



The Body and Social Theory

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The Body in Sociology

Throughout its establishment and development, sociology adopted a disembodied approach to its subject matter. That, at least, is the analysis favoured by social theorists accustomed to regarding the body as the province of another discipline such as biology, an uninteresting prerequisite of human action, or a passive target of social control. It would probably be more accurate, though, to portray the body as possessing a dual status in sociology. Instead of missing entirely, the body has historically been an 'absent presence' in the discipline. It has been *absent* in that sociology has rarely focused directly on the embodiment of humanity. As bodies were commonly regarded as natural, individual phenomena existing outside the legitimate social concerns of the discipline, this should not be surprising: it was only when sociology subsequently questioned the nature/society distinction that the body became seen as central to social action and to the sociological enterprise. It is also possible, however, to argue that the body has been *present* at the centre of the sociological imagination. Like the human heart, the body in sociology tended to remain hidden from view, yet nourished and sustained that which surrounded it. In being concerned with societies, sociology could not avoid exploring how embodied subjects externalized, objectified and internalized social institutions (Berger, 1990 [1967]). The fleshy body may often have escaped explicit sociological concern, but facets of human embodiment, such as language and the emotions that motivated action, became central to the discipline's development.

The dual status of the body can be illustrated by brief glances at several core areas of the discipline. The study of social mobility, racism, the formation of the 'underclass', inequalities in health and schooling, and globalization, are concerned implicitly with the movement, categorization, location, care and education of bodies. In different ways, each examines how and why the social opportunities and life expectancies of people are shaped by the classification and treatment of their bodies as belonging to a particular 'race', sex, class or nationality. Inequalities in morbidity and mortality rates, for example, have prompted sociologists to ask what it is about the social existence of people that affects their bodies in such dramatic ways. Clearly bodies matter, and they matter enough to form the 'hidden' basis of many sociological studies.

Despite this, sociologists have until recently neglected the subject of embodiment. Rather, they have in the examples above concentrated traditionally on the structure of nation-states, prejudicial views and discrimination, attachment to work and family, access to services, and the interlocking of local and global processes in culture, economics and politics. If the body is the basis of these sociological investigations, it has too frequently been a hidden base, under-theorized and taken for granted. In the case of globalization, for example, trade involves international circuits of bodies, body images and body servicing (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002). This includes organ trade, mail-order brides, sex tourism and child slavery. Less dramatic instances of body trading exist in the case of sport. The American baseball major leagues have academies in the Dominican Republic that rob this nation of sporting talent (Klein, 1991), while the wealthiest European football leagues regularly plunder the best players from Africa and the rest of the world (Darby et al., 2007; Darby and Solberg, 2010). Phenomena such as these exist on a continuum of body exploitation at the core of globalizing processes, but it is rare to find the body given the explicit importance it deserves in theoretical accounts of globalization. Instead, it once again assumes the status of an absent presence.

This marginalization of the body can damage both the inclusiveness and quality of sociological research. The sociology of education exemplifies this point. Education systems in the West have passed through them the large majority of young people living within the boundaries of a nation-state. Indeed, the compulsory nature of schooling is one of the main reasons why policy analysts identified schools as prime vehicles for the delivery of welfare (Finch, 1984; Wulczyn et al., 2009). Schools are places in which children are inoculated against life-threatening diseases, monitored for signs of physical abuse, may receive nutritionally balanced meals, engage in physical education and sometimes have their height and weight monitored. They are not just places that educate the minds of children, but also survey and shape the embodiment of young people in their totality.

The bodily implications of schooling have been recognized in Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) analysis of how 'cultural capital' is embodied within children through their acquisition of particular dispositions, tastes and abil-

ities. Despite the influence of Bourdieu's work, however, sociologists in North America and Britain developed theories of schooling that focused on language and the mind, rather than on other features of human embodiment, and the sociology of education has traditionally been concerned with social class, cognitive development, ideology, certification and social mobility. Such approaches produced a wealth of important data about educational opportunities, yet compounded the mistaken view that schooling is concerned only with cognition, and with one sort of knowledge – the abstract and academic (Shilling, 1992, 2008). This proposition is found in the writings of both liberals who equate education with intellectual development, and reproduction theorists who see schools functioning to inculcate dominant ideologies in the minds of pupils. Neither perspective explores adequately the embodied nature of schooling or the corporeal implications of educational knowledge. Yet one has only to think of the attempts of teachers to get young children to dress themselves 'properly', ask to go to the toilet in time for accidents to be avoided, sit still and be quiet during lessons, and respect daily rituals such as morning prayers or saluting the national flag, to realize that the *moving, managed and disciplined body*, and not just the thinking, speaking and listening body, is central to schooling (e.g. see Simpson, 2000).

The importance of the processes involved in the schooling of bodies should not be underestimated, and is finally beginning to get the attention it deserves (McVeigh, 2000; Shilling, 2004, 2010; Watkins, 2007; Evans et al., 2009; Braun, 2011). As Bourdieu (1988) argues, schools help produce particular forms of bodily control and expression that can – via habituation to authority – serve to obtain from children and adults forms of consent that the mind could otherwise refuse. For sociologists to ignore such features of education leads to a partial, misleading view of these institutions.

I have concentrated so far on one side of the dual status of the body; on how sociology rarely focuses explicitly on the body as subject matter, but also noted above the body's irreducible presence in the discipline; a presence that has been important for the sociological imagination. The fundamental reasons for the body's significance are based on the recognition – derived in part from the concerns of philosophical anthropology and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty – that the capacities and senses, experiences and management of bodies are implicated in human agency and constraint, and in the formation and maintenance of social systems. It is these capacities that have provided a potent stimulus for sociological work.

Our experience of life is inevitably mediated through our bodies. As Goffman (1963, 1969 [1959]) demonstrates, our ability to alter the flow of daily affairs involves managing our bodies through time and space. To put it another way, we have bodies and we act with our bodies. Our daily experiences of living – be they associated with learning in schools, travelling to work, buying and preparing food for a meal, or making love – are inextricably bound up with experiencing, managing and responding to our own and other people's bodies. The embodiment of humans is central to the intricate techniques involved in the formation and maintenance of families and friendships. From the cradle to the crematorium, individuals depend upon the interdependent relationships that exist between embodied subjects (Elias, 1991a), while societies depend for their very existence on the reproduction of existing and new bodies.

Bodies, then, need to occupy a place in the sociological imagination as our experience and management of them form part of the material out of which social life is forged. Our lived embodiment provides a basis for theorizing social commonality, social inequalities, and the construction of difference. We all have bodies, and this constitutes part of what makes us humans, possessed of the ability to communicate with each other and experience common needs, desires, satisfactions and frustrations (Doyal and Gough, 1991; Gough, 2000, 2010). This recognition of the sociological importance of the body is not confined to a general recognition of its *shared* significance to social actions and social systems. While human bodies provide the potential for empathetic communication and shared experiences, they are inhabited and treated differently within and between social systems. As Mauss (1973 [1934]) argues, cultures have specific 'techniques of the body' that provide their members with identities, govern infancy, adolescence and old age, and inform such activities as talking and walking. Furthermore, as the work of Norbert Elias demonstrates, bodily differences vary historically as well as cross-culturally. In the Western world our sensitivity to bodily waste has increased enormously in recent centuries, as has the tendency to perceive our flesh as an immovable barrier between ourselves and the outside world (Corbin, 1986; Elias, 2000 [1939]). Bodies also vary individually. We all have bodies but

are not all able to see, hear, feel, speak and move independently. Having a body is constraining as well as enabling, and the old and disabled often feel more constrained by their bodies than do those who are young and able-bodied (Featherstone, 1995; Thomas, 2002). Being embodied makes life possible, but also ensures physical death (Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

The body, then, is present in, as well as absent from, sociology, but its dual status/absent presence is part of a legacy that can be traced to the discipline's foundations. It is worth examining this in a little more detail as it reveals why the initial development of sociology displayed a schizophrenic attitude towards the body; failing to provide explicit theories on which a sociology of the body could be built, yet having much to say about the embodiment of social existence. Looking at the early development of the discipline also illustrates why the absence of a sustained, explicit focus on the body did not prevent later sociologists from drawing on key dimensions of the sociological tradition in framing new studies of the body in society.

The Body in Classical Sociology

The absent presence of the body is apparent in the concerns and work of the 'founding fathers'. On the one hand, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and other classical sociologists such as Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies and Karl Mannheim, rarely focused on the body as a subject of investigation. Turner (1991: 7) has even argued that 'The question of the ontological status of social actors remained submerged, and in so far as classical social theorists turned to such issues, they defined the human actor in terms of agency, which in practice meant the rational choice of ends'. On the other hand, the body was too important to be excluded completely. This is evident in Marx's analysis of how the development of capitalist technology linked and subordinated working-class bodies to machinery, Durkheim's theory of the elementary processes underpinning the constitution of moral orders, Weber's writings on the rationalization of the body within bureaucracy and modernity, and Simmel's interest in how technology enabled us to transcend the parameters of our sensory being.

There are good reasons why the body in its entirety did not occupy a central place in the foundations of sociology. Sociologists such as Durkheim were concerned with establishing a disciplinary field distinct from and irreducible to the natural sciences. In proclaiming sociology an independent science, Durkheim (1938: xlix) also defined its interests and methods as opposed to those of psychology. Psychology was concerned with the individual, not the social, and psychological explanation was seen by Durkheim to be based on 'organic psychic' factors ('pre-social' features of the individual organism given at birth and independent of social influences; Lukes, 1973: 17). Humans were marked by a nature/society dualism, and the biological body for Durkheim (1938) was placed in the sphere of nature, while sociology was charged with investigating social facts *above, beyond* and *out of reach* of those subject to them. This view had an enduring effect on the discipline, meaning that the natural/biological was frequently ruled outside of, and unimportant to, legitimate sociological investigations (Newby, 1991). Consequently, there was an inevitable reluctance for sociologists to incorporate in their studies aspects of human embodiment that could apparently be explained by biology or psychology. The foundation and early development of sociology can from this perspective be analysed as a social and epistemological project that had detrimental implications for the body as subject matter.

Developing this conception of the discipline's trajectory, Bryan Turner (1991) identified four reasons for the failure of classical writers to generate a sociology of the body. First, sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Mannheim were concerned not with the historical evolution of human beings, but with similarities between industrial capitalist societies and how these contrasted with traditional societies. Classical sociologists were concerned with the growth in wage labour, urban centres and mechanization; the rise of political democracy and citizenship; the waning power of religion, and the gradual secularization of values and beliefs. The very scale of these changes appeared to necessitate explanations based on developments in such societal factors as the division of labour (Durkheim), class struggle (Marx), or processes of rationalization and intellectualization (Simmel and Weber).

Second, sociology concentrated on the conditions required for social order or social change, with the com-

plexity of industrial capitalism generating an interest in society as a functioning social system. As the work of Simmel and Weber demonstrated, this did not rule out a concern with individuals, but it did encompass a commitment to the construction of theories based on inter-relationships with a social basis. Unfortunately, the body was often conceptualized as a 'natural', pre-social phenomenon, undeserved of serious sociological attention.

Third, the capabilities required for human agency became equated with consciousness and the mind, rather than with embodiment as a whole. Bodies were seen, at best, as an uninteresting condition of social action. This is exemplified by Weber's (1968: 24–6) typology of social action in which truly human action was associated with intellectually processed, rational action, rather than with habit (traditional behaviour) or emotional affect (affectual behaviour).

Fourth, a theoretical consequence of these epistemological and ontological commitments was that sociology did not show much interest in the anthropological view of the body as a classification system. It was the mind, rather than the body, which served as the receptor and organizer of images concerned with, and deriving from, social stratification. As Turner (1991) notes, this is evident in the Marxist tradition's focus on ideology, false consciousness and reification. It is also reflected in the conceptual dichotomies considered to be at the centre of sociological explanation. Leaving the mind/body relationship in the realm of philosophy, sociology focused on other conceptual dichotomies central to its studies such as the structure/agency and subject/object dilemmas.

Turner's account of why the 'founding fathers' failed to develop a sociology of the body is perhaps a harsh assessment of their accomplishments (Shilling and Mellor, 2001), but it reflects how many recent body theorists interpreted their work. In addition to Turner's reasons, furthermore, two additional points help us understand why there was no explicit sociology of the body within the classical tradition. The first concerns the methodological approaches promoted by the discipline. These laid great emphasis on abstract cognitive inquiry. For example, Durkheim (1938) argued that it was the open and empty mind of the professional sociologist, rid of bodily impurities such as emotional prejudices, that could apprehend the reality of social facts. Conceptual thought was provided by society, and concepts were defined in opposition to organically based 'sensations'. Not only did this emphasis invalidate the role of bodily experience in the accumulation of knowledge, but it also threw into doubt the validity of lay actors' knowledge because it was likely to be infected by corporeal existence (Bauman, 1992b). As Durkheim (1938) argued, events in our daily lives gave us only confused, fleeting and subjective impressions, but nothing in the way of scientific concepts or explanations.

Finally, it is relevant to note the obvious but important fact that the 'founding fathers' were embodied as men. The founding of sociology was a social as well as an epistemological project, and it was a project carried out by men. The risks women faced during pregnancy, the high numbers who died during childbirth and the high rates of infant mortality may have been reflected through a greater consideration of the body if Marx, Simmel, Weber and Durkheim had been women. This is not to suggest that knowledge is reducible to immediate bodily experience, but it is to acknowledge an integral connection between knowledge and embodiment. The sociologies of the 'founding fathers' were profoundly influenced by the intersection of their personal biographies with the social issues dominating the societies in which they lived, and if they had been faced at first hand with the corporeal dangers associated with being a woman at that point in history, their writings may have been more concerned with embodiment.

It would be inaccurate, though, to argue that classical sociology ignored the body completely. Frequently disallowed as a primary object of legitimate sociological concern, the body's importance to social life is reflected in what Turner (1991) describes as a marginalized, 'secret' history of corporeality within the work of Marx, Engels and Weber, and developed through the writings of Nietzsche, Elias, Marcuse and Foucault. Marx and Engels were concerned with the corporeal conditions surrounding consciousness, the condition of the English working class, and the detrimental consequences of a division of labour that deformed the bodies of workers (Engels, 1958 [1845]; Marx, 1973 [1939], 1975 [1844]). They also developed a sophisticated theoretical

discussion of the relationship between the material existence of humans, labour and the development of consciousness (Marx and Engels, 1970 [1846]). Human development occurred as the result of a dialectical relation between nature as determined by the conditions of human life, and the practical transformation of those conditions. The body was simultaneously a social and biological entity in a constant state of becoming, and possessed transcendent potentialities that could be realized fully only within a future communist state.

Durkheim viewed sociology as the study of 'social facts', but was concerned additionally with how these facts became incorporated into the bodily dispositions of individuals. Social facts act *on* individuals, but also *within* them (Durkheim, 1953: 57). In totemic societies, the identity of the collectivity was often inscribed quite literally on the bodies of its members. It is because bodies 'share in a common life, [that] they are often led, almost instinctively, to paint themselves or to imprint images on their bodies that remind them' of this life (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]: 233). Tattooing, 'the most direct and expressive means by which the communion of minds can be affirmed', exemplifies this 'instinct' and occurs within clans or tribes apart from 'reflection or calculation' (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]: 233–4).

The writings of Simmel can also be interpreted as exploring the relationship between embodied life and social and cultural forms (Shilling, 2001). This is evident in his argument that newly created forms constituted a product of life's expression, but soon developed into fixed traditions or institutions that paid no attention to *subsequent* bodily needs (Simmel, 1971 [1918]). The development of the money economy had a particularly deleterious effect on people's bodily character. By treating everything in terms of its exchange value, the money economy promotes the dominion of means over ends and, in so doing, distances people from the sensory gratifications associated with attaining particular ends or interacting with particular others (Simmel, 1990 [1907]: 429–30, 444). Associated with a city life in which the gaps between work and rest have shortened, the money economy is also associated with a decline of energy, and a rise in affectual moods such as cynicism that are undermining of social bonds.

Weber's concern with the body is most evident in his writings on the protestant ethic, social action, rationalization, the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy, charisma and eroticism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1985 [1904–05]), for example, Weber examines the Calvinist idea of 'the calling' as a way of ascertaining the psychological conditions that accompanied modern capitalism. According to Weber, the Calvinist view of predestination produced in people a deep insecurity which manifested itself in a motivation to lead a wholly disciplined and dedicated life on earth. This directed puritans into business, in which endless hours could be dedicated to the accumulation of money. Central to this 'spirit of modern economic life' was the voluntary subjugation of the body to strict routine. Hard work and effort in the sphere of production was coupled with frugality and denial of the sensuous in the sphere of consumption. Indeed, Weber's work can be interpreted as providing us with a view of the affinities between the Puritan habitus and the early capitalist habitus; a set of overlapping physical dispositions and capacities that constituted a corporeal basis for the development of rational capitalism (see also Campbell, 1987).

The dual status of the body in sociology was, then, established firmly in the work of the 'founding fathers'. The physical body was evident in some of their writings, and these analyses retain an influence on contemporary studies on the exploitation and rationalization of the body and on the formation of effervescent, embodied communities, yet the *overall* orientation of their project mitigated against locating the embodied human as the central area of investigation. This is symbolized by Durkheim's *Suicide* (1951 [1897]), a study that explored implicitly the varied effects religious communities exerted on the body-subject, but did not formulate explicitly the theory of embodiment at its core.

Twentieth-century sociology continued to exhibit a schizophrenic attitude to the body. In its continuing eagerness to maintain itself as a separate subject, sociology reacted against variants of biological reductionism that accounted for human behaviour, institutions and inequalities with reference to their 'natural' biological basis. Consequently, while structuralist and interpretive sociologies were concerned with ideologies, and questions of language, meaning and understanding, they remained uninterested in explaining the significance of those

features of the body apparently explicable in terms of the biological sciences. Neither structuralist nor interpretive sociologies took adequate note of human embodiment, developing instead through a one-sided focus on those features of humanity that could most easily be viewed as social (language and consciousness). Structuralism tended to conceptualize structure as equivalent to the cognitive internalization of dominant value systems, and dissolved the causal significance of other features of the body by making individuals the products of forces over which they were powerless (e.g. Althusser, 1971). In contrast, much interpretive work viewed agency as equivalent to the mental and linguistic abilities of individuals to re-make their daily lives. While consciousness and language are embodied, this feature of their existence has usually been ignored. Instead, the fully corporeal agent disappeared in a nexus of 'projects', 'intentions', 'perspectives' and 'coping strategies' (Schutz, 1970; Woods, 1980a, 1980b), as the body was portrayed as a passive shell activated by the creative minds of subjects.

This aversion to the body is exemplified by the sociological fate of pragmatism. The social philosophy of pragmatism, espoused by John Dewey, G.H. Mead, William James and C.S. Peirce, was distinctive in identifying embodiment as the central mediator of the external and internal environments of human action. The *external environment* of action is illustrated by Mead's (1962 [1934]) conception of a group of interdependent human organisms cooperating and building a social milieu as they seek to survive in their physical environment. According to Mead, this cooperation encourages in people the capacity of taking the role of others – involving the inter-corporeal cultivation of gestures, inter-gestural understanding and eventually language – and also the capacity to take the role of objects as means for the efficient coordination of effective action. The *internal environment* of action is evident in Dewey's (1980 [1934]) and Mead's (1904) concerns about the relationship between biological necessities, impulses proceeding from these needs, and behavioural capacities and tendencies. Crucially, it is the embodied subject that *mediates* these external and internal environments through its sensory, intentional and situated actions. As Dewey (1980 [1934]: 13) argues, no creature lives within the confines of its skin; our senses are a 'means of connection' with 'what lies beyond [our] bodily frame', facilitating action and being 'called out' by the environments in which we seek to fulfil our needs in conjunction with others (see also Siegfried, 1996: 164).

It was in this analytical context that pragmatism explored the embodied cycles of habit, crisis and creativity that characterized individual action (Faris, 1967; Shilling, 2008). *Habits* facilitate effective action by enabling us to bracket out non-threatening, irrelevant information. They seep into the deepest recesses of the body, directing our senses and muscular activity, becoming an integral part of who we are, and expanding or constricting our activities as in the 'intelligent habits' of a true artist or the 'routine habits' of the mechanical performer (Dewey, 2002 [1922]: 67). Far from being opposed to rational action, moreover, James (1950 [1890]) argued that habits constitute its bedrock. Habits may clash and contradict each other, however, and can become ineffective as a result of changes in the relationship between the internal and external environments of embodied action; prompting a possible *crisis* when there is a mismatch between the social and physical surroundings and the organic needs and potentialities of embodied subjects. As Kilpinen (2000: 334) notes, even in apparently static situations, social, physical or biological factors including ageing and illness can change the demands made of people, making untenable previous ways of thinking about and acting upon the social and physical world. Finally, as Peirce and other pragmatists demonstrated, embodied subjects are not passive victims of crises (or, indeed, of habits) but can engage in creative deliberations involving feelings, thoughts, images and affect saturated rehearsals of possible alternatives that may facilitate 'a new mode of acting' capable of establishing a realignment between the individual and their environments.

Rejected by classical European sociologists such as Durkheim (1955), this pragmatist theory of embodied action was nevertheless well represented in the first sociology department established in America (Joas, 1993; Levine, 1995). Through the influence of key figures such as Dewey and Mead, who taught at the University of Chicago, it informed a range of body-relevant studies in the early 20th century (on the city, sexuality, immigrant groups and hobos) and aspired 'to nothing less than a program to resolve all philosophical questions through analyses of practical action' (Levine, 1995: 228). Nels Anderson's (1961 [1923]) study of hobos (homeless men who were also migratory workers), for example, is I believe a classic of body studies in its ex-

plorations of the external environment of 'hobohemia' where these men lived, the internal physical hardships and deprivations that characterized their lives, and the significance of their embodied actions to the building of the railroads, mines, outposts, towns and cities that constituted the 'second frontier' of modern America (Anderson, 1961 [1923]: xxi). Similarly, the important work undertaken on sexualities by pragmatist-inspired Chicago school sociologists produced a map of non-normative sexual practices depicted as emerging from the relationship between individual desires, embodied actions and the city environment, rather than as manifestations of 'personal pathologies' (e.g. Thomas, 1907; Cressey, 1929; Heap, 2003: 459).

By the mid-20th century, however, pragmatism's highlighting of the body faded dramatically: its impetus was never sufficient to embed the body at the centre of the sociological imagination. Unsurprisingly, given the traditional sociological ambivalence towards the body noted throughout this chapter, the writings of the most sociologically influential pragmatist, Mead, were interpreted as contributions towards the study of *symbolic* interaction. Herbert Blumer's development of symbolic interactionism, for example, ignored Mead's concern with the physical dimensions and environments of action (Rochberg-Halton, 1987: 195). More damaging still, Talcott Parsons excluded pragmatism from his vision of sociology as the study of normative action and the value integration of social systems (Joas, 1993: 14). Parsons (1991 [1951]: 541–2) recognized the importance of the body to human life, but embodiment remained residual in his concern with the cultural patterning of selves, egos, actions and social systems. Even Richard Rorty's revival of pragmatism in the 1980s overlooked the previous significance attributed to socialized human biology, transforming embodied identity into a textual self or, as Shusterman (2012: 40) puts it, 'nothing but a linguistic web.' These developments were themselves preceded by the fading of the Chicago School's influence by the 1940s, and prompted Joas's (1993: 17) assessment that the School only ever effected a 'partial realization ... of the possibilities inherent in the social philosophy of pragmatism'. The body, in short, remained an absent presence (see Shilling, 2008; Shusterman, 2008).

The Rise of the Body in Sociology

Despite the discipline's ambivalence, the importance of embodiment has been highlighted by a growing number of sociologists and others since the 1980s. Making explicit its subterranean existence in traditional writings, important steps have been taken to integrate the body into the discipline. Among the earliest of these studies, Hirst and Woolley's (1982) analysis, Turner's (1984) text, O'Neill's (1985) *Five Bodies*, reviews by Freund (1988) and Frank (1990), the three (1989) volumes on the history of the body edited by Feher, Naddaff and Tazi, and the collection edited by Featherstone et al. (1991) helped make the body a semi-respectable, popular object of sociological analysis. The body came gradually to be seen as a subject that could throw new light on many of the problems that traditionally preoccupied sociologists such as the structure/agency and macro/micro divisions. Furthermore, as the body is located at the very centre of the nature/culture and biology/society dualisms – dualisms that have historically served to delineate the scope of the discipline – taking the body seriously became viewed as central to widening the relevance of the discipline to such areas as the environment.

Why did the body emerge as a phenomenon considered worthy of detailed study in the late 20th century? The answer to this question involves examining the social and academic changes that highlighted the importance of the body in society. This is not to imply that the body had been unimportant socially previously. As Mary Douglas (1970) argues, there has always been an intimate relationship between the concerns of the social body and those of the individual body. For example, fears were expressed in the United States and Britain during the 19th century about over-indulgence and fatness among the rich, and malnutrition among the poor. Both issues were related to worries about racial degeneration (Searle, 1971), and intensified when recruitment to the armed forces became problematic. In Britain, for instance, the army rejected 408 per 1,000 recruits on physical grounds between 1864–7, while the Navy rejected 4,410 out of 5,567 boys applying for naval service in 1869 (McIntosh, 1952). These issues persisted following the Boer War when the Committee on the Physical Deterioration of the Race (1903–04) recommended a number of social and educational

reforms that addressed this threat of deterioration (Soloway, 1982). This committee was part of the wider 'national efficiency' movement that focused upon physical health and mental capacities. The motivation for its concerns were encapsulated by David Lloyd George, UK Prime Minister from 1916–22, when he warned that 'it was not possible to run an A1 Empire with a C3 population' (Overy, 2009: 96–8). The responsibility for this poor human stock tended to be attributed to women, with the eugenicist Richard Austin Freeman (1921: 263) suggesting that 'the principal agent of racial degeneration is the inferior woman', while the pioneer in birth control Marie Stopes made the more general point that the only people who should become parents were those who could 'add individuals of value to the race' (Overy, 2009: 96, 112).

Similar worries were expressed in the United States about the fitness of youth when draft statistics for the First World War were published. During this war, the bodily shape of American society became a concern. A professor of physiology at Cornell estimated that New Yorkers alone carried 10 million pounds of excess fat that would have been better used as rations for soldiers, and stated that the most patriotic act for millions of Americans would be to diet. Others suggested that the money saved from overeating should be invested in Liberty Bonds (Green, 1986; Schwartz, 1986). The body had become, not for the first time, a metaphor for national health and fitness.

The body was also taken up in a more radical way, as image and ideal, by 20th-century totalitarian societies. Fascism, particularly National Socialism, revolved around a cult of the 'mindless body' reflected in its art and derived from a clearly articulated view of the desirable social body, while the importance of particular body iconographies remains evident in the rise of extreme right-wing groupings and skinhead subcultures in the post-communist East (e.g. Pilkington et al., 2010).

The current sociological interest in the body, then, cannot be explained with reference purely to its emergence as a social problem or social symbol as this is no new phenomenon. It can be argued, however, that the precise significance of the body has changed. Whereas the body used to be given meaning by national governments, there has in recent years been an increased concern on the part of women to 'reclaim' their bodies, and from people in general to adopt a reflexive orientation towards their embodied identities. This has been accompanied by the tendencies mentioned in the introduction; our ability to control our bodies has been accompanied by a potential destabilization of their meaning. In this context, the distinctly modern manner in which the body emerged as an important social issue has coincided with the interests of sociologists in a way that was not previously apparent. Furthermore, once the body was recognized as a valid object of study, interested sociologists recognized that there were many traditional resources of relevance to its analysis within their discipline.

Specifically, the social and academic changes which informed the current concern with the body involve the rise of 'second wave' feminism; the interest in ecological concerns and 'alternative lifestyles'; demographic changes that highlighted the needs of the elderly in Western societies; the rise of consumer culture linked to the changing structure of modern capitalism; and the previously mentioned 'crisis' in our certainty about what bodies are which is connected to the rationalization of the body in late modernity.

First, the rise of 'second wave' feminism in the 1960s placed on the political agenda issues related to the control of fertility and abortion rights, and formed the context for a more general project among women to 'reclaim' their bodies from male control. As Gill Kirkup and Laurie Smith Keller (1992) note, self-help groups were important parts of the feminist movement in this respect. For example, the hugely influential 1971 manual on women's health assembled by the Boston Women's Health Collective, entitled *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, sold over 4 million copies, resulted in more than 20 foreign editions, and has been utilized and adapted by women all over the world. As Kathy Davis (2007) explains, this book has been used to change health policies, direct medical research, and has been an invaluable resource for the reproductive rights movement.

Complementing such practical action, feminist analyses of women's oppression brought the body into academic conceptualizations of patriarchy. In contrast to those theories that identified the family as the basis of

women's position in society, a number of feminists gave primacy to the biological body as the source of patriarchy. One prominent example of this is Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971). Firestone's book has been criticized for biological reductionism – its central thesis being that an unequal sex class system emerged from the different reproductive functions of female and male bodies – but it at least addressed directly the body's implication in systems of domination. Later, more sophisticated discussions of patriarchy built on Firestone's work by incorporating the body into frameworks that sought to integrate analyses of production with reproduction (McDonough and Harrison, 1978; Hartmann, 1979; see also Walby, 1989; Grosz, 1994). Radical feminists have also placed great importance on the body as a basis of female oppression through, for example, its location as a site for the construction of habitual, affectual and spatial forms of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980; see also Butler, 1990; Sharp, 1997).

In addition to the appearance of the body in discussions of patriarchy, feminists undertook studies of the commodification of women's bodies in pornography, prostitution and surrogate motherhood (Singer, 1989). They also highlighted the differential socialization to which girls' and boys' bodies are subject (Lees, 1984), the significance of body symbolism to the gendered character of legal systems (Eisenstein, 1988), and the male-orientated knowledge which has informed the development of the medical services and the treatment of women's bodies during pregnancy and childbirth (Greer, 1971; Oakley, 1984; Martin, 1989 [1987]; Miles, 1991; Young, 2005). Debates about the role of reproduction and housework in the economy also highlighted the position of women as the servicers of men's and children's bodies (Oakley, 1974; Charles and Kerr, 1988; Counihan, 1999). In sum, women frequently must learn to live with 'over-burdened bodies'. As Rosen (1989: 213) puts it, women who are wives, mothers and paid employees 'often experience intense emotional and physical stress: there are simply too many conflicting demands, too many things to do, too little time to do them' (see also Hochschild and Machung, 2003; Hochschild, 2007).

This feminist focus on women's embodied existence did more than simply highlight the multiple ways in which bodies were implicated in social relations of inequality and oppression. Analysis of the sex/gender, nature/culture and biology/society divisions began to break down, or at least reduce the strength of, the corporeal boundaries that popular and academic thought posited between women and men (e.g. Oakley, 1972). Indeed, feminist scholarship problematized the very nature of the terms 'woman' and 'man', 'female' and 'male', and 'femininity' and 'masculinity' by questioning the ontological bases of sexual difference, and by moving towards a concern with the performance of heteronormative identities (Butler, 1993).

This touches on a further important point. Feminist thought did not always concentrate on women's bodies to the exclusion of men's bodies (despite the literature sometimes giving the impression that women are somehow 'more embodied' than men). The bodies of men and women needed to be seen as inextricably related subjects, as it was the power and force exercised by male bodies that was instrumental in controlling the bodies of women. Furthermore, the development of 'men's studies' in North America and the United Kingdom throughout the 1970s and 1980s added impetus to the study of masculine embodiment (Kimmel, 1987). As Jeff Hearn and David Morgan (1990) point out, the focus on sexuality within men's studies did not automatically entail an examination of the body. In practice, however, the two subjects became related, as illustrated by studies on men, sexuality and the transmission of HIV which include a concern with the cultural meanings given to specific sexual acts involving penetration and the exchange of sexual fluids (Connell and Kippax, 1990).

One aspect of men's studies particularly relevant to this discussion is the examination of male body images. Mishkind et al. (1986) argue that men maintain an idealized image of the perfect body type to which they aspire – the 'muscular mesomorph' – while Kimmel (1987) identifies three social trends that have led to this preoccupation. First, the decreasing stigmatization of gay men as 'failed men' – the replacement of the old stereotype of the limp-wristed 'sissy' with the new stereotype of the gay macho bodybuilder – has increased and legitimized men's overall concerns with body image. Second, women's increased participation in the public sphere has led to a kind of 'muscular backlash' given that cognitive, occupational and lifestyle differences between men and women are decreasing (Nelson, 1994). In this context, body image emerges as one of

the few areas in which men can differentiate themselves from women. The third related trend concerns the relative decrease in importance that the 'breadwinning' role assumes in the formation of men's self-identity, and the increasing emphasis on 'becoming a man' through consumption practices centred on the surface territories of the body (Ehrenreich, 1983; Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1987; Jeffords, 1989; see also Bordo, 2003; 2012). To these we can add a fourth, related, reason that has heightened the male concern with an ideal body: the increased public display of male bodies for female consumption. Contemporary examples of this include *Cosmopolitan* magazine's 'man of the month' and an increase in the popularity of male strippers/semi-clad male 'service entertainers' for hen nights and other events (British groups currently include *Dream Boys*, *Adonis Cabaret* and *Butlers in the Buff*). This convergence between bodily issues that are to some extent pertinent to both men and women has contributed recently to calls for men's and women's studies to be rethought and reformed (Catano and Novak, 2011).

If the rise of feminism was the first factor to highlight the importance of the body; the second concerns the growth of ecological concerns and 'alternative lifestyles' that can also be traced back to the 1960s. Elements of this may have appeared ephemeral, such as the counter-cultural experimentation with drugs. Nevertheless, the concern with living a life apart from the 'one-dimensionality' of white-collar work and mass culture (Marcuse, 1964) drew on methods of somatic improvement involving yoga, meditation and a host of bodily practices and disciplines associated with elements of Oriental spirituality such as Zen, Taoism or Tantra (and designed to heighten body awareness, interrupt damaging habits and improve well-being) (Shusterman, 1997: 43, 2000, 2008: 17; Eichberg, 1998; Levine, 2006). This heightened concern with the 'internal environment' of bodily experience was complemented by the growth of green movements that focused on the damage advanced industrial society is doing to our environment (Doyle, 2004).

Third, the 'ageing of Western societies', and a number of non-Western societies including Japan (Kingston, 2004: 291), has become a matter of international concern largely because of the economic implications of this demographic trend. Increasing elderly populations have serious implications for social policy and state expenditure in the areas of pensions, medical provision, social work and other caring services (Cameron and McDermott, 2007); with World Bank economists suggesting that the ageing of the developed world poses a threat to future economic growth (Turner, 1991; 2007: 33). An increased focus on human bodies has come about both as a cause and a consequence of these changes. Medical advances have helped create greater life-expectancy rates, but often end up discharging the elderly into a state of chronic illness (Turner, 2008), thus increasing the amount of body work that needs to be conducted on dependent populations (Twigg et al., 2011). This became an important political issue with the rise to power of governments in both the United States and the United Kingdom during the 1970s and 1980s that were influenced by the ideas of the 'new right' and concerned to reduce public expenditure commitments, a trend likely to be re-doubled during the present era of economic retrenchment. The 'burden' of caring for ageing populations has also been linked to the possibility of generational conflict over the distribution of resources in welfare systems (Higgs and Gil-learn, 2010).

A related, if less important, reason for the rising academic concern with the body can be seen in the ageing of the sociology profession. While in the early 1980s the life experiences and reflexivity of sociologists fed into a growing interest in the sociology of ageing, this developed into a more general concern with how social definitions of bodies have entered into conceptions of 'youth' and 'aged' which have attached to them different symbolic values. The young, slim and sexual body is highly prized in contemporary consumer culture, whereas ageing bodies tend to be sequestered from public attention. Recent examples of films displaying older actors engaged in sexual activity in movies such as Meryl Streep's and Alec Baldwin's 2009 *It's Complicated* are notable for their rarity and for the controversy they have stirred. More commonly, as Heywood (2003: xxiv) notes, while 'aging beautifully' used to entail 'wearing one's years with style, confidence and vitality', today it means for many using all the cosmetic, exercise and surgical options necessary in order to defy gravity and appear eternally youthful.

The fourth factor to have increased focus on the body concerns a shift in the structure of advanced capitalist

societies in the second half of the 20th century. This period was characterized by a move away from a focus on hard work in the sphere of production coupled with frugality and denial in the sphere of consumption. Instead, the decline of competitive capitalism based on a labour force inclined to save and invest, the historical shortening of the working week, and the proliferation of production orientated towards leisure, encourages the modern individual to work hard at *consuming* as well as producing goods and services. Related to this, the prominence of body images in consumer culture helped promote the 'performing self', which treats the body as a machine to be finely tuned, cared for, reconstructed and carefully presented through such measures as regular physical exercise, personal health programmes, high-fibre diets and colour-coded dressing. As Featherstone (1982: 22) argues, the body ceases to be a vessel of sin and presents itself instead – in such guises as the 'metrosexual' male form as popularized in the late 1990s – as an object for display inside, and outside, of the bedroom. The centrality of the body to ideologies of the performing self have become increasingly consequential, moreover, with the rise of bodywork and emotion work. The body now has to be evaluated as a 'suitable object for display' before the individual is accepted as an employee within many areas of the service sector, while physical appearance and impression/emotion management have become key elements of performance in many jobs (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Placed in a broader historical context, these events can also be seen to be outgrowths of changes initiated in the 19th century when clothes and the presentation of the body shifted from being signs of social place to become manifestations of personality (Sennett, 1974). Whereas flamboyant clothes, hats, make-up and wigs were once fixed markers of social position, the flexible 'presentation of self' is now seen as signifying the real character of individuals (Goffman, 1969 [1959]). In contemporary consumer culture this has helped promote among people the experience of both *becoming* their bodies and of being regularly *anxious* about the possibility that their body will let them down or 'fall apart' if they withdraw from it constant work and scrutiny. This body anxiety is central to the way many people perceive their bodies as projects and has been linked to the experience of technology and the environment as dangerous and out of control (Burgess, 2004), and the fear of ageing, illness and death (Bauman, 1992b: 199). In the case of food, for example, specific 'scares' (e.g. 'mad cow disease', salmonella in eggs, the levels of the carcinogen acrylamide in food that has been fried, baked or microwaved, and the *E.coli* outbreak in salad across the European Union) may come and go, but their cumulative impact can leave people with 'chronic low-level anxiety' or even plunge them into a state of *gastro-anomy* (Fischler, 1980, 1988; Beardsworth and Keil, 1997: 163).

The fifth factor to have increased interest in the body returns us to the tendency for advances in bodily control to be accompanied by a crisis in meaning. In discussing the increased control that modernity exerted over the body, Turner (1992b) has pointed out that diet was central to the early rationalization of the body. Whereas early dietary schemes were connected to religious values, the 19th century saw a scientific literature on diet emerge with the establishment of nutritional sciences. These knowledges were first applied in social policy to measure the food required by various populations such as prisoners and army recruits, and were utilized by the social reformers Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree in assessing poverty in British cities. Furthermore, the rationalization of the body was intimately connected to the 'sciences of man' that sought in such places as prisons, armies and workplaces to 're-educate the mind via the discipline and organization of bodies in a regime that sought to maximize efficiency and surveillance' (Turner, 1992b: 123, 126).

Our ability to control the body has continued apace as a result of advances in transplant surgery, nutrigenomics, stem cell research, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization and plastic surgery. There are now few parts of our body which technology cannot restructure in some way or other. One of the images employed frequently in describing such developments is the 'body as machine', a popular metaphor in lay perceptions of health and illness (Rogers, 1991; Baxter, 2010). This image may appear to contradict the idea that contemporary individuals have sought to define their bodies as individual possessions integrally related to their self-identities. The 'body as machine' might suggest instead that the body is radically 'other' to the self. However, there is nothing to stop individuals feeling that the body is *their* machine that can be maintained and fine-tuned through diet, regular exercise and health checkups. Nonetheless, the 'body as machine' metaphor has at the very least provided national governments with opportunities for linking the idea of the body as an

individual project with the body as an entity amenable to social control.

The 'body as machine' is not merely a medical image. One of the areas in which the body is most commonly perceived and treated in this way is in the sphere of sport. Radical critics have long noted that the vocabulary of the machine dominates the language of sport and have argued that it is through sport that the body has come to be understood as 'a technical means to an end, a reified factor of output and production' (Brohm, 1978). Sports science has perfected equipment and training techniques which specify, isolate and transform those parts of the body of most importance for competitive performance (a trend that has been commercialized through iPhone apps geared to improving performance in specific areas of sport), and it has long been recognized that success in athletics tends to be dominated by those countries whose scientific knowledge is best applied to the 'raw material' of athletes' bodies (Miah, 2004).

Bodies also get treated as machines in waged labour, especially through the discipline and control exerted by bureaucratic regimes that specify when particular quantities and qualities of work must be carried out irrespective of workers' needs. Productivity schemes sometimes fall into this category and, by failing to allow for adequate rest and relaxation during the working day, can lead to stress-related illness among both women and men by necessitating states of somatic vigilance and self-control that place a strain on the usual rhythms of embodied subjectivity (Hochschild, 1983; Eriksen and Holger, 2002; Freund, 2011). As Martin (1989 [1987]), Laws (1990), Lee (2003) and Young (2005) argue, bureaucratic regimes often have disproportionate effects on women: women are expected to manage and conceal menstruation, pregnancy and menopause 'in institutions whose organization of time and space takes little cognizance of them' (Martin, 1989 [1987]: 94).

So far I have concentrated on the vast increase in control over the body that accompanied processes of rationalization in modernity. However, while rationalization may have provided us with the potential to control our bodies more than ever before, and have them controlled by others, it has also reduced our certainty over what constitutes a body, and where one body finishes and another starts. Two manifestations of this can be seen in electronic media and film. 'Virtual reality' promises to collapse boundaries between technology and the body. One development is associated with the concept of 'teledildonics', which involves the user dressing in a bodysuit lined with tiny vibrators. Broadband connections 'bring together' others similarly outfitted, with their conversations accompanied by artificially-induced bodily sensations and computerized visual representations in their headsets of their bodies engaged in sexual encounters (Rheingold, 1991; Springer, 1991). Teledildonics exist already in the form of electronic sex toys that can be connected to computers and controlled by a partner achieving telepresence through Skype, while the potential of such developments has been explored in Levy's (2009) futuristic analysis of human-robot relationships.

Horror films provide another example of instabilities in the meaning and boundaries of the body (Tudor, 1995). Here, the threat to the body used to come from an exterior source, whereas it now frequently comes from the interior of the body as a result of its inherent instability. The dominant trend in the 1950s and 1960s was to portray victims as vulnerable to attack from external foes such as aliens from outer space. In the 1970s, though, the body was under threat from demonic *possession*, as in the case of *The Exorcist*. The *Alien* trilogy had both John Hurt and Sigourney Weaver 'giving birth' to monsters, and the threat to the body's interior stability continued to grow in the 1980s with the start of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series in which the ghastly 'Freddy' would emerge from the dreams of his victims to mutilate and destroy their sleeping bodies. The *Terminator* films continued to reflect the instability of what bodies are, with machines becoming increasingly human and humans becoming increasingly machine-like (is it a machine or an ex-governor of California?). Embodied instability, corporeal-machine boundary dissolution, and possession continue to be prominent in 21st-century films, including *I Robot* and the second and third instalments of *The Matrix* franchise. This looks set to continue with the huge popularity of vampire novels, television series and films such as *The Twilight Saga* that bring together a sense of external threat with the spectacle of human vulnerability, volatility and transformation. Zombie narratives, involving the invasion of bodies by disease, also feature in a large number of films, television series and computer games.

An additional manifestation of this crisis in our knowledge of bodies exists in the difficulties sociologists have had in pinning down what they mean by 'the body'. Bryan Turner acknowledges that in writing his 1984 text 'I have become increasingly less sure of what the body is' (Turner, 1984: 7), while Judith Butler admits that 'in trying to consider the materiality of the body' she 'kept losing track of the subject' (Butler, 1993: ix). This uncertainty is reflected in the fact that we now have discursive and material bodies (Turner, 1984); physical, communicative, consumer and medical bodies (O'Neill, 1985); individual and social bodies (O'Neill, 1985; Turner, 1992b); multiple bodies and networked bodies (Mol, 2002; Mol and Law, 2004); and medicalized, sexualized, disciplined and talking bodies. We also have distinctions in German between *Leib* (the lived body) and *Körper* (the fleshy shell) (Ots, 1990); and the elaboration of this distinction into the body-incarnate, and the somatic and corporeal aspects of the body (Frankenberg, 1990). These distinctions reflect the nuances and intricacies of body studies, but are indicative of the uncertainty sociologists have in identifying what the body is. These uncertainties have been reflected most clearly in post-modernist writings that abandoned the 'modernist project' of 'knowing' what the body is, viewing it instead as a 'blank screen' or 'sign receiving system' ever open to being constructed and reconstructed by external texts or discourses (e.g. Kroker and Kroker, 1988).

To these five factors could be added a sixth that was not part of the initial impetus to develop body studies, but has in recent years imparted another dimension to existing concerns: those social and political controversies that have emerged across the West in response to physical manifestations of Muslim identities such as the wearing of the hijab. Viewed in some quarters as a threat to the corporeal foundations on which civil society and the interaction order is based, religious dress has come under social, cultural and legislative scrutiny and sanction in France and elsewhere, raising to new levels the question 'What constitutes acceptable forms of bodily display?' in the context of the current resurgence of religious identities (Bowen, 2007; Scott, 2007; Laborde, 2008). Of particular significance to our concern with embodiment is not simply controversies surrounding modes of dress represented as 'alien', but the collective, religiously justified criteria used by many Muslims to promote these practices; criteria that can fuse together aesthetics, politics, women's rights and religion (van Wichelen, 2012) and pose a challenge to the individualized and apparently secular character of most contemporary normative body projects in the West.

The diversity of these factors is important in illuminating why the body has risen as an object of academic inquiry not just in sociology but also *across* the social sciences, and helps explain why there has been little consensus about how to analyse the subject. The body was a sexed object used to reproduce women's subordination for feminists. It was an object rendered passive by changing modes of governmentality for Foucauldians. A surface phenomenon that had become a malleable marker of identity for writers on consumer culture, the body undergoes metamorphosis once again as a vehicle for cultivating a particular form of lived experience and a 'balanced life' for ecologists and new age therapists. Embodiment has manifested itself as a burden on the state for analysts of the ageing clientele of welfare regimes. It changed once more into an uncertain and even rapidly disappearing remnant of pre-technological culture for those interested in how scientific and medical interventions into our bodies had destabilized our knowledge about what was natural about, or possible for, bodies. Finally, its aesthetic presentation constituted a symbol of religious purity or danger for religious communities, and those who live among them. Within each of these analyses, the spotlight shines on certain aspects of the body, leaving others obscured. What is not in doubt, however, is the importance of embodiment to our understanding of society.

Drawing the Body in Sociology

Earlier in this chapter I spoke of the dual status of the body in sociology, and illustrated this by exploring the absent presence of the body in the classical foundations of the discipline. I then described some of the social and academic factors that have highlighted the contemporary importance of the body. My aim in the next few chapters is to provide a critical overview of some of the most important approaches relevant to recent sociological studies of the body. I hope this will provide a number of contexts in which the recent proliferation of studies on this subject can be located, and a basis on which we can develop a more adequate approach

towards conceptualizing the body and its position within, and relationship to, society.

- body (sociology)
- embodiment
- rationalization
- body image
- pragmatism
- sociology
- consumer culture

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