

Sociology and the Body

Absent Bodies

Contemporary sociology has little to say about the most obvious fact of human existence, namely that human beings have, and to some extent are, bodies. There exists a theoretical prudery with respect to human corporality which constitutes an analytical gap at the core of sociological enquiry. The collective phenomena of births, ageing and mortality have become the academic monopoly of historical and mathematical demography, where the moral and social significance of these events is subdued in favour of exact calculation. What one might term the theodicy of the body is equally neglected even in the sociology of religion (Turner, 1983). The oddity of the failure of sociology to develop a theory of the body and bodies is emphasized by the prevalence of commonsense notions that diet, jogging, fasting, slimming and exercise are not merely essential aids to sexual fulfilment, but necessary features of self development in a society grounded in personalized consumption. Some recent debates in sociology, particularly with respect to narcissism (Lasch, 1979), have illustrated an awareness of the changing symbolic significance of the body in relation to capitalist development, but these are exceptions that prove the rule. The reasons for sociology's exclusion of the body from theoretical enquiry are not difficult to trace.

The epistemological foundations of modern sociology are rooted in a rejection of nineteenth-century positivism, especially biologism which held that human behaviour could be explained causally in terms of human biology (Parsons, 1937). Sociology emerged as a discipline which took the social meaning of human interaction as its principal object of enquiry, claiming that the meaning of social actions can never be reduced to biology or physiology. The academic institutionalization of sociology involved its separation from eugenics and Darwinist biology. It is clearly the case, however, that evolutionary biologism played an important part in the theoretical development of sociology, especially in the work of Herbert Spencer (Peel, 1971) and Patrick Geddes (Boardman, 1978). It can also be argued (Foucault, 1973) that the emergence of social science was closely connected with the growth of rationalized medicine, through the collection of health statistics with the growth of urban populations in the nineteenth century. Despite these institutional and theoretical connections with positivist biology and medical science, the

central assumptions of sociology were inimical to its submersion in biology. The physical sciences and bastard offshoots like sociobiology do not provide a model for the explanation of social reality which cannot be subsumed in nature. The central assumptions of sociology are that the natural world is socially constituted and transformed by human activity. Human beings do not simply apprehend the natural world as a given, since nature is always mediated by culture. In arguing that the reality in which the human species is situated is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), sociology has to some extent incorporated the argument of Karl Marx that man opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature (Marx, 1974, vol. I: 173).

The external world, including the human body, is not a given, but an historical reality constantly mediated by human labour and interpreted through human culture. The human body as a limiting point of human experience and consciousness seemed less important than the collective reality of the social world within which the self was located. The legitimate rejection of biological determinism in favour of sociological determinism entailed, however, the exclusion of the body from the sociological imagination. The primary dichotomy of sociological theory was not Nature/Society, but Self/Society.

The Self

Sociology extracted itself from the physical sciences as a model of social theory by viewing itself, according to Max Weber (1978), as an 'interpretative science' of the meaning of social action and interaction. Such interaction occurred between entities which were designated as 'the self' or 'the social actor' or 'the social agent'. The interaction of bodies is 'behaviour', whereas the interaction between social actors involves meaning and choice; it is the proper object of sociology. The social thus came to be seen as an on-going process of interactions between Ego and Alter, so that 'society' is an emergent reality and the product of ceaseless interactions. It is important to note that social actors (Ego and Alter) are not necessarily 'real' individuals, but socially constituted entities. For example, Alfred Schutz (1962) made an elementary distinction between direct, face-to-face interaction with consociates and indirect action with predecessors, successors and contemporaries. In sociology it is perfectly reasonable to include in 'interaction', exchanges between the living and their dead ancestors, between children and their dolls, between the faithful and their gods. A 'social actor' is an entity which is socially constituted as an interactant. In the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Rose, 1962), interaction fundamentally presupposes, as it were, an internal