

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Chris Shilling, ed., *Embodying Sociology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2007, 169 pp. \$43.99 paper (978-1-4051-6794-9)

This slim collection covers a great deal of ground in relatively few pages, and if it does not quite do all it promises, it is still well worth a spot on your bookshelf. The ten contributions are of two very different sorts. The first five chapters are by five well-known theorists: Shilling, whose introduction does much more than introduce; Bryan S. Turner, Donald Levine, Kathy Davis, and the anthropologist Judith Okely. In the second half of the book we find three studies in “body pedagogics,” a new field centred on the insight that our bodily practices play an under-recognized part in cultural learning and reproduction. Specifically, body pedagogics examines the ways cultures teach specific corporeal skills and techniques, and the experiences through which these are acquired. The studies herein — of soldiering, ballet, and glass-blowing (by Brian Lande, Anna Aalten, and Erin O’Connor, respectively) — draw heavily on Mauss’s concept of “body techniques,” the strengths and implications of which are introduced in a paper by Nick Crossley. The book is rounded out with a chapter by Simon Williams on sleep, that perennially ignored half of our everyday social lives.

Shilling’s introduction outlines the development of sociology as a field, in a way that accounts for the marginalization and later recuperation of the body as a sociological topic. This is familiar territory, but Shilling’s discussion covers it in a comprehensive yet economical fashion that will be a useful review for graduate and senior undergraduate students whose exposure to theory, especially the classics, is ever more spotty. Turner provides the book’s second *tour de force*, a wide-ranging discussion of the often politicized boundary between the animal and the human, and the ways the concepts of culture and technology have worked historically to distance anthropological and sociological theorizing from the body. Turner’s contribution is packed with challenging commentary on theorists of every stripe, from Kluckhohn to McLuhan to Agamben. It focuses eventually on the demise of the free autonomous self of the 1960s and the reemergence of biological determinism, in scholarship and in the popular imagination (e.g., the “divorce gene”). For Turner, the effects of the biotechnological revolution, especially stem cell research,

go beyond the destruction of nature and the environment to the potential destruction of morality. Weakest at the end, Turner's chapter winds up with an alarmist speculation that links stem cell research to the possibility of "living forever," and thus to the collapse of morality. But the end of morality turns out on closer inspection to be the end of "religious culture" — a more plausible and far less dire scenario.

Kathy Davis, like Turner, is concerned with the pendulum swing toward biology, here, in feminist theory, in the guise of the turn to the "material body." Davis attributes this swing to the dominance of post-modernism and the discursive turn over the last two decades, a shift in which the body seems to have become a casualty. Davis gets right at the crucial issues: How can we respect the body's materiality without sliding back into biological determinism? And how do we know the body, since the discursive turn has cast doubt on the privilege of experience as the seat of authentic knowledge? In this chapter Davis provides an agile summary of important developments in several decades of feminist scholarship on the body and more broadly, and she is to be commended for tackling head-on the problems associated with the idea of direct experiential knowledge of the body (or anything else). Davis suggests that feminist scholars might reawaken their appreciation of women's corporality by taking a second look at the way health activists understand bodies and embodied experience. These three impressive chapters show scholars at the top of their form, and each reprises their fields of expertise while adding something fresh and new for this volume.

The remaining two theoretical essays promise much but deliver unevenly. Levine's topic, the absent body in the sociological literature on conflict, is tremendously fertile ground — who would disagree that here, in such an obvious and important piece of the sociological landscape, the body has gone weirdly missing? But his review of how bodies enter into various forms of conflict and its management proceeds in a mechanical way. Okely's chapter, on the ways anthropologists use their bodies in fieldwork, and how those bodies are read by members of host cultures, is a fascinating read and like Levine's, opens new ground, but like Levine's is more a set of notes than a sustained argument, and is similarly disappointing.

The collection next takes an empirical turn to the new field in the sociology of the body, styled "body pedagogics." We learn from the book's jacket that Shilling is the coordinator of the International Body Pedagogics Project, and body pedagogics as a concept is informed by the insight that we learn, teach, and reproduce culture in part through physical doing — through specific bodily practices like breathing, stretching, and holding. These three studies set out to show how much our learning

of dance, say, or of glassblowing, owes to proficiency in its specific bodily practices and skills.

Body pedagogics is thus another example of the “material turn.” Lande’s account of the role of “correct” breathing in learning how to soldier — how to run, climb, shoot — is especially intriguing. We see clearly how a commitment to soldiering is about more than a belief in a career or a way of life; it is also forged through hard-won bodily competence, in which breathing plays an important part. Lande’s paper is confined to soldiering, but it makes us as readers reflect on the power of the physical experience — from giving birth, to training in terrorism — to bind us to an ideal, even to a new self.

Shilling’s attention to body pedagogics in this volume is a response, he says, to the usual complaint that recent scholarship has overtheorized the body at the expense of good empirical studies of everyday body techniques and practices. The three papers here are careful, detailed, and complete in their way, but they feel, well ... undertheorized. Reading them, we are returned to the largely undone work of connecting their empirical detail to larger theoretical issues. If “proficient, practical knowledge” about right breathing techniques is part of being a soldier, what new insights about knowing, bodies, and cultures do we learn from such practices? And how does this kind of “corporeal knowing” square with the critique of experiential knowledge discussed by Davis (for example)? Lande’s study of soldiering begins to move down this path; but Williams’ look at sleep delivers the most value not for its account of the physical practices and preliminaries associated with sleep, but for its insights into sleep’s cultural meanings — as a realm of bodily vulnerability, for example, or as a marker of homelessness and social marginality, as in “sleeping rough.” So this chapter does not advance the agenda of body pedagogics in any obvious way.

In his introduction, Shilling observes that the body has become a vehicle for disciplines and perspectives so dispersed that, as a topic, it is barely discernable. He contends that this diversity has caused us to lose sight of what should be our central mission — that is, a critical analysis of current social developments affecting bodies in order to assess their ethical implications. If Shilling intends this collection to remedy that lack, then it is no more than a partial success: only in Turner’s paper are ethics explicitly addressed, and perhaps also, tangentially, in Davis’ discussion of agency. Where it does succeed, however, is as a vivid demonstration of the turn to the material body in theory and empirical research. In recent scholarly discussion on the body we have seen a loosened commitment to postmodernism and the body “as text,” and the so-called material turn has emerged as the topic of the hour. More remains to be said,

no doubt, about the ethical implications of this move, but for now, this is achievement enough.

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