

BOOK REVIEWS

BRYAN S. TURNER. The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984. 272pp, references, index.

PETER BROWN. The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity. New York and Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1988. 504pp, references, index.

These two excellent books may share the same title, but in actual content they share very little in the way of subject matter or theoretical orientation, which fact only goes to illustrate how vast is the territory covered by a topic like "The Body and Society." What these authors do share, however, is an excellence and depth which make both volumes well worth reading for those interested in a general anthropology of the body and its history in Western culture.

Bryan Turner is a sociologist of Weberian persuasion, and particularly concerned with the absence of the body in Western social theory. He argues that a comprehensive sociology must be grounded in a recognition of the embodiment of social actors, but that, to date, the body has made only a cryptic appearance in sociological debates. He considers it unfortunate that much of the field has been cluttered by trivial or irrelevant intrusions such as neo-Darwinism, sociobiology and biologism, and considers important, developments in anthropology, phenomenology and existential philosophy which converge on the notion of human embodiment. He acknowledges the considerable tradition of research on body rituals in anthropology, but does not draw explicitly upon these materials or approaches (other than Mauss's seminal 'Body Techniques' paper) because his focus is upon the body in urban, secular, capitalist society.

Turner's introduction succinctly presents an overview of the ongoing Cartesianism which constitutes the problem:

In Social Darwinism and the functionalism of Talcott Parsons, the body enters social theory as 'the biological organism'; in Marxism, the presence of the body is signified by 'need' and 'nature'; in symbolic interactionism the body appears as a presentational self; in Freudianism, human embodiment is rendered as a field of energy in the form of desire. The social sciences are littered with discourses on 'drives', 'needs' and 'instincts' which ooze out of the id. In this respect, much of sociology is still essentially Cartesian in

implicitly accepting a rigid body/mind dichotomy where contemporary philosophy has largely abandoned the distinction as invalid.

Having discussed this peculiar absence of the body in social theory, Turner sets out to reconsider traditional sociological thought, and to incorporate (literally) the body within conventional debates about social order, social control and social stratification.

Chapter four, entitled 'Bodily Order,' lays out his theoretical project, his thesis being that the classical Hobbesian problem of order can be restated as the problem of the government of the body. "Every society is confronted by four tasks; the reproduction of populations in time, the regulation of bodies in space; the restraint of the 'interior' body through disciplines, and the representation of the 'exterior' body in social space." Turner acknowledges the influence of Foucault's History of Sexuality (1978) in this regard, and he offers a useful systematic version of Foucault's thought. He goes further than this, however, with an excellent discussion of certain continuities between Max Weber's notion of 'rationalization' and Foucault's discussion of 'disciplines', which denies, in part, the originality of Foucault's contribution.

The chapter is a reflection on the parallels between the idea of a regimen or government of the body, and the regime of a given society. This idea is well illustrated with discussion of a variety of 'disorders', especially those of social subordinates, that are taken as cultural indicators of the problem of control. In particular, disorders of women--hysteria, anorexia and agoraphobia--are considered as disorders of society. The thrust of the argument is that "any sociology of the body involves a discussion of social control and any discussion of social control must consider the control of women's bodies by men under a system of patriarchy."

Two chapters on patriarchy follow, and the origins of the institution and the ideology are traced through a discussion of the distinction between nature and culture, especially in terms of Christian theological attitudes toward 'the flesh'. Turner argues that the notion of patriarchal power cannot be uncoupled from the existence of the patriarchal household. The development of capitalist society, by destroying the traditional household, undermined traditional patriarchy, and Turner suggests that a new conceptualization is necessary to capture the contemporary form of defensive regulation of women. He suggests the term 'patrism' to mark this departure.

In chapter seven on 'the disciplines' the argument returns to themes raised by Foucault's later work on knowledge and the surveillance of bodies, perfectly illustrated by an analysis of the

development of dietary techniques in Western societies. This history of dietary management emerged also "out of a theology of the flesh, developed through moralistic medicine and finally established itself as a science of the efficient body." Turner accurately notes that diet was originally aimed at the control of desire, whereas under modern forms of consumerism, diet exists to promote and preserve desire. The secularization of bodily management involved a process of conversion from the internal management of desire to an external presentation of the body through "scientific gymnastics and cosmetics."

Turner skillfully links these social changes to economic changes in Western societies and shows how they cannot be analysed and understood outside of a capitalist system of production, distribution and mass consumption. Developments in contemporary capitalism have produced new forms of the self and Turner discusses modern narcissism and new forms of regulation under mass consumption. The conventional association between capitalist accumulation, protestantism, and the ascetic practices of the body have become increasingly irrelevant, he argues, as asceticism has been replaced by a calculating hedonism.

Following chapters focus upon illness and disease, and the notion that we can never regard an illness as a state of affairs which is dissociated from human agency, cultural interpretation, and moral evaluation. The book concludes with an enquiry into social ontology, through an interesting and important discussion of two related but distinct approaches, those of Marx and Nietzsche. In Marxism, the body is both the vehicle and the site of labour; it exists but is constantly transformed by human agency. In Nietzsche, our corporeal existence does not pre-date our language and classificatory systems of knowledge and thus the body is a social construct.

Turner acknowledges that there has been a recent eruption of studies on the body in the wake of Foucault's emphasis on the significance of the bio-politics of the body. He correctly notes that this flurry of interest does not, in itself, constitute a theoretical movement, and so the body remains absent from social theorizing, especially in sociology, but, one would also want to add, from mainstream anthropological theorizing too. Turner's book does not claim to provide such a theory, but does indicate what "a general theory of the body" would have to take into consideration. I find this idea problematic because as anthropologists discovered some time ago, it is to the notion of "person" and "self" that we must turn for more general theories. To focus only on the body risks perpetuating the very Cartesianism one is trying to reach beyond, because "body" is likely to remain separated from "mind" and therefore from language use, rationality and so forth.

Turner notes those areas of sociology--medical sociology, the study of patriarchy, the nature of social ontology, the sociology

of religion, the analysis of consumer culture and the nature of social control--where the human body is especially prominent, and does so in an interesting way, but the Cartesianism which informs the former perspectives remains largely unchallenged: the focus has simply shifted to include "the body." These areas of interest and problems apply equally to anthropological enquiry, of course, and Turner's work is sure to be of interest to anthropologists interested in the social construction of the person, and how this is intricately connected to other social realms such as religious beliefs, political and economic institutions, medical practices, and the use of language. In addition, if our ethnographic reports are to be truly reflexive, then this demands we understand deeply the theoretical and historical underpinnings of attitudes to the body held by our own society and consequently ourselves.

Those of us who specialize in the anthropology of human movement must note, however, that in Turner's book, as with those of Armstrong (1983), Hudson (1982) and Freund (1982), and within Foucault's work, "the body," albeit a social and cultural one rather than a biological or mechanistic entity, remains a static object. It is vital that an anthropology of human movement connects these interesting discussions to the moving body--to the person as physical actor in the social world--so that an anthropology or sociology of the body develops which truly transcends Cartesian limitations rather than simply restates, however interestingly, some of the results.

It is interesting to note that Foucault's work also provided crucial encouragement to the author of the second book being reviewed here. Peter Brown's study is truly an exemplary work. It examines how certain problems of corporeal existence led to the practice of permanent sexual renunciation among men and women in early Christian circles. This meticulously documented study covers a period from a little before the missionary journeys of Saint Paul in the 40's and 50's AD, to a little after the death of Saint Augustine in 430 AD. Brown's principle purpose is "to make clear the notions of the human person and of society implied in such renunciations, and to follow in detail the reflection and controversy which these notions generated, among Christian writers, on such topics as the nature of sexuality, the relation of men and women, and the structure and meaning of society."

His account begins in the second century AD in a pagan world where Christianity had begun to achieve a certain measure of public visibility. Chapter two returns in time to the Palestine of Jesus, to Saint Paul, and to the role of continence in the obscure and stormy first century of the Christian movement. What was astonishing to this reviewer, was to learn of the enormous variety of practices and interpretations placed upon the notion of renunciation by the many and diverse Christian groups in existence by 150 AD. Chapters three through six move us around the Mediterranean and the Near East, presenting the wide range of

options faced by Christians in the remarkable fifty years that stretched from the generation of writers such as Marcion, Valentinus and Tatian to that of Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. The "towering genius" of Origen dominates all accounts of the further developments of notions of sexuality and the human person in the Greek world, but his peculiarly majestic ideal of virginity has to be understood, Brown reminds us, in the context of the role of continence in the relations between men and women within the changing structures of the churches of his generation.

Any detailed account of Origen's thought precedes discussion of the parting of the ways between pagan notions of abstinence and the Christian ideal of virginity in the third century. Part one of the book closes with a fascinating survey that presents some of the varied meanings taken on by the practice of sexual renunciation in the different regions of the Christian world, and goes on to consider relations established between continent and married members of the churches in the age of Saint Anthony and Constantine.

Part Two opens with a discussion of the traditions of spiritual guidance associated with the Desert Fathers who came to flank the churches of the settled land, in Egypt and elsewhere, from the reign of Constantine to the last days of the Roman Empire in the East. In enthralling detail, the impact of ascetic ideals on the thought and practices of the churches of the Eastern Empire of the fourth and fifth centuries are taken up topic by topic and region by region. Again it is the carefully researched and skillful presentation of a tremendous diversity of thought and practice that is intellectually satisfying in Brown's work.

Part Three deals with the Latin world, which as Brown notes, is closer in many ways to the traditions with which modern Western readers can identify themselves. He sets the attitudes of three outstanding authors--Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine--against the dilemmas peculiar to their place and generation, and measures the degree to which the Catholic tradition, to which they contributed so decisively, differed from the traditions previously discussed for the Eastern Christian world. The Epilogue compliments the first chapter by summing up the changes in the notion of the human person and of society that had taken place.

This is an important book because Brown has carefully recaptured the distinctive flavour of Early Christianity in that period of the history of Christianity which, instead of prefiguring later centuries, is actually quite distinguished from them. The notions of sexual renunciation are profoundly different from the more familiar notions of medieval Catholicism and the Christianity of modern times. This is a time period in which the cult of the Virgin Mary emerged only towards the end. Clerical celibacy, though finally advocated by some, was practised in a manner totally unlike that now current in the Catholic church. The ascetic

movement, though a constant fascinating presence for much of this period, lacked the clear and orderly profile later associated with the Benedictine monasticism of the Latin West. Even the notion of perpetual virginity, Brown tells us, though it dazzled many writers in the late third and fourth centuries, came into clear focus only in fits and starts; above all, it never acquired the unambiguous association with specifically female chastity that it achieved in other ages, both in the pagan world and in later forms of Catholic Christianity.

Brown notes that the Early Church remains a period still charged with more than academic interest for many readers. Stereotypes, alternatively placid and histrionic, gravitate around it with remarkable ease, and Brown's explicit purpose is to "give back to the Christian men and women of the first five centuries a little of the disturbing strangeness of their most central preoccupations." Brown acknowledges the limitations of his data in that he is "dealing with evidence of an overwhelmingly prescriptive and theoretical nature, written exclusively by male authors." He considers it important to make clear the harsh values of the Greco-Roman world; "it is a comfortable and dangerous illusion to assume that in much of the evidence, the presence of women is even sensed by its male authors, as might well be the case in later periods of European history."

Citing Caroline Walker Bynum's rich study of a crucial aspect of the piety of late medieval women, he reminds us that "the Christianity of the High and Later Middle ages--to say nothing of the Christianity of our own times--is separated from the Christianity of the Roman world by a chasm almost as vast as that which appears to separate us from the moral horizons of a Mediterranean Islamic country . . . we must respect their irreducible particularity, and nowhere more than in the stark limitations that silently and insistently delimited the relations of men and women in a late Roman society." Bynum's model study has revealed a world in which significant differences of viewpoint existed between men and women on central issues of Christian faith and practice. The reader may also wish to compare Bynum's work on Medieval Christian women with Williams' ethnography of contemporary Carmelite nuns (Williams 1975). The implication is that such gender differences could, of course, have a long but undocumented history.

Brown too acknowledges the "humbling sincerity and unaffected craftsmanship" of Michel Foucault as an influence and inspiration at a crucial moment in his work. He uses Foucault's own words to remind modern readers that they must not sink into the cozy familiarity with which a modern person often feels entitled to approach the sexual concerns of men and women in a distant age. It is a reminder of such pertinent anthropological value, that it is worth repeating here:

After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain knowingness . . . and not, in one way or another, . . . in the knower's straying afield from himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on thinking and reflecting at all. [Foucault 1985:8]

The question of "knowing if one can think differently than one thinks" would seem to me to be part of the fundamental challenge and experience of doing anthropology. Both these books challenge us to enlarge our conception and understanding of the Western cultural legacy in ways that are directly relevant to the practice of a reflexive semantic anthropology.

Brenda Farnell
Smithsonian Institution

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