

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE HUMAN BODY
IN THE MODERN AGE

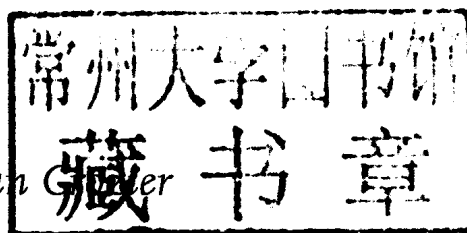
EDITED BY IVAN CROZIER



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OF THE HUMAN BODY

IN THE
MODERN AGE

Edited by Ivan G



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SERIES PREFACE

A Cultural History of the Human Body is a six-volume series reviewing the changing cultural construction of the human body throughout history. Each volume follows the same basic structure and begins with an outline account of the human body in the period under consideration. Next, specialists examine major aspects of the human body under seven key headings: birth/death, health/disease, sex, medical knowledge/technology, popular beliefs, beauty/concepts of the ideal, marked bodies of gender/race/class, marked bodies of the bestial/divine, cultural representations and self and society. Thus, readers can choose a synchronic or a diachronic approach to the material—a single volume can be read to obtain a thorough knowledge of the body in a given period, or one of the seven themes can be followed through time by reading the relevant chapters of all six volumes, thus providing a thematic understanding of changes and developments over the long term. The six volumes divide the history of the body as follows:

Volume 1: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity* (750 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.)

Volume 2: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age* (500–1500)

Volume 3: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Renaissance* (1400–1650)

Volume 4: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Enlightenment* (1650–1800)

Volume 5: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Empire* (1800–1920)

Volume 6: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Modern Age* (1920–21st century)

General Editors, Linda Kalof and William Bynum

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Introduction

Bodies in History—The Task of the Historian

IVAN CROZIER

Forty years ago, a cultural history of the body would have been essentially unthinkable. Histories were written of events, of people, of ideas, of politics, of societies, but bodies had somehow slipped through the historiographical net. And yet, when a number of historians, enriched by various anthropological and sociological writings, began to focus on cultural history, the body became a central site of reference—as something on the cusp of the prediscursive that demonstrated the direct action of power.¹ Early historians who explored such interests, such as Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, did much to encourage an interest in the body.² So, too, did medical historians, who looked up from their detailed studies of the development of medical theory and practice and started to take account of the bodies that were persistently being spoken of in their sources.³ Before long, the body was as much of a historiographical object as the French Revolution or World War I—and, indeed, the body has been prominently placed in these two historiographies.⁴ This tectonic shift was also in part brought about by the rising status of theoretical speculation, mingling aspects of psychoanalysis and Marxism,⁵ and the broadening of historiography in this abstract arena, to include a wider range of interpretations of culture. The body became an important testing ground for numerous theories about gender, sexuality, identity, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial discourses about race. Now, as this series shows, body history is well and truly situated within academic historical studies. Even “traditional” historical topics such as war,⁶

medicine,⁷ class,⁸ and education⁹ have taken a corporeal turn and emphasize the body as a mediating point between ideas and social reality: as something at once “real” and imagined, objective and subjective.

Accounts of the body in the twentieth century have profited from the increase in self-conscious reflection that accompanied developments in the plastic arts, literature, the sciences, and popular culture. All of these fields have in turn benefited in various ways from the increasing uncoupling of sexuality from “traditional” (or religiously induced) morality and from reproduction, which has consequently put the uses of bodies up for negotiation at a point where there was previously more sanctioning. The increasing articulation concerning what bodies do (their actions and pleasures, their destruction in war, the ways they can be depicted or described) and how they differ (across gender, class, ethnicity, aesthetics, etc.) gives historians of the modern period much material to draw on, as these issues were very much at the heart of the birth of modernism. The corporeal turn of the twentieth century has involved new conceptions of the self that are visited in many of the chapters in this book. Such self-conceptions cannot be disassociated from the changes being wrought in this context. This period covers, in no particular order: world wars; the rise of feminism; a growth in class consciousness and the introduction of increasingly automated workplaces; interactions with bodies from other cultures, made possible by imperialism and the formulation of sciences of ethnography and anthropology; reflections on issues of the self, the state, and sexuality in terms of psychology as well as eugenics; and developments in medicine that afforded major changes in the understanding and treatment of disease. The resulting knowledges and experiences—of bodies damaged and destroyed by the horrors of war; the recapitulation of the “rights” over women’s bodies and the uses to which they could and should be put; the effects of factories on working bodies; the reconceptualization of racial bodies; and the changing status of illness (and the possibilities of treatments)—brought about drastic new circumstances in which to think of the body. These changes, when drawn together with advances in artistic representation, including photography, and the wide distribution of body images through magazines, cinema, and eventually the Internet, have meant that bodies can be represented in ways that were impossible in earlier periods. This increased access to bodies in the twentieth century has had both a cementing and a destabilizing effect—by the end of the century, television shows (*Extreme Makeover*, *Ten Years Younger*, etc.) had put the body in such a position that it became the final arbiter of social acceptance, above intellectualism, social position, or talent, while at the same time becoming one of the key sites for anxiety (in terms of weight, fashion, aesthetics, etc.). In order to map these monumental social changes onto the twentieth-century body, it is profitable to focus on separate problems, although it will soon be recognized that these categories meld into one another.

One of the key problems historians face when approaching the body concerns evidence and interpretation. This problem is initially a psychological one—rather than abjection, there is a Cartesian sense that all bodies are experienced as our own. Bodies are both internalized and cast out in our comprehension; they maintain something of the prediscursive, despite the fact that historians have learned to think of bodies in terms of systems of discourse. When we read about pain or pleasure, it is appreciated as our own—or it remains unsympathetically unimaginable. Studies in the transmission of tacit knowledge highlight formal aspects of this problem well.¹⁰ If knowledge has a tacit component, and this transmission has to involve learning how to perform successfully,¹¹ then we are left with an assumption that equivalent actions are based on identical experiences. But if bodies differ, then knowledge and action must also be “personal,” as Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi has it.¹² We see this problem particularly when the body is situated in various ways.

If bodies are not to be treated at this personal level by the historian, if we are to move away from the conception that all bodies are our own, then bodies must be cast into some schema for interpretation: We have to become reflexively aware of the discursive parameters through which we access and interpret bodies. This approach has largely been adopted in this series, with bodies placed alongside one another in terms of general themes, including the medical, sexual, social, cultural, artistic, aesthetic, and religious. In the chapters in this volume, bodies are shown to be negotiated through specific regimes and conceptualizations. They are not treated as purely natural entities but as the product of various context-specific interventions. Only by placing bodies in their (discursive and historical) contexts can they be understood.

This standpoint further relates to the problem of representation. As we cannot access past bodies directly, we require them to be represented, either visually or through other forms of conceptualization—written sources being the most common form of historical material. Accessing past bodies requires a skill at reading through sources, as “the body” is not always engaged with directly in the text. Rather, hints and suggestions must be scraped together and interpreted. It is for this reason that bodies lay under the historiographical radar for so long, failing to register as we focused on other events than those through which the body was inscribed directly.¹³ Much of what is found in this book follows this reliance on fragmentary evidence rather than offering an overview of *the* body in history and culture. Nevertheless, some general historiographical themes emerge, which are tackled in the following.

DISCIPLINED BODIES

Historians have, on the whole, been rather comfortable with a sociocultural appreciation of disciplined bodies since Foucault’s genealogical writings, especially

Discipline and Punish (1975). In this work, Foucault traced the way that bodies at the end of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century came under particular regimes of power within specific institutions that situated them not in opposition to the king or the state but in terms of new organizations—the prison, the school, the military barracks, the hospital, and so on—that exerted control over the ways in which subjects lived and related. He wrote,

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A “political anatomy”, which was also a “mechanics of power”, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies.¹⁴

Such corporeal techniques for control—which typified the particular institutions in the modern age that Foucault described—are seen in a modified form in any number of practices that are adopted as “normal” in society: hygiene, sexual relations, diet, health, appearance, manners, clothing, poise, and so on. Bodies are situated inextricably within these particular power relations. In each of these regimes, different aspects of the disciplined body are focused on in sui generis specificity to the point that there is no “ontological independence of the body outside of any one of those specific regimes.”¹⁵ To situate these bodies, I concentrate in this introduction on health, gender, race, and sexuality before turning to the role played by modern biomedicine in the preceding processes. These different fields are often interlinked, so that different disciplinary orders play off one another in the control of modern bodies. Some of the possibilities for such intertwining are explored in the works of physician-artist Eric Avery.

HEALTHY BODIES

Healthiness, and particularly the conceptions of health that have been widely disseminated throughout the twentieth century (diet, regimes of exercise, lifestyle, medical checkups, etc.), can be considered a paradigmatic form of discipline, although in ways that are not identical to the specific processes described by Foucault when focusing on post-Enlightenment institutions or on classical Greek sexuality. Conceptions of health beg the question of why there is such an imperative for living a healthy lifestyle. Of what moral value does healthiness consist, other than the long-term avoidance of suffering? Answers could include a political economy of lifestyle and could take issue with the state’s role

in constructing health to serve its own economic ends. They could also take into account issues such as class difference—which is demonstrated clearly when one considers eating habits and the price of fresh vegetables in contemporary Britain, making healthy eating a marker of economic and social status, evidenced by the organic chic of the farmers' market. But such answers would skirt the embodiment of health at an individual level—the action of power directly on the body and the associated exercising of agency in order to fit the sanctioning of the particular health regime. In this case, healthiness is a point of accessibility in the discussion of disciplined bodies, as it is an embodiment of external values. Foucault had much to say about this embodiment:

Mastery and awareness of one's own body can be acquired only through the effect of an investment of power in the body: gymnastics, exercises, muscle-building, nudism, glorification of the body beautiful. All of this belongs to the pathway leading to the desire of one's own body, by way of the insistent, persistent, meticulous work of power on the bodies of children or soldiers, the healthy bodies.¹⁶

Such ideas hang together well with Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys: A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship* (1908), which extolled to young boys the message "you must train yourself to be strong, healthy, and active as a lad."¹⁷ Healthiness, more than simply avoiding long-term disease, is allied to fortitude and to manliness.¹⁸ It signifies much more in culture than the moral terms in which it has been wrapped. This aspect can be better examined through attention to the growth of health movements throughout the twentieth century, which have received much attention by historians in recent years.¹⁹ Particularly interesting work has been done on the way modern subjects adopted a variety of bodily practices, such as naturism (and the *Freikörperkultur* movement in particular), vegetarianism, yoga, calisthenics, and so on, in order to illustrate individual agency and the embracement of new corporeal possibilities through health practices—essentially attempts to reconstruct the self through health.²⁰ These subjects are not merely cultural dopes following trends but are actively involved in the establishment and maintenance of social institutions of health in their actions—while at the same time they are able to be situated in specific, and historically contingent, power relations beyond the scope of their bodily desires.²¹ Healthy acts are thus both consecutively determined and the products of (limited) agency.

In opposition to the healthy, fit, and often masculine body was the slovenly, unhealthy, fat body. This fat body not only opposed ideals of health; it also was increasingly gendered as feminine. Christopher Forth has shown specifically how the gut came to signify a lack of fortitude, and to be gendered feminine even on the most masculine of men, such as Émile Zola.²² But, more usually,

fat has been taken up as a feminist issue.²³ This movement was kicked off by Judy Freespirit and Sara Aldebaran, who wrote the *Fat Liberation Manifesto* in 1973, soon followed by Susie Orbach's *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (1978). In these texts the case was made for "size acceptance." Their political heirs are now members of organizations such as Largesse, whose mission is "to create personal awareness and social change which creates a positive image, health and equal rights for people of size."²⁴ Such efforts consist of renegotiating the politics of fat; they struggle to effect a shift in power relations, moving the body from a regime based on slim aesthetics and health to a heavier situation in which the espoused feminist ideals come to the fore. Such a vignette shows that bodies and their interpretations are not fixed; they can be anchored to a particular system, but they can slip their moorings just as easily.

GENDERED BODIES

To backpedal a little, it is highly important to consider the broader development of feminism in relation to the body in the modern period; indeed, it is perhaps one of the defining social movements of our century. Feminism drastically changed the status of the body in the twentieth century. Topics such as birth control, marriage rights, education (and physical ability to undertake such), work, and sexual pleasure dominated much feminist writing in the early part of the century and helped to reconfigure the body as a political site. This attention not only changed the way that individual women experienced their bodies (via childbirth, sexual pleasure, medical innovation, etc.) but became something of a social-reform agenda in terms of eugenics.²⁵

Not all feminist concerns were as socially demanding or overtly political. One aspect of women's changing position in society was the altering of female dress codes during this period in ways that displayed the body in a new light—trousers became one option, and short-length skirts another. Newer (post-1970s) feminist concerns maintain a fashion-conscious edge. Issues such as eating disorders, weight, physical appearance, and so on have all been discussed in terms of the pressures put on modern women to conform to attractive ideals.²⁶ These issues escalated after World War I, when women entered "public" society in terms of work and other roles, in much more conspicuous ways. The coincidence with the rise of mass media such as magazines and cinema also played a significant role in shaping the way that women were perceived, and widely distributed ideals of beauty.²⁷ One of the ramifications of this has been the resort to body-modification surgery—from minor procedures that can be performed at a "beauty" salon, such as Botox injections to remove wrinkles and laser treatments to remove unruly pubic and facial hair, to major surgery, such as liposuction, nose reshaping, breast augmentation and reduction, and even reconstructing the genitalia to conform to aesthetic ideals. Such efforts

to reshape the body are not new—they have been around since at least the 1920s.²⁸ But these practices have become widely dispersed, to the point where they are used as entertainment on British and American television (see shows such as *Ten Years Younger* and *The Swan*, in which women are subjected to a variety of procedures to give them an “ideal” appearance, superficially at least).²⁹ These body modifications are an attempt to stave off time, even death, as the aging body has a somewhat decreased value in modern society.³⁰ Although men also participate in cosmetic plastic surgery, they are not (yet) targeted to the same level as women. Such practices can be seen as examples of the “technical fix” provided by modern medicine.

Cosmetic plastic surgery is often directed to the bodily performance of a gendered ideal. This is clear in the case of breast-enhancement surgery but is also present in the removal of fat from thighs or hair from women’s lips. But surgery is, of course, not always necessary to adopt a feminine mien. Rather, while gendered performances of bodies are situated in past performances, these do not determine future sanctioned gender performances in any hard sense.³¹ Individuals adapt the accepted norms of femininity (and masculinity as well) to new instances, although not without the sanctioning of the society to which they belong.

This notion of performing gender (rather than “being” a gender) is most forcefully promulgated by theorist Judith Butler, the current last word in gender theory, which has had an immense impact on contemporary feminist theorization of the body.³² For Butler, gender is not part of an essential identity. It is not something fixed on an individual. It is not the last point of difference between bodies (male and female). Rather, it is something that is performed; it is acted out in specific, ritualized, repeated performances of the gendered body. To quote Butler:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.³³

As such, bodies should be considered to be underdetermined; they have to be thought of as social institutions as much as parts of the natural world.³⁴ Butler is not saying that there is no materiality of the body, but she is problematizing the idea that subjectivity can be thought of as deriving from the natural body