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978-0-521-59405-9 - Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in  
Early Modern England

Jonathan Gil Harris

Excerpt

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## 1 Introduction: functionalist organicism and the origins of social pathology

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This is a book about organic political analogy in Tudor and Stuart England – that is, the diverse, complex ways in which writers of the period conceived of social structure and process through the prism of the human body. There have been a number of other studies of the notion of the body politic in early modern English culture; the present study differs from these in that its primary focus is not on how organic political analogy worked, but rather, on how it *didn't* work. As I shall show in this book, the rich storehouse of somatic figures for society, its constituent members, and its operations which early modern English writers had inherited from medieval and classical literature became throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries increasingly dysfunctional and, in a very literal sense, pathological.

Nowadays, it would seem, the body politic is a dead metaphor – or at least one whose descriptive power has become severely attenuated. In late twentieth-century Western political discourse, it no longer participates within the elaborate repertoire of correspondences that characterized its use in early modern England. We may still speak of the “head” of state, or of “members” of parliament or congress. But these few lingering fossils represent a mere fraction of the metaphorical applications to which the body, its parts, and its functions were put in medieval and early modern political discourse. No matter how seemingly insignificant the body part, English writers from the Norman conquest to the Revolution proved themselves extraordinarily deft in establishing connections between the components of bodies natural and politic. “The republic is a body,” observed John of Salisbury in the middle of the twelfth century:

the position of the head in the republic is occupied, however, by a prince . . . the place of the heart is occupied by the senate, from which proceeds the beginning of good and bad works. The duties of the ears, eyes and mouth are claimed by the judges and the governors of provinces. The hands coincide with officials and soldiers. Those who always assist the prince are comparable to the flanks . . . the feet coincide with peasants perpetually bound to the soil.<sup>1</sup>

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Over four centuries later, writers in Tudor and Stuart England managed to adduce even more ingenious correspondences: the liver was compared to the High Treasurer, the four humors to different types of citizen (“the generous,” “the learned,” “yeomen,” and “Trafiuers”), and the tongue to a bewildering variety of members of the English body politic – amongst them, lawyers, commoners, Catholics, unruly women, and witches.<sup>2</sup>

Such metaphorical excess can strike modern readers as quaint relics of a completely remote *episteme*,<sup>3</sup> not least because of the archaic, Neoplatonic cosmology that practitioners of organic political analogy frequently invoked to lend legitimacy to their formulations of the body politic. For many writers in Tudor and Stuart England, the body politic was not simply a heuristic device; it was imbued with a cosmic significance, participating within a system of correspondences between the body of man, or microcosm, and the larger body of the universe, or macrocosm. In *The Boke of the Governor*, for instance, Thomas Elyot presented the “publike weale” as a “body liuing compact,” a system whose organization corresponds to “the order that God hath put generally in all his creatures, beginning at the most inferiour or base, and ascending vpward.”<sup>4</sup> For Elyot and a large number of his contemporaries, therefore, the structure of the “publike weale” – conceived of in some cases as the existing body politic, in others as the ideal *corpus politicum* to which England should aspire – acquired divine sanction by reflecting the hierarchical order placed by God in the human body and, indeed, all creation.

Despite, or maybe because of, the quaint outmodedness of the cosmological apparatus within which the analogy often participated, twentieth-century examinations of Elizabethan organic political metaphor have frequently been motivated by a pronounced nostalgia. Two distinct currents of this nostalgia are discernible. The first has simply applauded the metaphorical richness of Tudor and Stuart formulations of the *corpus politicum*. David George Hale, for example, concludes his important study of the body politic with a caveat that barely conceals its wistfulness: in the twentieth century, he says, “the imagery of the body politic no longer delights and instructs, no longer holds up the mirror to nature. To lament this change is futile; to recognize it, imperative.”<sup>5</sup> Hale’s imperative has arguably gone unheeded by those literary and cultural historians who profess a slightly different brand of nostalgia, one prompted less by the metaphor itself, perhaps, than by its presumed vision of social as well as cosmic hierarchy. E. M. W. Tillyard provides the most notorious instance. For Tillyard, the metaphor is part of a larger “world picture” which “all Elizabethans believed in,” and to which he himself lends his implicit assent with his insistence that the “greatness” of any Elizabethan writer can be ascertained by the extent to which they uphold the world picture’s prin-

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ciples of hierarchy and subjection to the *primum mobile* of God, soul, or monarch.<sup>6</sup>

For all their differences, Hale and Tillyard are in fundamental agreement that early modern English accounts of the body politic belong to an irretrievably lost *Weltanschauung*. Contrary to the elegaic *ubi sunt* flavour of Hale's and Tillyard's studies, however, this book proceeds from the premise that Tudor and Stuart articulations of organic political analogy are not quite as remote from our modern moment as they may at first seem. Clearly the body is no longer, in Michel Foucault's words, "the fulcrum on which all resemblances turn."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the body remains a powerful constitutive metaphor – albeit one that remains largely occulted – in many twentieth-century discourses of nation and social formation. This is particularly evident in the recurrent figurations of social pathology that have been a feature of popular and academic discourse alike. Western political rhetoric has amassed this century a sizeable lexicon loosely derived from pathological medicine whose terms (e.g. the "purge," "foreign bodies," "infection," "containment," perhaps even "ethnic cleansing") presume an organic notion of nation or civil society. And in tandem with the pathologization of mainstream political rhetoric, the academic discourses of functionalist sociology and cultural anthropology have repeatedly resorted to complex models of society derived from human biology and medicine in order to explain the maintenance of the social "organism" and the causes of its "pathologies."

To an extent that has not been fully acknowledged, early modern English versions of organic political analogy are similarly fixated with illness: extensively informed by the emergent discourses of Renaissance physiology, nosology, and pathology, elaborate accounts of the body politic's sundry diseases and their remedies make their first appearance in the literature of the period. In the century following Thomas Starkey's detailed summary of the eight "illnesses" afflicting England's "politic body" (c. 1535), a swarm of descriptions of the nation's social "plagues," "infections," "impostumes," "tettors," and "cankers" were published.<sup>8</sup> Political writers, playwrights, and pamphleteers attempted to explain not only the nature of the *corpus politicum's* ills; styling themselves (or the judiciary, or the monarch) as the nation's "physicians," they concocted a colorful ensemble of medico-political remedies – "purges," "potions," "glysters," "pharmacha" – designed to expel the body politic's afflictions. And, most importantly, they repeatedly sought to explain the etiology of social illness in ways that not only borrowed from, but also helped consolidate, radically new conceptions of the origins of disease.

This book, then, examines the early modern origins of social pathology: that is, both Tudor and Stuart writers' theories of how and where the body

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politic's illnesses originate; and, more specifically, the historical origins within early modern English writing of the modern discourses of social infection, containment, and cure. The emergence of the "pathological" as a category within Western juridico-political as well as medical lexicons during the nineteenth century has been extensively documented by Georges Canguilhem, Sander Gilman, and others.<sup>9</sup> But we have to go back to the Tudor period's fledgling formulations of England's ills to begin fleshing out the history of the two most distinctive – and problematic – axioms of twentieth-century functionalist social pathology: first, that social illness has its origins exclusively in external factors; and second, that the social organism's pathologies can contribute to, rather than undermine, its health. In this introductory chapter, I will sketch how both axioms have informed not only functionalist sociology and anthropology, but also Stephen Greenblatt's watershed essay on containment in Elizabethan culture, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion." The persistence of the two axioms within twentieth-century academic discourse makes a new study of early modern English organic political analogy timely, and suggests that such a study might help illuminate the prehistory, as well as the pitfalls, of the discourses of social pathology that are part of our own historical moment.

### Functionalist organicism

From Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century to Bronislaw Malinowski and Talcott Parsons in the mid-twentieth, social scientists have employed biological models of society, in large part to legitimize their work as "scientific," but also to explain the ways in which the various components of a social "organism" function to maintain its integrity. "The physiologist studies the functions of the average organism," Emile Durkheim observed; "the same is true of the sociologist."<sup>10</sup> Refinements in social science have kept step with paradigm shifts in medicine and biology: more than a century after Comte asserted "a true correspondence between Statistical Analysis of the Social Organism in Sociology, and that of the Individual Organism in Biology,"<sup>11</sup> Talcott Parsons drew on contemporary developments in genetic science to compare the function of genes to that of "units of cultural inheritance," parallel the relationship between cell nucleus and cytoplasm to that between cultural institutions and their subsystems, and characterize the family both as the body politic's "germ plasm" and the "primary organism for the transmission of the fundamentals of the pattern of culture."<sup>12</sup>

Possibly the most comprehensive theorization and application of organic analogy this century was undertaken by the English anthropologist

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A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. In his important essay “On the Concept of Function in Social Science,” Radcliffe-Brown explains how “the concept of function applied to human societies is based on an analogy between social life and organic life.” He asserts that “the life of an organism is conceived as the *functioning* of its structure. It is through and by the continuity of the functioning that the continuity of structure is preserved.” His emphasis on function almost inevitably commits him to a conception of social process and order that is both homeostatic and teleological: “The function of any recurrent activity, such as the punishment of a crime, or a funeral ceremony, is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the structural continuity.”<sup>13</sup> As this assertion demonstrates, Radcliffe-Brown’s organicism is informed by one of the distinguishing features of functionalist thought: for him as for Durkheim and Parsons, any social institution or activity can be understood only in terms of its “maintenance” of the social organism; it is virtually impossible to conceive of any “recurrent activity” that may be disruptive or dysfunctional.

Not surprisingly, the fetishization of social integration and cohesion that is the hallmark of functionalist organicism has prompted widespread criticism from many quarters of the social sciences. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, has questioned the tendency of functionalist anthropology “to credit historical systems with more coherence than they have or need to have in order to function. In reality, these systems remain . . . “things of shreds and patches.”<sup>14</sup> Skepticism regarding the extent of social integration has also led to criticism of the organicism that has underwritten functionalist models of society and culture. In his *Interpretation of Cultures*, for example, Clifford Geertz – a former student of Talcott Parsons – proposes a comic refinement of the organic metaphor: “the appropriate image, if one must have images, of cultural organization, is . . . the octopus, whose tentacles are in large part separately integrated, neurally quite poorly connected with one another and with what in the octopus passes for a brain, and yet who nonetheless manages both to get around and to preserve himself, for a while anyway, as a viable if somewhat ungainly entity.”<sup>15</sup> For all that Geertz’s octopus society debunks the functionalist vision of immaculate social integration, it nonetheless replaces one version of the organic model with another; and with his concluding emphasis on how the octopus, despite its structural deficiencies, “manages both to get around and preserve itself,” Geertz may be seen to adumbrate a model of social formation that amounts to little more than Functionalism Lite.

Elsewhere, however, Geertz supplements his quibble over the functionalist fetishization of integration with a more telling criticism: “where the functional approach has been least impressive, however, is in dealing with

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social change . . . The emphasis on systems in balance, on social homeostasis, and on timeless structural pictures, leads to a bias in favor of ‘well-integrated’ societies in a stable equilibrium.”<sup>16</sup> For all that the functionalist model may conceptualize social formations as dynamic, organic systems, it still remains irretrievably trapped within a synchronic understanding of social process; other than by resorting to problematic paradigms of evolution, it has consistently neglected the occurrence of social transformation and the factors that may prompt it. Victor Turner makes a similar criticism: “the functionalists of my period in Africa tended to think of change as ‘cyclical’ and ‘repetitive’ and of time as structural time, not free time . . . but [I did not find it] too helpful to think about change as *immanent* in the structure of Ndembu society, when there was clearly a ‘wind of change,’ economic, political, social, religious, legal, and so on, sweeping through the whole of central Africa and originating *outside* all village societies.”<sup>17</sup> Turner rightly registers here the inability of functionalist methodology to explain anything other than cyclical change. Nevertheless, his critique is itself problematic. At the same time as he helpfully displaces questions of social transformation from the synchronic to the diachronic, from consideration of “cyclical change” to the economic and political origins of more radical cultural upheaval, he is nonetheless inclined to view social transformation as originating in factors external to the social organism rather than as a consequence of developments, conflicts, or contradictions within its systems of organization. In fairness, he is speaking about the colonial process, where the drastic transformation of “primitive” societies has been prompted for the most part by agencies extrinsic to them; but it is precisely cultural anthropology’s imbricatedness within one of the master narratives of European colonialism – i.e. the nostalgic fantasy of a perfectly integrated, prelapsarian society transformed (and transformable) only by the contaminating apparition of the powerful white colonist – that has contributed to its functionalist practitioners’ characteristic difficulty in conceiving of change arising from factors within a society.

For example, although Radcliffe-Brown does attempt to theorize social dysfunction – “to return to the analogy of social life and organic life, we recognize that an organism may function more or less efficiently and so we set up a special science of pathology to deal with all phenomena of disfunction” – it is significant that he conceives of social disease, and change, as emerging from external rather than internal factors: “while an organism that is attacked by virulent disease will react thereto, and, if its reaction fails, will die, a society that is thrown into a condition of functional disunity or inconsistency (for this we now provisionally identify with *dysnomia*) will not die, except in such comparatively rare instances as an

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Australian tribe overwhelmed by the white man's destructive force, but will continue to struggle toward some sort of eunomia, some kind of social health, and may, in the course of this, change its structural type. This process, it seems, the "functionalist" has ample opportunities of observing at the present day, in native peoples subjected to the domination of the civilized nations."<sup>18</sup> As with Turner's account of change in Ndembu culture, Radcliffe-Brown's social pathology emerges from a problematic positing of the devastating encounter between "civilized" and "primitive" societies as paradigmatic of cultural transformation in general.

It would be inaccurate, however, to claim that functionalists have been entirely neglectful of the possibility of "disease" emerging from factors *within* the social organism. Nonetheless, as with Parsons's studies of the potentially disruptive behavior that is a feature of institutions like sports and entertainment, consideration of social illness or dysfunction has been typically subsumed within a larger concern with the integrative functions of a cultural system.<sup>19</sup> This is most obviously the case with Emile Durkheim's study of deviance. More than any other subsequent functionalist, Durkheim attempted to lay in his *Rules of Sociological Method* the basis for a scientific social pathology. His chapter on "Rules for the Distinction of the Normal from the Pathological" starts with a conventional analogy between social well-being and bodily health familiar to readers of Plato's *Republic*: "for societies, as for individuals, health is good and desirable; sickness, on the other hand, is bad and must be avoided."<sup>20</sup> In what amounts to an ingenious proto-deconstructive reversal, however, Durkheim asserts that "pathological" behavior need not be injurious. On the contrary: social illness, he argues,

cannot fail to entail a special consequence esteemed to be harmful to society, and on these grounds it will be declared pathological. But, granted that it does bring about this consequence, it can happen that its deleterious effects are compensated, even over-compensated, by advantages that are not perceived. Moreover, only one reason will justify our deeming it to be socially injurious: it must disturb the normal operation of the social functions. (90)

In other words, Durkheim's project is to demonstrate a paradoxical proposition: how seemingly pathological behavior can contribute to rather than disrupt "the normal operation of the social functions."

This ultra-functionalist organicist perspective – that even antisocial elements can be recuperated for the good of the "social organism" – shapes Durkheim's account of the role played within the body politic by criminal behavior. Crime, he concedes, is "a fact whose pathological nature seems indisputable" (97). Nonetheless, in an about-turn which he admits "is apparently somewhat paradoxical," he boldly asserts that crime "is a

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factor in public health, an integrative element in any healthy society” (98). How? Most importantly, Durkheim claims, crime helps clarify and ratify the boundaries and “collective values” of the social organism. Additionally, he insists – a little contentiously – that crime is a universal, and hence “normal,” social activity: “there is no phenomenon which represents more incontrovertibly all the symptoms of normality, since it appears to be closely bound up with the conditions of all collective life. To make crime a social illness would be to concede that sickness is not something accidental, but on the contrary derives in certain cases from the fundamental constitution of the living creature” (98). With this assessment, Durkheim hints at, if only to repudiate, a radical social pathology. A Marxist – or, as I shall argue later in this book, even a conservative early Tudor political thinker like Thomas Starkey – would willingly make the concession that Durkheim refuses here, and assert that the body politic’s illnesses are indeed potentially produced by contradictions or imbalances in its “fundamental constitution.”

However, Durkheim rejects this explanation of the origins of social illness for two primary reasons: first, he subscribes to the question-begging functionalist premise that every “fundamental” component or product of the body is “normal,” and therefore must contribute in some way to its health; and second, he endorses the exogenous explanation of illness formulated by nineteenth-century germ theory microbiologists such as Louis Pasteur, and replicated by anthropologists like Radcliffe-Brown – namely, that disease originates not in the “fundamental constitution” of the body, but in an external, invading pathogen to which the body has been “accidentally” exposed.<sup>21</sup> Both these positions implicitly inform Durkheim’s conclusion that “contrary to current ideas, the criminal no longer appears as an utterly unsociable creature, a sort of parasitic element, a foreign, unassimilable body introduced into the bosom of society” (102). Durkheim figures the criminal as an invading, “foreign” pathogen, but he does so precisely so he can disqualify the suggestion; because the criminal is not foreign to the body but is produced by and in it, his or her presence cannot be rightly regarded as invasive and hence pathological.

**“Invisible bullets”**

What is remarkable is just how closely Durkheim’s account of deviance, and the exogenous paradigm of disease that informs it, anticipates Stephen Greenblatt’s outline of his model of subversion and containment in “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion.”<sup>22</sup> Greenblatt’s essay offers a compelling exposé of Tudor power and its delusive subversive effects. Evaluating the alleged atheism of the Elizabethan philosopher,



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scientist, and New World colonist Thomas Harriot, Greenblatt is reluctant to assign atheism in general any positivist identity within the Tudor body politic; “atheism,” he maintains, “was almost always thinkable only as the thought of another” (22). Instead, he focuses on the functional utility of accusations of atheism in consolidating authority. “The pervasiveness and frequency of these charges,” Greenblatt argues, “does not signal the existence of a secret society of free thinkers, a School of the Night, but rather registers the operation of a religious authority, whether Catholic or Protestant, that confirms its power by disclosing the threat of atheism.” And he concludes this portion of his argument with the now well-known line: “If the atheist did not exist, he would have to be invented” (23).

The specific case of the atheist is but one instance of what Greenblatt regards as a larger pattern of Tudor authority’s self-legitimation through the production and containment of subversion – a pattern evident not only in Hal’s flirtation with *Henry IV*’s underworld of cony-catchers and masterless men, but also in Thomas Harriot’s encounters with Algonquian Indians in the Virginia colony. Discussing Harriot’s “subversive inquiries” about Algonquian theories of disease in his *Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1587), Greenblatt offers a thoroughly functionalist explanation of Tudor power and its “subversion”:

But why, we must ask ourselves, should power record other voices, permit subversive inquiries, register at its very center the transgressions that will ultimately violate it? The answer may be in part that power, even in a colonial situation, is not monolithic and hence may encounter and record in one of its functions materials that can threaten another of its functions; in part that power thrives on vigilance, and human beings are vigilant if they sense a threat; in part that power defines itself in relation to such threats or simply to that which is not identical with it. Harriot’s text suggests an intensification of these observations: English power in the first Virginia colony *depends* upon the registering and even the production of potentially unsettling perspectives. (37)

Greenblatt’s analysis of the effects and functions of “subversive inquiry” involves a revealing movement from an antagonistic model of society, in which subversion is disruptive of a non-monolithic authority, to a functionalist model, in which “transgressions,” “threats,” and “unsettling perspectives” are somehow integral to the maintenance of a homeostatic social organism (or, in this passage, its Foucauldian near-synonym: “power”<sup>23</sup>).

For Greenblatt, the most complex instance in Harriot’s *Brief and True Record* of how the “apparent production of subversion is . . . the very condition of power” (65) is its author’s recourse to what Greenblatt terms “Machiavellian anthropology.” Machiavelli’s hypothesis that religion

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originated “in an imposition of socially coercive doctrines by an educated and sophisticated lawgiver on a simple people” (27) was, at least for Elizabethan political and religious authority, radically subversive; but, Greenblatt maintains, Harriot succeeded in testing and confirming the hypothesis by performing precisely this sort of imposition on the Algonquian Indians. The latter, impressed but bewildered by the European colonists’ array of technological gadgets and accomplishments, thought – or so Harriot supposed – that these “were rather the works of gods than of men, or at the leastwise they had been given and taught us of the gods.”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, according to Harriot, the native priests experienced a crisis of belief, and began to suspect that the Europeans were the custodians of genuine religion with privileged access to the “true” (or more accurately, most powerful) God. Harriot thus placed himself in a position, Greenblatt claims, to “disclose the power of human achievements – reading, writing, perspective glasses, gunpowder, and the like – to appear to the ignorant as divine and hence to promote belief and compel obedience” (30). Greenblatt’s conclusion is as mischievous as it is brilliant: the very same subversive “Machiavellian anthropology” which could provoke accusations of atheism (and, subsequently, lead to torture, imprisonment and execution) was deployed by Harriot as a means of consolidating rather than questioning Elizabethan religious and political authority.

Nonetheless, the “Machiavellian anthropology” which Greenblatt claims to recognize in Harriot allows him to cloak his own indebtedness to modern *functionalist* anthropology. After all, his claim that “the *Discourses* treats religion as if its primary function were not salvation but the achievement of civic discipline, as if its primary justification were not truth but expediency” (24) is just as much a gloss on Durkheim’s *Elements of Religious Life* as it is a synopsis of Machiavelli. As Greenblatt revealingly lets slip in his explanation of the subversive “Machiavellian” hypothesis, “a strictly functionalist explanation even of false religions was rejected by Christian theologians of the period” (34). With such claims, we can begin to glimpse the complex relay of ventriloquism that Greenblatt’s essay performs. Harriot’s “patriotic” voice, Greenblatt invites us to realize, daringly discloses itself to be Machiavelli’s; but Greenblatt fails to conceal from the reader how, on occasion, the very “voice” he attributes to Machiavelli also originates elsewhere – not in the discourses of the sixteenth century, however, but in a twentieth-century functionalist lexicon: “the *social function* of popular belief is underscored in Harriot’s note to an illustration showing the priest carefully tending the embalmed bodies of the former chiefs . . . We have then, as in Machiavelli, a sense of religion as a set of beliefs manipulated by the subtlety of priests to help instill obedience and respect for authority” (26; emphasis mine). Here, Green-