CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

1

O brave new world, that has such people in it

Oliver J. T. Harris and John Robb

Bodies in crisis – or everyday invisible strangeness?

In the Western world, hardly a day goes by without the announcement of a crisis in the body. New, wonderful, disconcerting, horrifying possibilities continually bombard us. During the time we have been writing this book, these are only some of the actual issues which have hit public attention:

- Is it right to create 'designer babies' to provide organic materials for an older sibling who may need a life-saving transplant? Is it ethical to screen unborn children for genetic diseases? For a preferred sex? For socially desirable characteristics or against socially stigmatized ones?
- Should stem cells from human embryos be used as a research or therapeutic material? Who owns the commercial rights to the genome of the population of Iceland? Should it be legal to trade commercially in human organs for transplant?
- Who controls dead bodies? For people dying in hospitals, is it doctors and hospital administrators or relatives of the deceased? For archaeological skeletons, is it scientists and museum curators, religious communities or descendent groups? Can waste heat from cremating the dead be used to heat a public swimming pool? Is it right to transform dead bodies into works of art for public, commercial display, as in Günther Von Hagens's controversial exhibitions of dissected bodies?
- Should animal organs be custom grown for transplant into humans? Should human genes be spliced into mice for testing human medicines?
- Why are athletes allowed to enhance their performance with caffeine and painkillers but not with steroids? Should students be banned from taking drugs enhancing mental performance during exams?
- When do media images cross the line from promoting attractively thin bodies to pushing girls towards anorexia? Should public health funds pay for cosmetic dental work, plastic surgery or sex reassignments? When is a surgical procedure 'traditional female circumcision' and when is it 'genital mutilation'? What are the social implications of full-face transplants?
- Who is a child's mother – the woman donating an egg for in vitro fertilization, the woman who bears the baby from an implanted egg or the adoptive parent actually raising the baby? Do women older than 60 years of age have a 'natural' right to bear children through surrogate mothers? Who controls the frozen eggs or sperm of persons now dead?
- Do people have a right to end their own lives when and how they wish? Should relatives or doctors be prosecuted for assisting them?

These are items culled from the daily news, not futuristic science fiction. Yet these things broach matters which only a few years ago were considered the stuff of dreams or nightmares. Miracle cures and illness-free lives? Socially engineered designer babies and commodified organs? Human-animal hybrids and robot-like prosthetics? Mix-and-match body parts? Endlessly cloned organs? Free-form parenthood hatched from test tubes? It is as if each news item is the thin end of a wedge opening cracks in how we experience the body. Cumulatively, as wedge after wedge pries open our[1] comfortable, familiar reality, it is almost inevitable that we see ourselves in a state of bodily crisis, with the plastinated corpses of Von Hagens's exhibition serving as a garish fin-de-siècle flourish.[2]

But perhaps we should not despair quite yet. The phrase 'Brave New World' was made famous in 1932 as the title of Aldous Huxley's dystopic novel of a grim future in which humans were vat-cloned industrially, tailored eugenically for their predestined social roles and made devoid of individuality and freedom. But it is now eighty years and counting from Huxley's vision. Throughout this time, we have always coped with change. We replace parts of our body with titanium hip joints, battery-run hearts, and dental implants you could chew bricks with, and it has not made us robots. Our vaccine- and antibiotic-fortified super-bodies are invulnerable to a whole range of killers, gaining us, on average, two additional decades of life; rather than basking in godlike arrogance, we spend this time pursuing retirement hobbies. We have decoded the secret of life in the human genome, but totalitarian dictators do not use it to eliminate undesirable races eugenically; instead, amateur

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

genealogists can buy DNA analyses on the Internet to see how genetically similar they are to people who share their surname. Reading about face transplants might make us worry about identity crises, but the first ones, used to rehabilitate victims of severe accidents, have proven psychologically beneficial rather than detrimental. The conceptual challenges posed by technologically assisted reproduction are nowhere near as complex as some of the traditional kinship-and-reproduction systems which anthropologists have documented in Australia, Melanesia and South America – systems based on old-fashioned pregnancy and amazing metaphorical logic, perhaps augmented by the ritual sharing of food, semen, milk or blood.

So is there really a crisis in the body? Humans are amazingly creative and responsive beings; there is no sign that the future is about to throw something at us which we really cannot handle conceptually and socially. What these news items do demonstrate is something else: *these things matter to us.* They matter because the body is central to how we conduct our lives on a daily basis. Beyond these extremes, how we use, live through, think and talk about our bodies is at the heart of the social and material world we inhabit. Thus, we project our hopes and fears about the future on the body. Not only has Huxley's vision not come to pass, it has been supplanted by newer, previously unimaginable nightmares and dreamscapes. Indeed, from at least the eighteenth century onwards,[3] whenever writers have envisioned alternative human worlds – utopian, dystopian or simply different – they have inevitably populated them with alternative human bodies, a fact which in itself tells us how deeply social life is rooted in the body. Every society understands the human body in its own way, and virtually every society believes that their body is *the* true body, the body which has evolved or been created to be the way bodies have to be. This is where the 'crisis of the body' comes from; it is part of our own historical narrative of the body.

Natural bodies? differences around the world today

'Nature', Katherine Hepburn tells Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*, 'is what we were put on earth to rise above'. Since at least the seventeenth century our own 'true' body has been the 'natural' body, understood as purely physical apart from a soul or mind. Many of our master narratives tell about our rise from body's 'state of nature' – how civilized people wash it, clothe it, heal it, restrain it and educate it. But since some point in the nineteenth century – perhaps *Frankenstein* marks the watershed – the flip side of this narrative has told how we may go too far, how the 'natural' body is being replaced by a futuristic body, unrecognizable and out of control.

This narrative, of course, depends upon the existence of a pre-cultural, biologically necessary body. Yet, when we look at it, there is little natural about our 'natural' body, aside perhaps from our conviction that it is so. We ordinarily find out how dependent upon social convention our body is when travel forces us out of our comfort zone and we encounter people living perfectly happy lives though clothed, fed, worked, washed, doctored and sexually satisfied according to entirely different standards than ours. Conversely, we continually do bodily things previous generations would have considered equally unnatural or improper – everything from unisex public bathrooms to vegetarianism, restrictions on corporal punishment, and open premarital sex. Unless we happen, miraculously, to be the first generation to achieve a genuinely natural bodily life – on the very cusp of technology devouring the natural body – a certain social conventionality appears in our own practice. Indeed, anthropologists have shown how people in different cultures have radically different views of what the human body is and how it should behave. We want to offer three quick examples of this here, to give a taste of the florid variations around the world today, but we will return to the topic in more detail in the next chapter.

How do differences in the body manifest themselves in the world today? Amongst many groups in the Amazon, what a person's body looks like is not fixed by their biology – their 'nature', in our common usage – but by who it is that is looking at them.[4] Accordingly, all beings, whether human or animal, share a single culture, and all look like humans to one another. So jaguars look like humans to other jaguars, but humans look like tapirs – prey animals – to jaguars. Tapirs look like humans to one another but look like tapirs to humans. Because the body here is a matter of perspective rather than biology, it is changeable, and particularly powerful individuals can take on the perspective (and thus the body) of another creature. The body in Amazonia is very different from the body in the West, but to understand this we need to place it in the context of a very different way of engaging with the world – a different set of social, political and ontological conventions.

In Trinidad, in contrast to the feigned indifference of those who cite the old proverb 'clothes do not make the man', clothes tell you who a person really is.[5] Here the efforts put into looking good, achieving status and being fashionable are recognized as telling people far more about you than whether you happen to have been born into wealth, intelligence or good looks. Truth is not hidden on the inside, as theories of psychoanalysis in the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

West might have it, but rather displayed in public, on the body where people can see it.[6]

For the shamans of Siberia, gender is not a fixed category given by biology but something that emerges under certain circumstances and that can change through time. Mandelstam Balzer has pointed out how 'at times, and in some Siberian cultures, the shamanic use of sexual power and symbolism meant that male shamans turned themselves into females, for particular shamanic séances, and, in some cases, more permanently'.[7] Amongst the Chukchi of north-eastern Siberia, female shamans occasionally did the reverse and took on male identities. Male shamans who took on female qualities were known as soft-men.[8] These soft-men then took husbands, dressed, ate and behaved as women, but despite the connotations of the name in English, soft-men were believed to be especially powerful shamans. The same is true of the attested cases of female shamans, who took up male identities and married wives. Jacobs and Cromwell trace up to ten gender categories amongst the Chukchi.[9] These range from the taking up of certain female traits by males (or vice versa) to the total adoption of the other sex's way of life.

In three different worlds, three ways of understanding the body emerge. In each case the body is central to how society happens: it lies at the heart of how Trinidadians conceive of truth and honesty, identity and being; it drives the ability of shamans in Siberia to change gender, or those in Amazonia to transform into jaguars. Each of these body worlds has coherence to it and builds upon this everyday strangeness to form a richly evocative subject, central to the societies themselves.

Huxley stole the phrase 'brave new world' from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Act V, Scene 1). Miranda, who has been raised alone with her father on a deserted island following a shipwreck, beholds people other than themselves for the very first time, and exclaims:

> "O, wonder!
> How many goodly creatures are there here!
> How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
> That has such people in't!"

We agree with Miranda. As we hope to convince you in this book, the really astonishing thing is not any science fiction vision of future bodies, but the complex and often unbelievable bodies all humans live with, in everyday reality.

From 'body worlds' to body worlds

To capture the social life of the body, we want to subvert Von Hagens's title and talk not about 'Body Worlds' but about *body worlds*; not the shocking, skinless, sensationalist bodies he displays, but rather the equally compelling bodies of everyday life. A body world, as we use the term here, encompasses the totality of bodily experiences, practices and representations in a specific place and time. These, we suggest, are at the heart of how we understand the world. The body world of Western daily life involves all manner of engagements: eating, sleeping, sex, painkillers, alcohol, walking, exercise, communication, driving and so forth. All of these are bodily acts, involving specific, usually trained, ways of moving, of carrying and shaping the body, particular forms of gender-appropriate behaviour (that are more or less adhered to) and so on. As our anthropological examples show, this is one example of many, but for all human beings body worlds are the worlds all of us inhabit all the time. Far from being boring, natural or universal, they are in fact fascinating, diverse and culturally specific.

Anthropologically, there is nothing normal about normality; it passes unnoticed not because it is inevitable, or the only way one can live, or even because it necessarily makes much sense, but simply because we are used to it. As we will see in Chapters 2, 7 and 8, our body world has a history and a cultural logic; it too could have been different, and will be different in the future. The strangeness and conventionality of our world is invisible, subsumed into a multitude of bite-sized pieces of experience, lacking the in-your-face shock value of flayed bodies, copyrighted genomes and face transplants. But if we examine daily life analytically, by taking it apart and looking at the rules, habits and bodily practices that comprise it, the 'obvious' nature of what we do and how we live disappears. It is these different body worlds, then, that we seek to explore in this book and to outline how and why they changed.

Bodies have history

But one can also encounter different bodies by travelling in time as well as in space – not to an alien future but to an equally alien past. Roaming away from the present, the historical tourist encounters strange bodies everywhere. Many seventeenth-century Britons – including highly educated scientists – believed that a hanged man's hand could cure some diseases. Medieval theologians found cannibalism peculiarly abhorrent not because of the violence involved but because of the difficulty it implied in sorting out whose body the flesh which was eaten belonged to when Resurrection came. Ancient Greeks placed statues of Hermes consisting of only a head and an erect phallus around the streets as a kind of civic spiritual protection. The most complex technology

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

of Bronze Age Europe was employed predominantly not to solve life's practical problems but simply to give bodies a shining appearance. Neolithic people risked their lives performing delicate cranial surgery with stone tools for little apparent medical reason. Mesolithic people buried dogs like humans and carved sculptures of people turning into fish (or perhaps fish turning into humans). The list goes on.

These apparently bizarre practices made perfect sense to people involved at the time, just as comparing a body to a machine or to a computer may make sense to us, though it would be utterly alien to these other groups. To understand the body, then, it is essential to set it in its own cultural, social, political and material frame of reference. In turn, this frame of reference has to be understood as *historical*. The body worlds we study in this book are the products of particular histories. To give one example, which we discuss in more detail in Chapters 7 and 8, it is impossible to understand our 'modern' bodies without an appreciation of a range of historical processes including medieval theology that set the body in opposition to the soul; the growth of science in the eighteenth century; the development of discipline in schools, hospitals, factories, asylums, prisons and the military in the nineteenth century and so on.[10] Our bodies carry these histories with them, in the way we move, exercise, sleep, eat and act in general. The body is not a universally shared physical object whose historical continuity comes from its unchanging biological structure, but rather something emergent through history. The body is in history; indeed, the body *is* history.

Yet bodies are not merely victims of historical circumstance. Body worlds and bodies themselves are historical agents in their own right. They embody – the pun is anything but accidental – and produce understandings of the world and so make certain developments possible and forestall others. The manner in which they are understood practically through action and engagement, and materially rather than verbally, means they are often more important in generating action than we give them credit for. Like material things, bodies can be humble and in the background,[11] even as they disclose a particular set of possible actions in any particular circumstance. Part of the aim of this book, therefore, is not just to examine how historical circumstances create particular kinds of bodies, but how particular kinds of bodies generate certain forms of history.

Not just another history of the body . . .

Of course, to many people it will be no surprise that how humans understand their body is situated historically, and therefore it is possible – indeed, necessary – to write a history of the human body. There is a huge literature on body histories in many fields, including archaeology, history, Classics and anthropology, and the specialized histories of medicine, science, art, religion, gender and sexuality. Without this literature our work here would not be possible, and as will become clear, we draw on it extensively.

Why then this project? This book is an unusual, perhaps very strange, project, in two ways. The first is just the sheer scale of the story we want to tell. Even 'comprehensive' treatments of the body[12] only deal with Classical times onwards. By integrating prehistory as well as historical and modern periods, we cover much more than twice this span. In the process we need to cross disciplines. A history of the body in which each period is written up by specialists in that period inevitably traverses fields with quite different materials, questions and methods of scholarship. Hence what one writes about the body magically changes as one goes from prehistory to the Greeks, from Greek to medieval, from medieval to modern. In such a history, how much of the apparent change is really attributable to differences between disciplines which rarely talk to each other? What would one learn from a history which treats different periods in an equal way?

The second reason is our focus. We do not want to write an encyclopedic volume, presenting everything about the history of the body for each of the periods we deal with. Many histories of the body attempted to date provide beautiful snapshots of one particular body world. This might be historians describing how medieval people existed in a world in which the body formed a canvas for identities and moralities,[13] or archaeologists discussing how Mesolithic hunter-gatherers in Scandinavia understood dogs as being something that could become part of a person rather than a separate living being.[14] When discussions of change are attempted, they tend to focus on one particular kind of practice or discourse, or one particular aspect of change. An example might be the change from thinking about the body as microcosm in the sixteenth century to thinking about it as machine in the eighteenth, as in the case of Jonathan Sawday's exemplary analysis.[15] While certain moments of change, say in the Early Modern period, or in the shift from Archaic to Classical sculpture in Ancient Greece, have been analyzed a lot, other transformations have not yet been thought through. Although this book attempts to narrate a continuous history for the body in Europe from the Palaeolithic to the present, we have inevitably left many stories untold, many problems ignored and much variation suppressed. This is the price of long-term cultural history. The result is not *the* history of the human body in

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

Europe, merely *a* history. We make no claims to totality or finality.

Instead, consider paradoxes of scale. Scholars tend to work inside historical comfort zones of a few decades or centuries. Only fools and archaeologists venture into millennia. But if you try to tell the story of ten thousand years, you inevitably do it differently than if you tell the story of one year ten thousand times. Pulling back to the big picture not only allows but actually forces one to see different kinds of patterns and processes. In the mirror of deep history, dramatic punctuational changes, such as between the medieval and modern periods, show much more continuity than could ever be suspected from the close-up view. At the same time, taken for granted parameters of daily life such as concepts of honor or gender become historically arbitrary. The surprising fact that ideas about the body can both be entirely conventional and last for a millennium or more itself demands theorization. In this sense, one of the main concerns of this book is not merely the substance of history, the ten thousand years of facts, but the process of history. How does history unfold at different scales? And how does this process of history involve the body? It is this focus on scale, time depth and historical process that really differentiates this book from conventional body histories.

Thinking outside the (disciplinary) box: A challenge to the reader

One of us (JR) frequently has an experience which could pass for a recurrent nightmare, except that it happens when awake. Imagine you find a book in a bookshop, which promises a fascinating account of a Big Topic. It is written by a World Expert – a historian, a sociologist, a psychologist, a biologist, a physicist, an architect or even a cook. Chapter 2 of *The Universal History of Topic* is always the foundation charter, the sketch of The Topic in Human Antiquity. It traces the prehistoric roots of our modern foodstuffs, or the evolutionary basis of political relationships, or how the modern cities began in Neolithic Anatolia, or the ancient basis of worldwide genetic or linguistic patterns, or prehistoric evidence for the social process of dying. And in nine cases out of ten, it is deeply disappointing. The World Expert in some other field has only the haziest idea of my own field, prehistory. Amidst sophisticated exposition of cutting-edge research in his or her own field are naiveties about archaeology or anthropology which would not pass muster in an undergraduate essay. By now, blasé, the prehistorian usually skips the prehistory chapter, which, anyway, normally serves only as the historical garnish to what the author is cooking up. The real problem is the second-order doubts: If World Experts can write absurdities on topics about which we happen to know a lot, why should we take their writing as authoritative on topics about which we know nothing?

Now the tables are turned, and we are writing a book in which easily two-thirds of the material covered comes from other disciplines, far from our own. We imagine – indeed, we hope – that our readers are quite likely to be experts in fields in which we are not. What is to prevent us from making the same hash of other people's fields that they often make of ours?

At this point, we would like to propose an agreement with the reader. On our part, we will try to avoid the mistakes people make with other fields. There are three reasons such errors regularly occur. One is simply lack of genuine interest – using another field as wallpaper or legitimation rather than as something important in its own right. The second (closely related, in this age of easy access to information for those motivated to seek it out) is lack of real contact with the field, relying on a few sources and impressions heard in an undergraduate lecture several decades ago rather than actually finding out what people in the field are doing now. For both of these we may plead that, as noted earlier, we have been working closely with our specialist colleagues in the fields we discuss to keep us closely engaged and *au courant*.

The third reason, the real killer, is disciplinary differences. Common sense in one field rarely matches common sense in another. To take just one example, it is usual in evolutionary studies, economics and some forms of political theory to assume that individuals' behaviour can be judged against some relatively straightforward, universal form of self-interest; this is gross anathema in most of sociology, psychology and anthropology, and the question of general explanation itself is rarely even considered in most work in history and Classics. Time scale and models of social process are another example; in some fields, history is a micro-narrative about people and their actions, and twenty years is considered the long term; in other fields, twenty years is a barely measurable blink of the eye, and history is a slow secular fugue of traditions and institutions. Our solution here has been to use a reasonably broad theoretical framework drawing upon theorists who will be familiar across much of the humanities and social sciences, even if different fields employ alternative readings of their works. Our specialist colleagues have been of great help here. We have also tried to phrase our concepts, and writing, in a straightforward, ecumenical, lowest-common-denominator way rather than in ways tied to specific disciplinary frameworks.

On your part, we ask two things of the reader. First, we would never ask the reader to suspend his or her critical

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

judgement – indeed, we are very curious to know what readers will make of this work – but we do ask you to suspend your disciplinary defense mechanisms. We may not always use the familiar phrases or cite the intellectual genealogies that serve as the handshake of recognition in each field, we skate over an immense amount of detail, and within the scope of this project we cannot possibly acknowledge all the controversies and debates which define every disciplinary landscape. We hope that this does not mean that the data which we do present and the interpretations we give them do not merit consideration.

Secondly, we hope readers will simply take the book on its own terms. Books which aspire to big-picture history with serious intellectual content (as opposed to popular surveys) are so rare that it is worth asking why this should be so. The answer is simply that scholars in most disciplines do not pose questions on this scale. On the rare occasions on which they do, there are real difficulties to contend with. The vast territory one needs to cover to answer these questions is carved up amongst quite disparate specializations that have to be reduced to some common comprehensibility; otherwise one winds up seeing not differences between the Dutch and English countryside but between how Van Eyck and Constable painted, so to speak. It follows that if this project is worth doing in the first place, it will have to be done in a way which does not fit any single disciplinary pattern; one can only judge it on its own terms, for how well the book answers the questions it poses.

Or so we think. Enjoy the ride!

NOTES

1. In this chapter, and indeed throughout the book, we use terms like 'we', 'our' and 'us' to refer to a set of perspectives commonly held by many people in Europe and North America. Of course, such a move may make it seem that we presume these people are a homogeneous group, or that we are alienating people from other places and backgrounds. This is not our intention. Rather, the point is simply that readers of this book have a deep well of ethnographic experience to draw on in understanding the body – 'our' knowledge of 'our' own bodies – and this gives us an invaluable resource in discussing these issues. And understanding the historicity of our own bodies is part of the point of the book. One could easily write another book exploring the limits of who the 'us' here actually is, but for the sake of clear writing, we (i.e., JR and OH) have chosen to use these terms as an intentionally general and somewhat vague shorthand simply to invoke an experience of embodiedness many readers may share.
2. Images of plastinated bodies-as-art from Von Hagens's exhibition may be viewed at http://www.bodyworlds.com/en.html. We had hoped to include an image here from the 'Body Worlds'. However, after reviewing this chapter, the 'Body Worlds' press office declined to grant permission to use an image – in itself a fascinating example of the sensitivity surrounding the use of dead bodies, here manifested in the organisers' feeling that they need to control the discourse their images provoke. In our text, we do not actually take a judgemental position on 'Body Worlds' – we merely note what others have said about the exhibit. But clearly it hit a nerve.
3. Guadalupe and Manguel (1987) provide a fascinating compendium with many examples of imagined alternative bodies from antiquity to the present.
4. See Vilaça 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2004.
5. Miller 1994; 2010.
6. Miller 2010, 18.
7. Mandelstam Balzer 1996, 165.
8. Ibid.
9. Jacobs and Cromwell 1992.
10. Foucault 1977; 1978.
11. cf. Miller 1987; 2010; Heidegger 1962.
12. E.g., Bynum and Kalof 2010.
13. Kay and Rubin 1994.
14. Fowler 2004a.
15. Sawday 1995.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

2

Body worlds and their history: Some working concepts

Oliver J. T. Harris and John Robb

Body worlds: Social reality as bodily process

Chapter 1 provided some of the background to the aims of our project. Before tackling the history of the body, however, we need to introduce the reader to some working concepts. Many will be familiar to readers who have studied fields such as anthropology or social history. This will not be true of all; and, in general, we have tried to use theoretical concepts quietly rather than belabouring the reader with them. Thus we need to set out our general approach here.

The first step towards enlightenment is perplexity. Of all things, we take the body the most for granted; we have to make bodies strange before we can understand them. And this means starting with our own bodies and (in the phrase we used in Chapter 1) their 'everyday invisible strangeness'. We begin with our own body world once again, before moving through a series of vignettes that outline just a fraction of the range of differences that exist around the world today. Doing so allows us to identify a series of key concepts to which we return throughout the book. Finally, we turn to the issue of variation in time, rather than space, and consider the tools we need to deal with the histories we seek to write, from multi-temporal scales of analysis to a rethink of causation. Once we have these concepts in hand, we turn to our narrative itself in Chapter 3.

The world we live (bodily) in

The strangeness and conventionality of our own body world is invisible, subsumed into a multitude of bite-sized pieces of experience; the shocking poster children for the body controversies which opened Chapter 1 are really just the tip of the iceberg. By looking critically at the rules, habits and bodily practices that make up daily life, the 'obvious' nature of what we do and how we live disappears, and we see instead how a historically configured bodily reality works.

Life in space

You are in a queue at a supermarket, bank or bus stop. Superficially, it is a completely banal, invisible moment, forgotten as soon as it occurs, the epitome of wasted time. But it is nevertheless a highly structured moment, in unseen ways. Consider the precise management of distance between bodies. Too close is invasive; too distant leads to ambiguity about who is next in line. Distancing is materially controlled and cued: bodies are quietly put into place by seats, doors, sidewalks, pathways, aisles, bathroom cubicles, privacy screens and many other devices, such as the plastic bars which separate your groceries at the supermarket checkout from those of the next customer. Social distance is maintained by behavioural walls too – conventions of glance, talk, position and gesture. Hearing someone a metre away in your group is listening, hearing someone a metre away in another group is eavesdropping, and discouraged.

Theoretically, the fascinating question here is why we should actually care as deeply as we obviously do about how bodies are distanced. The answer is that we experience not only physical space but also social or psychological space. Spatial closeness is fundamental to defining different kinds of public or private interaction amongst groups such as strangers, companions, a family or a couple. Conversely, identities can define spaces, as when people occupying an unstructured 'public' space define a 'private' group by standing and talking as one. These proximities do not merely symbolize social relations; they actually create them. They are experienced emotionally as intimacy, familiarity, invasiveness, presumption, chilly distance, privacy or security. And this emotionally coded space is centred upon the body. In our normal model of personhood, a person is rather like an onion; one penetrates successive thresholds to achieve increasing intimacy, solidarity and understanding. Our moment of queuing happens in a relatively outer layer of the onion, but it presumes and reproduces a continuum extending into more formally defined private groups (at a restaurant, for instance), into the official 'private' space of the home – itself graded into more 'outer' places for guests and more 'inner' places such as bedroom and bathroom.[1] Finally, via channels as varied as sexual contact, medical imaging, introspection or psychological therapy, poetry or

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

portraiture, we get beneath the skin to penetrate the physical and psychological interiorities where we feel one encounters the true 'inner' self.

This is not a universal model of personhood; it is a model which is defined in our own culture,[2] which relies upon concepts such as the interior self, and which is elaborated on and experienced in many ways, including our unconscious spatial reflexes in moments such as queuing. (We discuss the historical roots of this model in Chapter 7.) Here, it is worth noting that it is a model in which most bodily functions (particularly 'bad' or dysfunctional ones) are understood as intimate and appropriate only for restricted or private spaces.[3] These include appetite (hence eating publicly is often hedged with convention), sweating, crying, defecation, sexual activity, illness and, of course, death. Thus, many critics of Von Hagens's exhibition of anatomised bodies felt that the displaying of the dead, particularly without their skins on, was an invasion of the privacy of death.[4]

You, your body and perfect bodies

To eat or not to eat? It is surprising how loaded this apparently simple, 'natural' moment of decision is. In a room alone, a young woman struggles against anorexia, fighting against the devastating linkage of her sense of self-worth with her body image: eating requires defeating part of herself. But morality also pervades less extreme situations. For most people, daily decisions about how to eat are laced with two particular discourses: body image and the medicalization of life. Images of how bodies should look are promoted ubiquitously through the media, through consumer culture and even through government and public agencies. These surround us with an omnipresent universe of ideal bodies, a pantheon in which celebrities serve much the same function as Greek gods, providing exemplary bodies. Central to this is advertising which employs young women, and increasingly young men,[5] to promote all manner of products in ways that allow the camera to consume the flesh of the model as much as advertise the product on display. Such visuals are internalized and form part of our self-image, for better or worse. Medical discourses, in contrast, lead us to internalize the idea that decisions should be made according to medical criteria: you should eat bananas not because you like how they taste but because they contain potassium and fibre. Claims about nutrition and healthy diet, reliable or not, are present in almost every eating situation. White bread or brown in your sandwich? The eater can, and is often forced to, make an informed decision on something about which he or she may never have previously considered a decision necessary at all.[6]

It would be silly to deny that what you eat has important health consequences, but the point here is that the moral discourse of eating goes far beyond this. Even as governments claim that super-thin fashion models promote a culture of female starvation, they also specify a narrow ideal weight range for everybody and stigmatize people above this as overweight or obese. Such evaluations obviously depend upon constant comparison of the body with implicit or explicit ideals. Such ideals are not only bureaucratically standardized but are also sold. Diets, exercise, 'healthy' foods and clothing associated with ideal bodies are huge commercial commodities, and consumer culture develops care of the self into a narcissistic care of the body. Increasingly, the body acts as a source of symbolic capital, of value 'less because of what the body is able to *do* than because of how it *looks*'.[7]

Hence eating – an apparently transparent decision which one might expect to be based upon things such as taste, hunger, need and pleasure – turns out to be mediated by imagery and discourse. Like all discourses of the body, this one is politically loaded. A famous 1970s manifesto argued that '[f]at is a feminist issue', that ideologies of body form imposed harmful sexist stigmas upon women.[8] Perhaps the most recent incarnation of this is the idea that the health costs of obesity are borne by society as a whole; being overweight is thus not merely personal but becomes an antisocial act. Increasingly clear moral boundaries police body size, fatness, unhealthiness and unattractiveness, all associated with a moral failure to control and discipline the body.[9] This often deftly converts a sexist stereotype into class-based demonization. To be thin is also to be attractive, successful and a good member of society.

Gendered doorways

A man entering a building holds open a door for a woman to pass through before him. Courtesy or condescension?

This apparently trivial gesture became politically loaded with the feminist movements of the 1970s. Traditionally, a male allowed a female precedence in entering a doorway. This was thought of as simple courtesy; it was a form of respect based upon difference. Yet, as feminists pointed out, it summed up distinctions that prevented women from having equal status with men: it cast women as the weaker sex and men as protectors, and it differentiated between those who orchestrate movement and those who are orchestrated. Such distinctions had a light touch when they opened a door with a smile; they had a heavy hand when they restricted women to 'women's work', excluding them from domestic decision-making and from education or professions.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

Several decades later, great steps have been made towards gender equality, and many people would probably consider opening a door a simple courtesy one would extend to anybody regardless of their gender. Yet, we still live with gender classifications, which begin from the moment the midwife or doctor holds the newborn baby (or looks at the ultrasound image) and announces "it's a girl!" Gender distinctions seem natural, yet they are historically constructed. Even looking at a body and declaring it to be biologically male or female is itself a social categorization which prioritizes some criteria over others and irons out variations.[10] The doctrine that men and women have different natures because they have different biological bodies certainly has a specific historical trajectory and may date to developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[11] Today, we still believe in gender and spend a lot of time discussing it in various forms. Why are there disproportionately fewer women in engineering and the physical sciences, and why do girls outperform boys at school? What kind of cars do men and women drive, and do they drive them in different ways? How can women (but not men, apparently) balance career and family? Why do we have separate male and female public bathrooms, given that separate cubicles within them already create privacy?

There are two important points to understand here. First, these tangential discussions of gender help constitute gender as a fundamental domain whose existential reality we do not question and which forms part of who we think we are and who other people understand us to be. We might (and in fact often do) argue about the surface choices of gender, such as dress or whether the kinds of cars men and women drive is changing; but we take for granted the underlying existence of categories such as 'male' and 'female' which are continually validated by such discussions. Secondly, these categories are not only created through discourse; they are enacted through bodily idioms of similarity and difference, through gendered spaces in which we move, through gendered things we make and use, and through gendered ways of dressing, looking, speaking, touching and moving. In bathrooms, shops, cars and life choices, we still have gendered doorways. If you remain to be convinced, try going through the wrong one.

Order, authority, class

In a tranquil concert hall, the orchestra plays a classical concerto. It is a highly ordered moment. Bodies of performers are synchronized, subordinated to a harmonious plan rather than allowing individualism or spontaneity. The violins' bows are coordinated to within a fraction of a second, and the finest distinctions are audible in the carefully modulated sounds that have been rehearsed a hundred times. Order encompasses not only the orchestra but the audience and other participants as well. Bodies are restrained, fixed in place, made to conform to standards of dress and decorum. The listeners sit in soberly dressed, silent rows, perhaps nodding or waving a finger gently in rhythm, awaiting their cue for their own performance, the mannered applause.

The interesting thing here is what this bodily coordination tells us about the meaning of Classical music as a field of activity. Admirers of Classical music will speak of beauty and pleasure, but there are many other, less rigidly ordered ways of experiencing beauty and pleasure. Classical music is music of finely textured order, of balance, repetition, formality, fine distinction; its values are intellectuality, restraint, and subtle distinction. Its venues are formal; even the more riotous or avant-garde twentieth-century composers, ostensibly composing tavern drinking songs or revolutionary manifestos, are normally heard in concert halls rather than in rowdy taverns or at street barricades. This genre is often associated with class (as part of high culture), with education (how can one become discerning without long training?) and with money (going to the symphony can be an expensive pastime, and only the prosperous can devote years of time and money to forming themselves as discerning performers or listeners). Mozart and Beethoven are often promoted prescriptively as what every educated person 'should know' (in implicit contrast to what they actually *do* know). In short, it is a musical form of high culture associated with class and authority. As discussed later, Bourdieu's concept of habitus[12] captures the manner in which different social orders produce and are produced by different kinds of bodily practices. These are conducted often without conscious thought, but nevertheless reveal much about the way in which bodies are understood and relate to one another in a particular society. And one bodily idiom for class and authority is a habitus of careful bodily control, reserve, restraint and conformity.

Habitus and authority in music is something we understand instinctively better than discursively. In another concert hall, this world is turned upside down; randomly and extravagantly dressed performers and audience contort themselves wildly, limbs flying in abandoned gestures. The disorder might be as scripted as the classical order, of course, but the deafening music with crude, pulsing rhythms expresses anarchic primal energy and individual defiance rather than finely coordinated, subtle distinction. In yet another gathering, we might find jazz, an intellectual, complex counterpoint of individualism and coordination, or a hymn service where the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-19528-7 - The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future
Edited by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris
Excerpt
More information

congregation sing in unison sturdy choruses with rousing, lowest-common-denominator melodies to get across the fundamental message of solidarity and salvation.

There are really two points here. First, not only within a genre of music but across different genres, and for listeners as well as performers, features such as synchrony versus asynchrony, uniformity versus difference, measured versus unrestrained gestures, and subtlety versus directness form bodily idioms which go straight to our nerves and help get the basic social meaning of the performance across. Secondly, and more importantly, these codes are not restricted by any means to music; they extend across many fields of life. The precise coordination of the violin section is matched by the impossibly synchronic, mechanical gestures of the military parade;[13] the two contexts ostentatiously display different sides of the subordination of individuals to the design of a group. The conservative uniformity of formal dress expected at 'establishment' occasions shows restraint, conformity to authority, and belonging; the restrained, controlled gestures and clipped, reasoned tones of upper class discourse express the same semantic in a different register. Without this underlying equation of bodily restraint with class, authority and conformity, how could long hair on men, disordered dress, wild gestures, upraised voices, or disordered music provide such a handy and recurrent way to express permissiveness, protest or anti-structure?[14]

The standard medical body

Then there is medicine (something we explore in more detail in Chapter 8). Many modern states have universal health care systems, and even ones which do not (such as the United States) may have very complex governmental systems which set standards for health care and uphold basic rights to get care. Such health care systems depend upon the idea that all bodies have equal rights to health and upon the concept of a universal body, a body with a standardized functionality which can be assessed through objective measurement. For example, health care now depends upon an increasingly bureaucratized specification of what a standard body should be – its body mass index, its reflex times, its blood chemistry, its metabolization of nutrients, its visual and auditory acuity, its vaccinated resistance to disease and many more features. The purpose of medicine (increasingly via preventive care and restorative interventions such as hip transplants) is to maintain the body to this universal standard and, when it is faulty, to restore it to it as far as possible.[15] Medicine thus functions just like car care: the annual road test or check-up detects deviations from the governmental, democratic standard, and repairs get the body back on the road.

The medicalization and management of the material body are evident in many other ways. Consider regulation. In medieval times, for example, the material body was rarely regulated out of consideration for its health. To the extent that it was regulated, the point was either to keep it in its social place (e.g. via sumptuary laws on dress, specifications for military service and so on) or for its spiritual good (e.g. in fasting, scripted participation in religious services, the regulation of sexuality and similar rules). To the extent that the government intervenes in bodies today, the situation is reversed. Although some moral strictures remain (such as limitations on public nudity), many have gone (such as restrictions on many forms of sexuality). In their place, there has occurred a huge growth in regulation aimed purely at the physical health of the body – rules about smoking, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, eating pure foods, conforming to a vast array of health and safety rules, obligatory insurance and, increasingly, the protection of minors. It is symptomatic of the historical reversal of priorities that we allow our citizens to believe anything they want about God but not to ride in a car without seat belts.

Back to social reality: Body worlds

In one sense these are trivial moments, but in many ways they are culturally more far-reaching than any Frankenstein-like new technology. Discovering DNA, growing new body parts from stem cells or developing thought-controlled prosthetics may feel like a tsunami or earthquake with the power to transform the landscape in an instant. Yet millions of small daily acts have a power of their own more akin to the constant carving of eroding wind and water. They can accomplish things cataclysms cannot, levelling mountains, filling ocean basins, building up sandstone and limestone hundreds of metres thick. Sedimenting history, they create the cultural landscape that determines whether an earthquake transforms an entire vista or passes harmlessly without effect.

What gives a coherent texture to experience is not each such moment but the tacit connections between them. If we trace the links between these moments, we see how gender norms cross-cut the question of eating and body weight and the doorways and paths men and women pass through. Reflexes of personal autonomy and space underlie the routines of bodily distancing and privacy and the idea of bodily control as a balance of

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org