

## THE BODY AND INDIVIDUALISM

Nothing is more mysterious for man than the substance of his own body. Every society has attempted in its way to give a particular answer to this primary enigma in which man has his roots. Innumerable theories of the body that have followed each other during the course of history or that still coexist today are directly connected to the world views of these different societies. Even more, they are dependent on the conceptions of the person. The modern view of the body, that which anatomo-physiology incarnates, is a direct function of the emergence and development of individualism within the European societies of the Renaissance, especially in the 17th century, that marks a crystallization, very clear at the social level, of this tendency. Moreover, the explosion of the present knowledge of the body<sup>1</sup> that makes anatomo-

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<sup>1</sup> The unrestrained research into other theories of the body, borrowed from the Orient, astrology, a more important esoterism; recourse to traditional forms of healing, that also carry various theories of the body and without rapport with the medical model; disillusion with modern medicine and its somewhat mechanistic view of the body, etc. We will come back to this in more detail.

physiology one theory among others, even though it is dominant, denotes another stage in individualism, a yet stronger falling back on the ego: the emergence of a society in which the atomization of individuals has become an important fact, an atomization submitted to or desired, according to the case, which does not appear in contradiction to present research in new ways of socializing, new forms of tribalism<sup>2</sup> and so on, as is clearly indicated by what we agree to call the associative phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> This is a characteristic of societies in which individualism is a structural fact: the development of an infinitely plural and polyphonic character. In these societies, in fact, the initiative is assumed by individuals or groups more than it is in a culture that tends to become a simple formal framework.

Today we witness an acceleration of the social processes without a follow-up at the cultural level; a separation is often apparent between the social experience and man's symbolic capacity for integration. A dearth of meaning is the result. Because of the absence of cultural responses, certain events abandon man to solitude. To overcome these ordeals, man tries, often with anxiety, to invent personal solutions. The tendency toward withdrawal into oneself, to the search for autonomy, if it becomes a refuge against the acceleration of history, is not without effect on the social tissue. The atomization of the individual accentuates the leaving behind of traditional cultural elements; these fall into disuse, giving place to a crisis of confidence or are made obsolete through technique. They lose their value or disappear, leaving a void behind them. On the contrary, individual solutions proliferate and seek to fill the voids of the symbolic by borrowing from other cultural tissues, other historical strata or through the creation of new symbolisms. The present denial of death, because of the (recent) cultural incapacity to integrate it into the tempo of life, offers an illustration of this act of symbolic compensation, since, parallel to this denial, a

<sup>2</sup> Yves Barel and Michel Maffesoli demonstrate this each in his own way: Yves Barel, *La Société du vide*, Seuil, Paris, 1983; Michel Maffesoli, *L'Ombre de Dionysos*, Librairie des Méridiens, Paris, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> The associative phenomenon shows the two tendencies of our age when faced with individualism: it illustrates on one hand the crisis of sociability, the rupture of traditional solidarities and on the other hand an aspiration toward contacts with others, a search for sociability but one that is "voluntarist" and passes through through mediations that are at times quite singular.

“new religiosity” has developed, often taking caricatural forms that offer the distressed individuals a way to find their place within the cosmos again, to share a communal life or at least to escape isolation, to deny the brutal fact of their death. The same effects are produced at the level of the body. “Deception” when faced with a disenchanting mechanistic view of anatomo-physiology, which leaves nothing to dreams, leads people on a frantic search for models that would give their bodies a kind of supplement of soul. In this way, the recourse to anomalous, often contradictory conceptions of the body, abusively simplified and reduced to formulas is justified. The body becomes a melting pot at times quite close to surrealist collages. Each person “fabricates” the representation he has of his body in an individual, autonomous way, even if he delves for it in the fashion of the day, the vulgarized knowledge of the media, and elsewhere.

In the present paper, we hope to call the attention of the reader to the advance of Western individualism and its consequences on the representations of the body. We shall try to show that the very notion of the body as such is an effect of individualism, a consequence of the rupture in solidarity that inserts the person into his proper collective, with no harshness between one man and another and in close liaison with the cosmos.

A surprising anecdote reported by Maurice Leenhardt will be a good statement of this problem. Before reaching that point, however, let us set up some guide posts by situating the Melanesian conceptions of the body<sup>4</sup> as well as those that structure and give meaning to the notion of the person.

The Kanaks believe that the body borrows its characteristics from the vegetable kingdom.<sup>5</sup> A morsel that is undetached from the universe that suffuses it, it interweaves its existence with trees, fruit and plants. It obeys the pulsations of the vegetable, identified with this *Gemeinschaft alles Lebendigen* (community with everything that lives) of which Cassirer spoke. *Kara* designates both the skin of man and the bark of a tree. The unity of flesh and muscle (*pié*) directly refers to the pulp or seed of fruit. The rigid part of

<sup>4</sup> We will see that this is not just a manner of speaking. The Melanesian conceptions of the body never autonomize it as a separate reality.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo*, Gallimard, 1947, pp. 54-70.

the body, the skeleton, has the same name as the heart of a tree. This word also designates the coral debris thrown up on the beaches, and shells serve to identify enveloping bones such as the cranium. The names for the various viscera are also drawn from a vegetal vocabulary. The kidneys and other internal organs of the body have the name of a fruit that is similar in appearance to them. The lungs, whose covering recalls the form of the totemic tree of the Kanaks, *kuni*, are identified with this name. As for the intestines, they are assimilated to the interlacings of the lianes that abound in the tropical forest. Thus the body appears as another form of the vegetal or the vegetal as a natural extension of the body. There are no discernible frontiers between the two domains: it is only our Western concepts that permit this severance, with the risk of a confusion and an ethnocentrist reduction of the differences.

The Kanaks do not think of the body as a form and matter isolated from the world; it totally participates in a nature that both assimilates and suffuses it. The link with the vegetal is not a metaphor but an identity of substance. Many examples borrowed from the daily life of the Kanaks clearly illustrate this corporal semantics. A child with rickets is said to “grow yellow”, like a sprout lacking in sap and wasting away. An old man opposes the policeman who has come for his child to force him to the hard labor demanded by the Whites: “See these arms<sup>06</sup>, he says, “they are water”. The child is identical to a sprouting tree, first watery, then with time woody and hard (p. 63). We could cite many more examples (pp. 65-66). The same materials are at work in the world and in the flesh; they establish an intimacy, a solidarity between men and their biosystem. In Kanak cosmogony, every man knows from which trees in the forest his ancestors have come. The tree symbolizes the belonging to the group by rooting man in the earth of his ancestors and by attributing to it a singular place in the heart of nature, blended in with the innumerable trees that make up the forest. At the birth of a child a sapling is planted where the umbilical cord is buried; little by little it takes hold and grows along with the maturing of the child. The word *karo* that designates the body of a man is a component of the baptizing expressions: the body of the night, the body of the axe, the body of the water, and so on.

We immediately understand that the Western notion of person is without consistence in Melanesian society. If the body is connected with the vegetal universe, there are also no frontiers between the living and the dead. Death is not thought of as annihilation; it marks the access to another form of existence. The deceased may take the place of an animal, a tree, a spirit. He may even return to the village or the town and mingle with the living in the guise of the *bao* (p. 67 *et seq.*) On the other hand, during his lifetime, a subject exists only in his relationship with others. Man is only a reflection. He has substance and consistency only in his ties with his partners. This is a characteristic relatively frequent in traditional societies and in addition refers us to the works of German sociology at the beginning of this century through the opposition it presents, with Tonnies, for example, between communal ties and social ties. The existence of the Kanak involves the necessary summation of exchanges within a community in which no one can be characterized as an individual. Man only exists in it through his relationship with others; he does not draw the legitimacy of his existence from his person alone erected as a totem.<sup>6</sup> The idea of person in the Western sense is therefore not found in traditional Kanak sociality and cosmogony. *A fortiori*, the body does not exist, at least in the sense in which we understand it today in our societies. The “body” (*karo*) is here identified with the world, it is not the support or the proof of an individuality since that is not fixed. The person rests on foundations that make it permeable to all the emanations of the environment. The “body” is not a frontier or an atom but an indiscernable element of a symbolic ensemble. There is no asperity between the flesh of man and the flesh of the world.

We now give the anecdote we mentioned above. Maurice Leenhardt, interested in a better definition of the influence of Western values on Kanak mentality questioned an elderly New Caledonian man who replied, to the great surprise of Leenhardt, “What you have brought us is the body” (p. 263). The imposition of the Western *Weltanschauung* on certain groups along with their evangelization<sup>7</sup> naturally led those who made the change and

<sup>6</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage*, Plon, Paris, 1962, p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> For the importance of individualization in Christianity, see Marcel Mauss, “La Notion de personne”, in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, PUF, Paris, 1950; Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme*, Seuil, Paris, 1983, pp. 33-67.

discarded their ancient values to an individualization that reproduces that of Western societies in an attenuated form. The Kanak who assumed these new values, even in a rudimentary way, freed himself from the tissue of traditional meaning that had integrated his presence in the world within a *continuum*; he became *indivisum in se*. The frontiers defined by his body from then on distinguished him from his companions, even those who had taken the same step with him. Put at a distance (and not really disappearance) from the communal dimension and development of the social dimension, even if in those more or less hybrid societies, the passage does not occur in a radical way. The contracting toward the ego that results from this social and cultural transformation leads to a verification of a strong intuition of Durkheim according to which “a factor of individualization is needed, and it is the body that fills this role”.<sup>8</sup>

This notion of person crystallized around the ego is itself of recent date in the history of the Western world. Several observations are pertinent here to show the solidarity that arises between the modern conceptions of the person and those which, as a corollary, assign a meaning and statute to the body. First, it is important to emphasize the differential advance of individualism within various social groups. In *Le Suicide* Durkheim showed that the autonomy of the individuals in the choices presented to them differs according to the social and cultural milieu in which the subject is rooted. In certain regions of France, for example, the communal dimension is well established and is verified in the survival and energy of certain conceptions of the body employed by popular traditions of healing in which the symbolic protectorship of the cosmos and nature is always present. It is also confirmed in these regions by the mistrust shown toward a medical practice that contributes to an individualist conception of the body. We will return to this subject later.

The notion of individualism that serves as a basis for this reasoning is, in our opinion, more a dominant tendency than an intrinsic and definitive reality of our Western societies. On the other hand, it is this view of the world that puts the individual at

<sup>8</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, PUF, Paris 1968, p. 386 *et seq.*

its center (the *ego cogito* of Descartes) which is at the origin of our prevailing conceptions of the body.<sup>9</sup>

The premises of the appearance of the individual on a global scale are to be found in the Italian mosaic of the Trecento and Quattrocento, in which the merchant and banking middle class played an important economic and social role. Through his enlightened but too brief exposition, J. Burckhardt<sup>10</sup> shows the birth of this new idea of the individual that manifests a certain distension of an earlier holism, of the historical *continuum* of the values and bonds between individuals. The individual becomes the autonomous center of his choices; he is no longer carried along by the collective and its traditions of thought. Of course this realization by the consciousness touched only a privileged fraction of society, that is, essentially, townsmen, the bourgeois. In the republics and the Italian tyrannies, two figures especially gave the measure of the extension of burgeoning individualism: the artist and the *condottiere*. Soon after came the *uomo universalis*, the erudite, smitten with all the sciences of his time, men such as Alberti or Leonardo, who could not confine their existences and their views of the world within the dimensions of a single State. This feeling of belonging to the world and not just to one's one native community was amplified through exile in which thousands of men were involved. Imposing colonies of exiles were created in Italian cities, that of the Florentines at Ferrara, for example. Far from surrendering to nostalgia, as Charles d'Orléans did earlier, these men far from their families and roots developed the new sentiment of their belonging to the world. In their eyes, communal and holist space became too confining to claim to enclose their ambitions within only those limits. The only measurement they admitted was that of the universe. They were already individuals<sup>11</sup> even though in many respects they continued to belong to a society in which communal

<sup>9</sup> Any conceptual field, whatever its object, contains a certain view of the world and assigns man (if only as a negative) a certain position, especially at the level of the practices he upholds. This is why we can say that certain conceptions (modern medicine, for example) contain an important coefficient of individualism.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *La Civilisation de la Renaissance en Italie*, Vol. I, Gonthier, Paris, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> The fashion of portraiture began in the 15th century. The promotion of the person was largely that of the face. There would be much to say on this point.

ties remained strong. Faced with these earlier ties they acquired a degree of liberty that had been unthinkable before. Dante, exiled from Florence, exulted in saying, "My country is the world in general".

As a corollary to this development of the individual was the glory that came to more and more men: poets, for example, enjoyed a considerable renown during their lifetime. Dante or Petrarch are proof of this. Another revelatory sign was the appearance of the signature on artists' works. While the creators of the Middle Ages, such as the builders of cathedrals, remained anonymous, lost in the community of men, the artists of the Renaissance left their personal imprints on their production. In his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550) Vasari makes himself the preceptor of these men suddenly promoted to an important social recognition. The artist was no longer the ripple carried along by the spirituality of the masses, the nameless artisan of great collective designs; he became an autonomous creator. He served his own interests more than the divine majesty, even if he was a fervent believer.

The Italian cities of the Renaissance felt honored to have sheltered celebrated men within their walls: saints, of course, but also political men, poets, savants, philosophers and painters. Mockery became the corrective of this glory and the ambitions that no longer knew bounds;<sup>12</sup> its forms developed more and more from the beginning of the Quattrocento, perhaps as a kind of compensation but also resistance by the group faced with an autonomization of the individual which was to its detriment.

Burckhardt says little about the merchant bourgeoisie, but it is clear that commerce was taking on a formidable extension in these independent towns or States. Now, the merchant is the archetype of the modern individual (along with the Protestant, for other reasons),<sup>13</sup> the man whose ambitions go beyond the established frameworks, a cosmopolite *par essence*, making his interests the motivation of his actions, even though it be to the detriment of the "general good".

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 118 *et seq.*

<sup>13</sup> Their collusion in the development of capitalism, as Weber has shown, also found there its *point d'entente*: an individualist dimension carried to its extreme.



An equally fundamental indication of this change in mentality, one that autonomizes the individual and is of primary interest to us here, was the constitution of anatomical knowledge in the Italian universities, especially in that of Bologna (and its branch in Padua) and its epistemological foundation: the opening of cadavers.

Dissections were forbidden during the Middle Ages: the intimacy of the body was inviolable, and to make an incision in it meant to tear the skin and flesh of the world. Within this conception, the individual was certainly not detached from his communal and cosmic fiber. "Fluidity of a world in which nothing has limits, in which beings themselves lose their boundaries and change in the wink of an eye without provoking objection, in form, aspect, dimension, indeed in reign as we would say: and here are so many stories of stones that come alive, move and progress; here are trees become living beings... here animals acting as men and men changing at will into animals..."<sup>14</sup> The body is absolutely not differentiated from the subject it incarnates. From this comes the profusion of biological metaphors to designate the social field or some of its entreaties. The social body is unitary, as is man. In the universe of medieval values, the body is engaged in the universe: it condenses the cosmos: a microcosm in which man does not yet *have* a body (in the register of having, of property), he is indissoluble from it, he *is* his body.

Thus we imagine that in the presence of his assassin the corpse begins to bleed. L. Febvre demonstrates how blurred the frontiers are between the possible and the impossible in this view of the world and mentions a decapitated man taking his head in his hands and calmly walking away from the place of his execution. We see how the body was solidly with the person and how it blended into the collective. It happened, of course, that criminals were dismembered, but they had proved their detachment from the human community through the crimes of which they were guilty. Thus by attacking their body the very foundations of their existence were destroyed. The remains of saints were also dismembered and cut up and their relics dispersed throughout Christendom. But in the fragment of the sanctified body it is the metonymic symbol of the

<sup>14</sup> Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l'incroyance au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1968, p. 404.

faith that is worshiped. There was a positive trace of individuation in these facts, perhaps, but it was extenuated through the use made of the relic. The opening of the body for the ends of knowledge was forbidden. Aside from the socio-cultural motives we have briefly mentioned, there was a theological factor in the centuries preceding the first dissections, against the wishes of the anatomists: the secrets of life had to be preserved and the body protected from any investigation that might reveal its hidden workings.

We thus grasp the stakes in the first dissections, the formidable change in mentality that they implied for the fractions of society that were favorable to them. Furthermore, in a world placed under the sign of Christian transcendence, to cause blood to run, even as a cure, meant to transgress a solidly implanted taboo. For a long time surgeons did not enjoy great social favor. At the least, they were very ambivalent personages, gathering to themselves the social responses inherent in all violation: impurity and the sacred.<sup>15</sup>

The anatomist went still farther: not content to cause blood to flow, he violated the supreme taboo of corporal integrity: by dissecting a body, he advanced toward the conquest of the secret of the flesh. The body no longer spoke for the man whose visage it carried: they were separated from each other. Anatomic knowledge claimed universality.

The first dissections took place in Italian universities: in Padua in 1341, then in Venice and Florence. They then occurred at regular intervals, under the control of the Church, which measured out its authorizations. The first dissections were slow ceremonies that extended over several days.<sup>16</sup> They were done for pedagogical ends, before a public of surgeons, barbers, doctors and students, but they became generalized in the 16th century and went beyond their original aims to offer themselves to the curiosity of the public. The mentalities of that century were ready to accept facts that would have filled most men of earlier times with horror, including the doctors themselves.

In 1543 Vésale's *De humanis corporis fabrica* appeared in Basel. It was an enormous work of 700 pages interspersed with 300 plates

<sup>15</sup> See Marie Christine Pouchelle, *Corps et chirurgie à l'apogée du Moyen-Âge*, Flammarion, Paris, 1983, p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*, p. 137 et seq.

done by a student of Titian. Various treatises of anatomy did exist, of course, issued mainly by the University of Salerno. However, their objective was not man but the pig. At that time this animal was considered the closest to man in its internal structure. But in the 15th and 16th centuries it was the human body itself that went under the knife of the surgeon. Vésale was no longer content to repeat Galen, as his predecessors did; he observed the dissected bodies and made notes on what he revealed with his surgical instruments.

An ostentatious image symbol of this detachment of the body, of the ontological division between the man and his body: the Spaniard Juan Valverde showed in his *Anatomia del corpo humano* (1560) an engraving of a flayed man brandishing his skin, like a rag, in which are seen the openings of the face. His left hand still holds the knife of his own punishment.

The way was open to deprive the common man of a knowledge of his own body in order to make it the privilege of a group of specialists protected by the complexity (at times hazy, cf. Molière) of their discourse. Anatomical knowledge also marked for the first time the autonomy of the body, its ontological separation from the individual it incarnated. Through this *Weltanschauung*, the body spoke only for itself. The appearance of individualist feeling was needed for the body to be envisaged as isolated from the world that received it and gave it a meaning, and the isolation of the man to which it gave form. Medicine took the body as such and took its material literally; it rejected the body-symbol.<sup>17</sup> The body referred only to itself. It became the property of man (in the register of “have” and not of “be”) and this latter was no longer a link in an infinite *continuum*. The correspondence was broken between the flesh of man and the flesh of the world, at least for the “savant” strata of society. It is not without interest that the philosopher of *cogito* (and not of *cogitamus*) admits his fascination for anatomy. There is even an anecdote that in reply to a visitor’s question about what he read, Descartes pointed to a skinned calf on a table and

<sup>17</sup> Medicine has never really issued from this dilemma. The usual argument brought against it, rightfully, is that it is interested more in the illness (the reified body) than in the patient (psychosocial unit). On the body-symbol, the anthropological structure of the body, see David Le Breton, *Corps et Sociétés*, Librairie des Méridiens, 1985.

said, "There is my library". We recall this surprising statement by Descartes in the second Meditation: "I consider myself primarily as having a face, hands, arms and all this machine composed of flesh and bone, such as it would appear as a cadaver, which I designate with the name of body. Beyond that, I would consider that I feed myself, I walk, I feel and I think and I refer all these actions to the soul".<sup>18</sup> The image of the cadaver appears without difficulty in Descartes' writing, denoting reification, the axiological void of which the body is the object. Descartes sets himself before his own body in a position of exteriority. In this sense, the *cogito* is an echo of the anatomical act: it differentiates the body and separates it from the soul, which is the only dimension of man to still testify to a value. The affirmation of *cogito*, as a conscious act of the individual, rests on the depreciation of the body, as a corollary to the growing autonomy of the members of certain social groups with regard to the traditional values that bound them solidly to the cosmos and to other men.

With the different epistemological stages marked by the names of Nicolas de Cusa, Copernicus, Bruno, Kepler and above all that of Galileo, Western "savant" society passed from the closed world of scholastics to the infinite universe of mechanist philosophy, or to again evoke Koyré, it shifted from the world of "almost" to the universe of precision.<sup>19</sup> Rather, we will say a passage from one system of intelligibility to another, more precise with regard to some purely cultural criteria, but one that forcefully introduced the idea of measurement, exactitude and rigor. With the epistemological fracture introduced by Galileo, the formula for the world was given by the mathematicians, and engineers became the new masters. That the astronomy of Galileo was refuted by the dignitaries of the Church who were completely ignorant of astronomy and that he had to abjure his discoveries is only the last effort of

<sup>18</sup> René Descartes, *Méditations philosophiques*, PUF, Paris, 1970, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandre Koyré, *Du Monde clos à l'univers infini*, "Idées", Gallimard, Paris, 1973. It is of course out of the question to develop this radical metamorphosis of the Western view of the world that began in the 17th century and continues to this day, with a larger and larger efficacy, at least on the level of the mastery of nature that is its main objective. We refer to the interesting works of R. Lenoble, G. Gusdorf and A. Koyré, but here we are concerned with the incidences of this change of mind on the social representations of the body.

Christianity to hold on to a world that was more and more escaping it.

It is a question of establishing the causes that preside at the recurrence of phenomena. The rational knowledge of these laws must give man the ability to set them up to his taste or to oppose them according to the interest he finds in them. Its mysteries unveiled, nature becomes a “mechanical toy” (R. Lenoble) in the hands of man who participates in this epistemological and technical change. It is a passage from a *scientia contemplativa* to a *scientia activa*.<sup>20</sup> It is important to become “masters and possessors of nature”. The continuity between man and his environment is broken in favor of another relationship. Knowledge must be useful, rational and productive of social efficacy, and nothing escapes this will to mastery. When Descartes tries to identify the nature of passions, he states that they are only the effects of the machinery of the body, consequences of the disorganized shifting of animal spirits. But he thinks that man may learn to control them: “I am not at all of the opinion... that we must not have passions, it is sufficient that we make them subject to reason”, he writes to Elizabeth on September 1, 1645. And Robert Lenoble analyzes with finesse the presuppositions for such an attitude: “To the anxious questions of the moralist, uneasy about the causes of sin”, he writes, “he substitutes the objective tranquillity of the technician at grips with a problem of the balance of forces”.<sup>21</sup> This is another good example of the detachment of man from his own body: just as any phenomenon of nature, man must know how to control himself, master the passions that move him.

The schema of nature is furnished by the machine. In this thought of the Mechanists that will directly fashion the world – since contemporary technoculture is its powerful heir – nature is identified with a systematic group of impersonal and anaxiomatic

<sup>20</sup> See René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, Garnier-Flammarion, Paris, p. 53, in which Descartes puts the accent on knowledge “that is useful in life”. He rejects “the speculative philosophy that is taught in the schools”. The engineer would become the support of this useful and productive knowledge.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Lenoble, *Histoire de l'idée de nature*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1969, p. 335. We find similar positions, but applied to political fervor, in Machiavelli, for example. See Max Horkheimer, *La Philosophie bourgeoise de l'histoire*, Payot, Paris.

laws. The body does not escape this axiomatic. The world is no longer a universe of values but a universe of facts that are subordinated to a rationality, submitted to the necessity of the possible, because thereafter the *non posse* can only engender the *non esse*.<sup>22</sup>

This development of the individual, whose imputation is different from one social group to another and from the country to the town, slowly makes its way across Europe, already prefigured by the Christian concept of man responsible before God. The Reform and the Counter-reform further instill this position. The rise of the middle class and the profound change in economic relationships it implies: the end of Scholasticism; and the emergence of a new mechanist epistemology, linked to these social changes, give still more amplitude to the movement. A paradox: man enlarges his universe, detaches himself from the central position he occupied in the Ptolemaic system, to see himself along with Galileo a simple point embedded in an unlimited cosmos, the more the idea of the individual takes on a social valence, the more the separation from the body is accentuated. Simultaneously, man is more and more driven back into an acute solitude.

As we have seen, the narrowing of the notion of person throws an ambiguous light on the body. In fact, the body becomes a factor of individualization, establishing its precise boundaries between one individual and another, contrarily to the earlier kind of indistinction. As a corollary, the body is as if dissociated from the individual, desanctified and the object of autonomous investigations. The birth on the collective scale of a sociability in which the individual has precedence over the group corresponds to the modern advent of the body.<sup>23</sup> However, we must affirm that the latter is affected by a depreciative indice. Man is cut off from his body, which becomes a devalorized aspect of his person. The new epistemology then being born but which would fertilize modern values, scientific and technical practices, which would found our Western technoculture, is indissolubly linked to a separation from the body.<sup>24</sup> The same is true with imagination, considered an

<sup>22</sup> Lucien Febvre, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

<sup>23</sup> This change in indices of individuality with regard to a group does not affect the common people who remain faithful to their traditions. Their view of the body, for example, is not isolated from the nature that gives it its rhythms.

<sup>24</sup> David Le Breton, "Aux sources de la violence institutionnelle: le corps et la philosophie cartésienne", *Corps et langage*, n. 4, Strasbourg, 1982.

illusion, a constant source of error and, even more, a useless activity, irrational and unproductive: major sins for the young middle class thought.

From the 17th century on, the Mechanist way of intelligibility made mathematics the sole key to the comprehension of nature. The body was thus stamped with suspicion; the experienced and felt universe such as becomes distorted due to perceptible activities, falls into disgrace to the profit of an intelligible, conceptual and abstract world. As is the case with man's imagination, his body is a perpetual cause of error, a challenge to the encounter of the rigor that is necessary for the demands of reason. The truths of nature are no longer immediately accessible to sensorial evidence; they are kept at a distance, the object of a purification and a rational calculation. Sensory nature is irreducible to intelligible nature. Here again, Descartes gives a memorable illustration in the second Meditation with his parable of the piece of wax. Spinoza gives an enlightened formula for the new *épistèmè*. According to him, it is not with the eyes of the body that we must decipher the mysteries of nature but with the "eyes of the spirit". The body is super-numerary, an obstacle to knowledge.

For these men far removed from the popular culture<sup>25</sup> of which Bakhtine speaks, the body changed into a suspect and unlucky reality. The separation from the body in the Western world indicates first of all a clean break between savant culture and folk culture. It is clear that the ritualized effacement of the body<sup>26</sup> finds one of its historic sources there.<sup>27</sup> The body is devaluated at the level of the so-called upper classes but not at all at the level of the common people.

The development of individuality, legitimized by the Cartesian *cogito*, called for a circumspect attention to the body. Already the

<sup>25</sup> We know the importance it assigns to the body. See Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *L'Oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen-Âge et à la Renaissance*, Gallimard, Paris, 1970. Two opposing views of the body were then polarized: one that exalted, the other that deprecated it and kept it at a distance.

<sup>26</sup> On this idea, see David Le Breton, "L'Effacement ritualisé du corps", *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, Vol. LXXVII, 1984; and *Corps et Société*, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> This is not the only one, of course; the manipulation of culture is indissolubly linked to the rise of middle class values, to the progressive extension of its ethos toward other social groups drawn into its orbit as it came to dominate economic rapports and increased productive forces. See Norbert Elias, *La Civilisation des moeurs*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris.

product of a rupture and a social division, the individual found himself ontologically divided into two heterogeneous parts: the body and the spirit. The body harbored all the charge of deception and negativity; on the other hand, as if a parcel of man's divinity had to be preserved in spite of the disenchantment with the world, the spirit remained under the tutelage of God. Man was burdened with a body that even when it was considered as a machine had the disadvantage of not being trustworthy and strict enough in its perception of environmental data. Rationality is not a category of the body, but it is one of the possible categories of the spirit. And indeed, in the opinion of the Mechanist philosophers, it is its most eminent quality and actually the only one they will admit. Descartes certified it in his way: "The faculty of thought is slumbering in infants and the insane; it is not really extinguished but disturbed, and we must not think that it is so attached to bodily organs that it cannot exist without them. Because, as we often see, it is hindered by these organs, it does not at all follow that it is produced by them; and not even the slightest reason can be given for it".<sup>28</sup>

The human body became a machine among millions of others, a particular chapter in general physics. The fact that it incarnates the human presence gave it no privilege. Descartes says, for example: "And really we can quite well compare the nerves of the machine that I describe to the pipes of fountains; its muscles and tendons to the various engines and springs that move the fountain's machine; its animal spirits, to the water that stirs it, of which the heart is the source and the concavities of the brain the eyes. Moreover, breathing and other such actions that are natural and ordinary for it and which depend on the course of the spirit are like the movements of a clock or a mill that the ordinary course of water can make continuous..."<sup>29</sup> It is on the model of the machine-body that he extends to the State that Hobbes bases his analysis in the first pages of *Leviathan* (1651); he says that the

<sup>28</sup> Descartes, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>29</sup> Descartes, *Traité de l'homme*, Garnier, Paris, 1963 (or in *Discours de la méthode*). "Every body is a machine and machines built by the divine artisan are the best arranged, without however ceasing to be machines. There is not, to consider only the body, any difference in principle between man-made machines and the living bodies created by God. There is only a difference in improvement and complexity" (p. 102).



heart is the spring and the articulations the wheels that communicate to the body the movements desired by man. It is the image of the automaton, of course, that leads Hobbes to this metaphor, and for Hobbes the State is only an “artificial man”, although of considerable size.

These are two examples among others of the reification of the body on the model of the machine. No qualitative difference marks the body from the objects to which it is compared. The epistemological rupture of the 17th century with its mechanistic concept of the world and man translated economic growth into a system of thought, along with its corollary, the development of productive forces, especially the factories in which man was reduced to his working force alone (and thus the body to a force, to a mechanical tool). Artisanal work within cooperatives, in which the body is not dissociated from man, gave way to the profit of factory work in which movements are segmented, are made uniform and are tirelessly repeated without any qualification being required from the worker. He is simply fastened to a body-tool in some ways detached from him but one he cannot abandon without himself disappearing. In this new organization of work, subtly analyzed by Marx, man (or rather his body) is only one piece among others, a simple appendage to the machine. Taylorism will only push to its extremes a logic already contained in the Mechanist philosophy.

Using clinical data offered by psychosis, Gis la Pankow<sup>30</sup> showed that every individual has an image of his body that furnishes him with a *form* that he recognizes as his own, limited in space and made up of the living unity of its different parts (contrarily to the fragmented image of the psychotic) and a *content* that allows him to inhabit his body as a coherent and familiar universe (and not as a chaos of hostile feelings, etc.) Elsewhere we have shown that clinical experience reveals here an essential anthropological fact. It seems, however, that beyond form and content there is a third dimension of the image of the body: that of *knowing*. By that we mean the knowledge, even rudimentary, of the collective representations that assign to the body its particular position within a general symbolism of society. Man must give a meaning to the substance of his flesh, understand the internal makeup of his body,

<sup>30</sup> Gis la Pankow, *L'Homme et sa psychose*, Aubin, Paris, 1969; *Structure familiale et psychose*, Aubier, Paris, 1977.

attach his illnesses and sufferings to a given system of interpretation, locate himself with regard to nature, and so on. This composite ensemble of representations attenuates the mystery that it condenses and contributes to the insertion of man within his community. It also permits an efficacious opposition to anxiety by giving man the means to understand himself.

What are the present forms of this knowledge in Western societies? We have seen that the burgeoning rationalism of the 17th century thoroughly renewed the criteria of knowledge. Truth was no longer based on the ancestral heritage of a cultural background. For an agreed-upon knowledge, resting on traditions and potentially shared by all the community, is substituted the knowledge of specialists, they alone able to establish the criteria for truth, beginning with a set of impersonal rules claiming a validity that is independent of cultures and history. The separation is thus pronounced between popular knowledge of the body and the “savant culture” of the doctors. The distance between them will continue to grow in the course of time.<sup>31</sup> The scientific approaches to the body divested it of all axiological valence. Rejected from the sphere of values and symbols, the body that appears through anatomophysiological knowledge resembles a clever assembly of pieces, of machinery, of technical procedures. The body, as we have seen, becomes another machine. It is not really through misuse of terms that we sometimes speak of “repairing” a sick body or of “putting back into place” the ideas of the delirious person, nor that in hospitals the patient is reduced to the only organ affected (“the kidney in 21, the lungs in 34”, etc.). Modern medicine since the Renaissance has always put the accent on the illness (autonomizing the affected organ on the model of a defective mechanism) rather than on the ill person (as a subject, personal history...). It has only been in the few years following the crisis of confidence in medicine that the argument has been expanded. On the other hand, some sectors of biotechnology pursue this reification of the body to the point where the body itself is relieved of its functions by the use of artificial substitutes that are more and more sophisticated. We

<sup>31</sup> The intolerance of official medicine with regard to folk knowledge of the body, healing, etc., has widened the gulf between these two views of the world, since the essence of the debate is the conflict between two systems of intelligibility of the body.

sometimes wonder if the Western world is not entering an era of the end of the body, if this latter is not fated to disappear entirely to the profit of a more rational cybernetic machine.<sup>32</sup> The individualist nature of many sectors of Western society leaves individuals relatively free to choose by means of a formal submission to a certain number of rules. All that is not without a bearing on the way in which people represent their own bodies to themselves.

To speak of the body in Western societies is most often to evoke the anatomico-physiological knowledge of medicine. Also, it is to assume a consensus around this knowledge and the practices that it underlies, forgetting, as Georges Balandier reminds us, that “societies are never what they appear to be or what they pretend to be. They are expressed on at least two levels: one, superficial, presents “official” structures... the other, deeper, opens the way to the most fundamental real relationships and to the revelatory practices of the dynamics of the social system”.<sup>33</sup> In fact, we rarely find individuals who really know the emplacement of the organs or who understand the physiological principles structuring the various corporal functions. As we easily see by looking around us, anatomico-physiological knowledge is more than rudimentary with most people. They adhere to it in only a superficial way. Many other views of the body are superposed on this approach.

With the Western body being deprived of all value, viewed as a mechanism, a breach is opened into which various items of knowledge precipitate, destined to bring to the subject a semblance of symbolization, a supplement of soul that is none other than a supplement of symbol. In the last few decades, the emergence of the consumer society and the order of artificial<sup>34</sup> substitutes it brings with it has accentuated this movement by giving to individualism the bases for a better installation. The rational universe is “inhabitable” where the symbolic dimension is missing. The disenchant-ed world aspires to new spiritualities, claims the reestablishment of the symbolic unity (*sumbolon*, that which unites) between man and the cosmos, between man and man, between man and himself;

<sup>32</sup> We took up this question in *Corps et Sociétés*, *op. cit.* We will return to it in more depth in other contributions.

<sup>33</sup> Georges Balandier, *Sens et puissance*, PUF, Collection “Quadrige”, Paris, 1981, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> See the essential studies by Jean Baudrillard.

the process of resymbolization that often seems artificial but is the object of a considerable psychological investment is based on an unlimited spread of representations of the body uprooted from their original soil, from philosophy and ways of life that gave them meaning, simplified as far as caricature, transformed into technical processes, into formulas. Through the revalorization of the body, the imaginary takes its revenge. We have seen that the Galilean epistemological break linked their destiny by rejecting both into the same sphere of scorn. It is with the same movement that they become free. The Western man of today projects fragmentary, confused and heteroclit knowledge on his body that gives it the appearance of a clown suit.

Rural traditional knowledge has never lost its socio-cultural anchorage. To this day it has continued its underground course, legitimated by word of mouth. Shut up for centuries in the rural classes, its influence has not ceased to grow. Because of the crisis in confidence that affects medicine, a number of healers even recruit their clientele from city dwellers. This appeal to practices that were just recently considered irrational, illegitimate and charlatan<sup>35</sup> clearly shows the phenomenon of resistance that Georges Balandier called “a recourse to counter-modernity”.<sup>36</sup> The townsman who thus makes his way back to the country is looking for a possible cure for ills that medicine has often given up on, but in addition he finds there a new image of his body, much more worthy of interest than that given by anatomy or physiology. Beyond the eventual cure, he again finds a symbolic dimension that gives his body and thus his own existence as a man a value that was missing. He enriches his life with a bit of symbolism. The ideas of the body found in folk knowledge are multiple, often blurred. They rest on a skillfulness that designs in negative a certain image of the body. These notions do not isolate the body from the cosmos. The same “raw materials” are constituents of man and the universe: the same with magnetism and radio-electric detection that favor the circulation of energy and its balanced distribution to all points of the body; of *signature* medi-

<sup>35</sup> A modern avatar of the centuries-old conflict between popular knowledge and the savant culture that claims the sole legitimacy.

<sup>36</sup> Georges Balandier, *Sens et Puissance*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

cine according to which a vegetable or mineral element exercises therapeutic functions due to the similarity in aspect that links it to what is being treated (for example, red jasper that stops haemorrhages); astrological medicine that places the organs under the influence of the stars through a complex web of correspondences making the body a discrete echo of the universe; stones, springs, streams, trees, are sometimes endowed with the property to cure such or such an illness. Another traditional practice that draws a singular profile of the body is sorcery. This practice believes that man is entirely contained within small fragments taken from his body (nail parings, hair, excrement, etc.). Possessing these elements, the fortune-teller is able to manipulate diffuse forces, to weave the chances of life into a destiny. He exercises an efficacious control over a body after he has metonymically appropriated a part of its substance. Through the prayer he murmurs and the signs he makes over the body of his patient, the *penseur de secret* crystallizes the beneficent forces that cure the illness. In the same way, the “*barreur*”, the “*toucheux*”, and others, whose power consists in “cutting” the fire of a burn.<sup>37</sup> In these different practices, we see the persistence of a close symbolic tie between man and nature, a sort of nondistinction of the body from the components of the cosmos that we have seen to be the revealer of a social dimension in which community ties have priority and of a structure in which man is not yet entirely disengaged from his relational tissue, at least at the level of the originating soil of these traditions. This does not mean that these practices do not exercise their attraction with regard to independent social groups. Technoculture frees traditions from their socio-cultural roots; it sterilizes them, empties them of all metaphysics and then puts them on the market of symbolic benefits as a collection of formulas. It is within the logic of the era of artificial substitutes that the radio-electric detectors, magnetizers, “*voyants*” and others become more and more installed in the cities, opening a new chapter in the history of liberal professions, that they receive an ever larger clientele among those

<sup>37</sup> For a fuller description of traditional knowledge of the body, see Françoise Loux, *Le Corps dans la société traditionnelle*, Berger-Levrault, Paris, 1979; under the direction of Françoise Loux, “Penseurs de secrets et de douleurs”, *Autrement*, n. 15, 1978.

who are “disappointed by medicine”. A good example of what Baudrillard called the semiological reduction.

The same movement affects the great oriental *Weltanschauung*. Acupuncture, yoga, shamanism, Zen, massages of various traditions are reduced to a few simple ideas, some sample formulas, some elementary gestures. Sterilized, they are degraded into mere corporal technologies. They float about weightlessly, apparently available for all misappropriation; new “specialties” taking the body for a target are born every day. The market is overrun but recruits a clientele that never tires of new experiences. Yoga combines with Chinese massage, Zen with hypnosis, American shamans offer their competence to the Parisians, psychoanalysis is grafted onto meditation, humanist sexology with other things, and so on. Boundaries are destroyed, everything mixes up with everything else, the essential being for the promoters to put a discipline with a new name on the fruitful market of the body, any theoretical or “spiritualist” gadget to make its way in spite of competition. The passage of certain oriental philosophies through California has given rise to an unlikely inflation of different “theories”, each having the body for its central concern. Some have crossed the Atlantic: bio-energy, gestalt, rebirth, primordial cry, etc. Based on naive and extremist simplifications, they answer to the emergence of this narcissistic feeling that tends to develop in the middle and liberal classes.

Man in Western metropolises invents the knowledge that he has of his body with which he daily lives from a hodgepodge of heteroclitic models, more or less similar, without worrying about their compatibility. The profusion of the present representations of the body in post-industrial society is not without leaving the body fragmented by schizophrenia. Today’s man rarely has a coherent image of his body; he transforms it into a tissue that is checkered with all sorts of references. No theory of the body is the object of a faultless legitimacy. The individual having the choice between clouds of possible information wavers between one and the other without ever finding the one that exactly suits him. His “liberty” as an individual is made up of these uncertainties, of the endless search for a *lost body* that is in fact that of a *lost community*.

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