

Reassessing Bodies

Book Review

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Chris Shilling

The Body in Culture, Technology and Society

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Over the last twenty years the body has emerged as a central topic of analysis within socio-cultural enquiry. As Chris Shilling points out it has been examined as a product of consumer culture, a site for exploring issues of gender and sexuality, a function of governmentality and disciplinary techniques, a cyborg whose parts and functions are readily amenable to technological manipulation and also as a 'conceptual resource' for investigating key concerns within certain disciplines such as issues of structure and agency. Shilling has been a major contributor to this sociology of the body. His central concerns have been to theorise the binaries of structure/agency, mind/body and nature/culture and the burgeoning new area of embodiment and emotions. In his most recent work, *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society*, he aims to provide a reassessment of this vast and heterogeneous field and to point to what he sees as future directions for body research. In doing this Shilling applauds the wealth of

scholarship that has been produced across a range of disciplines but is concerned that the body has become 'all things to all people' (8) and, as such, has assumed an elusive quality with analysis providing little theoretical contiguity. He does point out, however, that contemporary analyses of the body have tended to coalesce around three broad perspectives: social constructionism, phenomenological approaches and structuration theories. Shilling discusses each of these in some detail and is of the view that, despite their disparate nature, there is some commonality. What he sees linking these different perspectives, however, is a view of the body as generally constrained by societal forces. Shilling explains that 'they tend to go too far in implying that there has been a blunting of human experience and creativity and that the body has lost the agentic powers it used to possess as a source of society'. (47) In effect, this criticism is the central theme of the book and Shilling aims to posit an alternative perspective that, while acknowledging the rationalising influences of society, also allows for the ways in which they may capacitate the body, enhancing individual agency and being in the world.

While I'd agree with Shilling's assessment that recent theorisation of the body has given emphasis to subjection, rather than the enabling potential of different forms of embodiment, his examination of the three dominant theories of the body does not really highlight the ways in which certain theorists within each of these broad areas have attempted to consider the productive possibilities of subjectifying forces, albeit with limited success. Also, his 'broad brush strokes' approach to examining each position doesn't always capture the theoretical nuances within each. This is evident in his discussion of social constructionist analyses of the body. Here Shilling examines the influences of Hobbes and Foucault on the work of Bryan Turner and Judith Butler and their respective structuralist and poststructuralist interpretations of the ordered body. While Shilling acknowledges that their work is quite different, and refers to Turner's critique of Butler's 'conception of the body', he doesn't detail what underpins this critique: the argument that Butler's focus is the discursive body, which, to Turner elides its materiality. This difference in perspective between the body as a material entity and discursive construction is one of the key theoretical antagonisms in approaches to the body. Shilling acknowledges this in his introduction when he points out that 'the body and society exist as real things that cannot be dissolved into discourse', (12) yet he doesn't examine this issue in any detail elsewhere in the book. Also, while it is indeed difficult to retrieve any degree of agency from Turner's conceptualisation of the body, Butler does engage with Foucault's notion of power as enabling at certain points in her work. She explains:

Submission and mastery take place simultaneously and it is this paradoxical simultaneity that constitutes the ambivalence of subjection. Where one might expect submission to consist in a yielding to an externally imposed dominant order, and to be marked by a loss of control and mastery, it is paradoxically marked by mastery itself.¹

Interestingly, Butler's remarks here, which highlight the agentic potential of subjection, seem to position her more as either a structuration theorist or something akin to the position Shilling is aiming for rather than simply a social constructionist.

Shilling's account of phenomenological approaches likewise tends to gloss over certain points of difference between the theorists he locates within this category. While he views phenomenological approaches, such as those of Drew Leder and Nick Crossley, as pleasing corrections to social constructionism's failure to account for the lived body, he feels they have generally neglected the role of the social. Drawing heavily on the work of Merleau-Ponty, recent phenomenological engagement with the body has explored the ways in which agency is attained through the productive interrelationship of body and space. Shilling, however, feels that there is something of a paradox in this work. In examining the means by which the body is capacitated through interaction with the world, phenomenological accounts highlight how the body, or rather conscious awareness of the body and its functions, slips from view only to reappear when a problem arises such as that signalled by pain; what Leder terms 'dys-appearance'. Such accounts concern Shilling and he is particularly critical of Leder's work commenting that

Leder's account can be interpreted not as a universalist account of the lived body, but as a troubling phenomenological analysis of the body's status as a location for the effects of a highly rationalised society in which instrumentalist action is prized and rewarded above other forms of behaviour (57).

I'd have to disagree with Shilling on this point. What Leder is discussing can in fact be understood as a universal phenomenon. His examples may be limited and may not grapple adequately with issues of gender, race and class but in acquiring mastery of a skill, be it playing the piano—of which Shilling provides an example—kicking a goal, writing a text or riding a bike, actions are habituated through iteration to the point where they no longer require conscious attention, unless some difficulty occurs. This process is essential to learning. The notion of the 'absent body' is necessary for further skill development to occur in whatever area of endeavour. In sociological terms the body may be 'a location for the effects of a highly rationalised society' but they can be refashioned for agentic purposes and not simply remain a form of subjection, which would seem to support Shilling's argument. Nick Crossley's work can similarly be viewed in a much more positive light compared to that provided by Shilling. Crossley's 'carnal sociology' is interesting in that rather than simply focusing on phenomenology he acknowledges the shortcomings of both sociological and phenomenological accounts of the body and aims to mesh the positive elements of both. Another interesting aspect of his work is how he points to a key omission in both phenomenological and sociological accounts, namely the process of acquisition.² He feels that little attention is given to the ways in which bodies are actually endowed with the potential for agency, which also seems a concern of Shilling's.

In some respects this is what structuration theories are attempting to achieve, which is another category of body research that Shilling examines. Here the focus is on the work of Bourdieu, Giddens and Grosz. Shilling firstly provides a comparison of Bourdieu's and Giddens's perspectives on the ways in which social structures come to structure individual action, pointing out how Bourdieu tends towards a more deterministic account of the process whereas Giddens is more subjectivist in orientation. Shilling's inclusion of Grosz in this category of body theorists is interesting. His reason for doing so resides mainly in Grosz's use of the image of the Mobius strip, a construct she feels best captures not simply the interrelationship between individual and society but body and sexuality. What also characterises each of the perspectives on the body that Shilling considers within this category of structuration theorists is an attempt to counter the binary oppositions that frame conceptualisations of embodiment. To Shilling, however, structuration theories have a major flaw. In attempting to demonstrate the mutually constitutive nature of structure/agency, individual/society, nature/culture and indeed mind/body, he feels they simply collapse the poles, which disallows any distinctive treatment of each and also the process of interaction itself.

Discussion up to this point has tended to focus on one chapter of Shilling's book, that is "Contemporary Bodies." This chapter, however, is central to the book overall. In discussing what he sees as problems with current approaches Shilling marks out his own space and trajectory for body research. He is calling for a view of the body as '*a multi-dimensional medium for the constitution of society*' (original emphasis) (9), a concept that highlights the ways it is '*a source of, a location for and a means by which individuals are emotionally and physically positioned within and oriented towards society*'. (11) Shilling sees this approach as a continuation of the work of Marx, Durkheim and Simmel and, although recognising their theoretical differences, he explores their points of convergence in relation to the body. He feels they are all bound by a commitment towards what he terms *corporeal realism*, that is an approach that is characterised by three key features:

1. an ontologically stratified view of the world in which the body and society are understood as 'real things';
2. a focus on temporality which acknowledges the ways in which the constraining features of society can generate bodily capacities;
3. a critical framing in analysis.

Despite the marginalisation of the body within western thought Shilling is of the view that these early theorists had begun to conceive of the body in productive ways, providing a fertile base for ongoing sociological enquiry. What prevented or rather sidelined this, Shilling reasons, is the work of Talcott Parsons. His influential view of sociology as the study of voluntarism marginalised the body and it was not until the late twentieth century that it was rediscovered as a sociological concern. In this rediscovery, however, Shilling feels that corporeal realism, and its multi-dimensional approach, has been neglected. Shilling sees it as his task to demonstrate its

benefits and in so doing provide a useful framework for future body research. The remaining chapters of the *Body in Culture, Technology and Society* are devoted to this end with Shilling applying his approach to work, sport, music, sociality and technology. In each chapter a wealth of past and recent research is drawn upon. In the chapter on musical bodies, for example, which is a pleasing inclusion, Shilling gives some account of the ways in which bodies acquire musicality. He provides interesting examples, such as David Sudnow's discussion of learning to perform jazz improvisation and also child development studies that explore the influence of music on young learners. Together with this, consideration is given to the political and economic dimensions of music and the ways in which these shape the body.

I'm not convinced, however, that Shilling presents a 'new approach'. To my mind the emphasis still seems very much on a view of society as a force that subjectifies the body. With the exception of some minor examples, such as those given, and comments that indicate its possibility, there is very little that demonstrates society's generative potential in relation to the body. To some extent this may be because Shilling attempts too much. While the book functions as a useful text in its breadth of coverage of different forms of embodiment it probably would have been better for Shilling to have taken a narrower focus, to concentrate on music or sport, for example, and to more clearly exemplify his approach. One of the three key features of corporeal realism is its attention to temporality, the ways in which over time individuals come to embody particular dispositions that generate practice. This isn't evident in Shilling's substantive accounts. It may be because effective demonstration of this requires protracted empirical work that is not only difficult given the current research climate but also generally unattractive to publishers who are more interested in the 'broad brush strokes' approach. Shilling has produced another useful text on the body providing plenty of food for thought but I don't see that it achieves its goals of reconciling the disparity of theoretical perspectives that currently exist on the body and also giving greater emphasis to the enabling potential of different forms of embodiment.

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¹ Judith Butler, *Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodern'*, in S Benhabib, J Butler, D Cornell and N Fraser (eds), *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, Routledge, New York, 1995, pp. 45–6.

² Nick Crossley, 'Body-Subject/Body-Power: Agency, Inscription and Control in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty', *Body and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1996, pp. 99–116.