
The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society

Anthony Synnott

London: Routledge, 1993. x + 309 pp. N.p.

Reviewer: Penny Van Esterik
York University

Synnott's book joins a growing corpus of works on the body and on the senses, drawing together these two, often disparate, literatures. Following an introduction on the embodied self, Synnott locates the study of the body and the senses within other sociological concerns. The book's greatest strength is its clarity of language and argument, combined with excellent reviews of historical and philosophical literature for each topic discussed. Its weakness, from the perspective of anthropology, is its failure to come to grips with significant theoretical controversies thrown up by the exploration of such a wide range of topics. Nevertheless, it is ideally suited as a text for sociology courses related to the body.

The first chapter reviews dominant metaphors of the body as tomb, temple, machine, self and bionic structure, with particular emphasis on classical and early Christian writings. Feminist scholars may find the second chapter, on gender, an oversimplification of very significant and complex questions that are not well integrated with the book's central concerns. Reflecting personal interests, I found the third chapter, on beauty and the face, the most interesting and provocative, and the following chapter, on hair, the least challenging.

The second half of the book concentrates on the senses, with three chapters detailing touch, smell and sight. The final chapter, on bodies and senses, purports to integrate the literatures on these two respective topics. A useful bibliography and indices complete the book.

"Liking the face and not liking the hair" captures for me the dilemma of this book: the body is cut up into its component parts, which are revealed through historical, literary and social-science texts. Bodies and senses are made so accessible that they become transparent. But the reader misses the problematizing of the body as a concept, the deconstruction of the political contexts that shape bodies literally and figuratively. Some readers may have the experience to fill these gaps with work by other authors; and students may appreciate the absence of undue complexity. However, there are many assumptions about bodies and their study that can be questioned. Neither the contradictions existing between the works of different authors, nor the perspectives of different time periods or disciplines, are highlighted or commented upon. Certainly, many of them cannot be resolved. But to refer to the "egalitarian tradition in Christianity," on page 38, and "Christian patriarchalism and even misogyny, male dominance and the subjection of women," on the next, calls for comment.

Those not familiar with anthropology could well be confused as to the discipline's contribution to the study of bodies. While Douglas is discussed, Leach's analysis of hair is dismissed in a sentence (p. 124). Instead, attention is directed to the measurement debates of early physical anthropologists (pp. 241-244) whose work has hardly contributed to the current resurgence of interest in this topic. Among the many "bodies created by anthropologists" (p. 250) are those that can be found in the rich tradition of ethnographic literature composed over the last 200 years. Here bodily practices are perhaps more easily visible.

The book concludes that we are "a long way from developing some simple grand theory of *the* body" (p. 262), but calls for an approach to the body that studies the "self as embodied." This book is an important contribution to this ongoing search for a sociology of the body.

For an Amerindian Autohistory: An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic
Georges Sioui

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992. xxv + 125 pp. \$29.95 (cloth)

Reviewer: Karen Szala-Meneok
Wilfrid Laurier University

Georges Sioui offers us a probing and wonderfully provocative exploration of Amerindian history and world view. Sioui sees Amerindian autohistory as an "ethical approach to history" (p. 21) which "studies the correspondences between Amerindian and non-Amerindian sources" (p. xxii). He argues that Amerindian history is best written by Native people and others who understand Amerindian cultural values. This book's purpose is to show how these values are reflected in Euroamerican thinking and how they may play a role in helping world populations deal with global environmental issues.

Sioui begins by discussing the impact of epidemics on the new world, and examines how these epidemics impeded the ability of Native peoples to "absorb the ideological and political shock" (p. 3) of European culture and hindered their ability to share their world view with Europeans and colonists. Amerindian world view focusses on "the sacred circle of life, wherein all beings, material and immaterial, are equal and interdependent" (p. 8) and the complementarity of the earth as mother and sky or universe as father or grandfather. Sioui explores the clashes that occurred between European androcentrism and paternalism and the animism and the "gynocentrism" of many Amerindian traditions.

In addition he addresses the assumptions of cultural evolution that excluded indigenous peoples from the traditions that are now characterized by technological hyper-innovation. Using the autohistory approach, Sioui tries to reconstruct 16th-century Huron culture. He discusses epidemics, war and social upheaval, examining how Amerindians were viewed by colonists and European intellectuals of the Enlightenment. Sioui examines how the ethnographically rich yet controversial 17th-century accounts of Amerindian culture by the French Baron de Lahontan were influenced by indigenous philosophers. Sioui powerfully argues that Lahontan's work (he cast Amerindians in a favourable light) was reflected in the ideas of Enlightenment writers such as Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot. Lahontan served as an agent for the "Americization" of European thought. He concludes by employing the techniques of autohistory to document the conditions precipitating the dispersal of his Wendat (Huron) forebears in the hopes of empowering them and other Amerindian peoples to determine their history and their future.

This book may raise concerns among ethnographers and historians, who could take exception to his sometimes-sweeping assertions regarding a Pan-Indian philosophy. These assertions need greater substantiation. Given this book's brevity and its man-