

The body: its uses and representations in the modernity

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In this work of the sociologist and anthropologist David Le Breton offers a stimulant reflection on the perception of the body in the contemporary occidental societies. Even when the translation to Spanish of *Antropología del cuerpo y modernidad*, the Buenos Aires publishing house could probably do a more careful design of the front and, in the interior of the book, it could have included in the footnotes the references in Spanish of the quoted books and articles. Despite these details, the content presented under the form of a compilation of essays, approaches with an innovative perspective fundamental problems regarding the symbolic construction of the body in the modern occidental societies. In this work, the research from the University Paris X. Nanterre analyses the implications of the individualizing structures that “transform the body in the precinct of the subject, the place of his limits and his freedom, the privileged object of an elaboration and of a dominion will”.

The author shows with examples extracted from the history and the anthropology, that the very notion of body us an invention of the industrial societies; its universalization is the result of their imposition through the colonialist system and the expansion of capitalisms.

Many were there indigenous peoples and tribes as the old “kanacks” from New Caledonia, for example, from whom the body was the support of the spirit which did not have its own characteristics. The body of the community members was not differentiated from the nature, which was manifested, among others, by the terms used to design the different parts of the human body. But with the imposition of the western nations, of the body as an autonomous organic unit, capable of surviving even when separated from the social body, it was moved from the individuation—in the Durkheim sense—to the individualism.

The reasoned thinking, Le Breton indicates, makes the man to be a being capable of abstracting from his natural conditions and those of his passions. To the extent the personality is disassociated from the body, the man and his passions are animalized. From Aristotle to Sade, passing by Hobbes and Maquiavelo, the man is an animal in the social and political reign. But the man had become in the reference point of the world. The anti-pocentrism was imposed in the different spheres of the society. “The

new ways of knowledge, the emerging individualism, the ascent of capitalism, free some people from their fidelity to the cultural and religious traditions”, says the French anthropologist.

The invention of the reason made the man to separate from himself, from the others, from the nature and the cosmos. With Descartes, the body is reduced to a machine, a clock. It was precisely the Cartesian thinking the one that went further in this disassociation between the individual and his body: “this philosophy —writes Le Breton— is an anatomic act, it distinguishes in the man between soul and body and grants the former the unique privilege of value”. From the Illustration the reason is granted, more unanimously, the capability of distinguishing between the truth and the fake, the real and the imaginary. For the erudite of those times, the body stops being the sacred recipient of the divine mystery to become an organic unit that it would be better to study, understand and explain.

Le Breton makes and emphasis on the fact that the dissections of the first western anatomists (Galiano, Vesalio) show a change of mentality: when transgress the body’s sacredness taboo, the skin is not inviolable any more and the human being is not untouchable anymore. The representations of the body in the anatomy books progressively lose their metaphysical aura when gaining precision and realism. The body is shown open, dissected, disemboweled. The vision overcomes the superstition. In fact, saints and tortured men were frequently dismembered: the former ones to become relics, the later to be examined by the barbers, surgeons and doctors. Similarly, in a very slow way, the human body became the instrument of knowledge of the modern medicine. In this way the medical science dictated the condemnatory sentence of the end of the human body unit: from then on the man is formed by an organic unit differentiated that requires specialists, and of a spirit or mind. The human being became the owner of his individuality, whereas his body became part of the social common propriety.

The biomedical knowledge was constituted through observations and experiences with sick people and dead bodies, in so far as the traditional knowledge were left aside and denigrated. Le Breton is right when he affirms that the illness, with the beginning of the modern medicine, started to being

seen as something alien that has to be removed and annihilated. Regarding the ill person, was and will still be seen as a weakened and dysfunctional body. To heal it, a remedy is needed. With the passing of the time, the pill symbolized a social nexus that tends to compensate the effects of anomic relations.

Although the author does not mention this in this work, it is necessary to mention that the discovery of the importance of the hygiene and the virtues of the sterile environments reinforced the idea of a body's sanitation. The body of the modern man is a body free of every infection; incapable of spreading (Mary Douglas in her classic *Purity and Danger* precisely approaches the invention and the cultural treatment of the uncleanness). To take care of their own bodies, preventing diseases is also taking care of the rest of the society. To this respect, Le Breton notes eagerly that the body is erased through avoiding behaviors. "If we compared ourselves with other societies, more hospitable about the body, we can say that the western civilization is based in an erasing of the body, in a particular symbolization of his uses that is changed by the distance". The recommendation of the American doctors that the parents should not touch their new-born baby immediately after the birth and the grandparents should wait at least three months before touching it, is an extreme example of this imposition of a distance among individuals. Doctors dictate the social law of the ideal use of the body. The fear of the diseases is only one of the manifestations of the fear of the alien body, of the angst the other provokes. Before this trend that started at the end of the XIX century, the individuals resist in different ways, individually or collectively, spontaneous or organized.

The traditional medicines and knowledge survive in the country side whereas the alternative medicines attract more and more people from the western societies. Sometimes in a very eclectic way the cure that considers the human being as whole is searched, being this trend the opposing to the institutional hyper-specialization of the modern medicine. Le Breton also sees the return of the healer figure through the doctor adept to traditional medicines and expert in different therapies. This "de-modernization" of the medical knowledge should not be surprising: the ill people are looking for a holistic response to their sufferings. The modern society has created

new diseased people, but there are no ways of treating them.

Since its separation from the soul, the body began a social reification process over the base of the medical needs and expectations. The post mortem voluntary donation of organs and the delivery of the body to the Science, the donation, sale of blood, sperm, ovules and kidneys, the in vitro fecundation, surrogate mothers, euthanasia, therapeutic bitterness, the cloning of human cells, are some of the modern techniques and uses of the body to which it is has to be added that of turning the body in an object of art. The body, from centuries, was the sepulcher of the soul; nowadays the soul buries the body in an uncertain future.

The competitiveness proper of the capitalist societies generates a centripetal process of margination and exclusion of the individuals. Solitude and singleness are two relevant manifestations of the chronic illness the industrialized societies suffer from. Before this anonymous and de-humanizing civilizing process, “the subject of the western metropolis forges the knowledge that possesses over the body with which lives everyday, from the mixture of heteroclitic models, better or worse assimilated, without worrying for the compatibility of the loans”. The wide spectrum of the therapeutic alternatives frequently added to sui generic and exotic beliefs, offers several real and imaginary opportunities to heal. In this context, the work on the body and its representations makes it possible to end with the illness. David Le Breton talks about the body as a “continent” due to the infinite extension of its possibilities, perceptions and uses.

The author reflects on the consequences of the total visibilization of the body, of its autonomy and metabolism. With the development of the technology, the patient’s body became transparent. Everything can be seen on the screen, from the fetus movements to the functioning of the brain, passing through the blood circulation. The infinitely small also became accessible, allowing the violation of the nature principles when being able to read the genes of a child when it is still in its mother womb. It is not necessary to open to operate, as it is the case of the calculus that are destroyed from the outside by means of magnetic bombings. These new possibilities the modern technology offer reduce the nuisances of the ill people and makes the diagnoses faster: pain and waiting time are reduced.

The computerized image constitutes a new stage in the evolution of the medical science and revives the fantasy of the transparency of the human body. Le Breton elegantly writes that “the evidence is the mystery’s shortest way”.

Now, the “liberalization” of the body from the social movements of 1968 carried a physical and symbolic distancing with the others. More visible, the modern body is not stopped being granted aesthetic strategies of a hygienic nature. The advertisement models present a stereotype capable of creating a social emulation. “Seem to” or “be as”, are expressions of the search of an appearance, of a different body according to the current cultural referents. Hedonism constitutes a new way of altruism where what it is intended is to mark even more the separation between the person and the body. It is the return of Narcissus. The body is taken care of and entertained as a machine in order to maintain its vitality. The long free time the people have amplifies both his egocentric occupations regarding the occupations of his body as well as those preoccupations related to his mental equilibrium. We have to practice sports in accordance to what the current fashion states: golf, tennis, jogging, stretching, spinning, Pilates, etc., since the entertaining of the body has its socially valued codes. The divinization of the young, athletic and healthy body is the response of a society that values the presentation of the self. But are those the same industrialized societies where the individual who cannot meet the social expectations transform their frustrations; obesity, anorexia and bulimics became public health problems.

However, it would be a mistake making this range of body yielding techniques a western specificity: when reducing the size of the women feet in the Chinese Empire, the deformation of the skull in the Inca civilization, are some examples of the development of bio-control techniques. This bio-construction of the beauty, whose norms vary according to the cultures and time, is added in the western societies the need of retarding the symptoms of aging. The practice of a sport, the diets, the use of cosmetics and the aesthetic surgery are some of the contemporary techniques to erase the track of time in the bodies. This is because aging is seen in the western societies as the tragic manifestation, but probably not inescapable of the

effect of time over the body. With all its technology and scientific knowledge, the modern society has not given a satisfactory answer to the cells' dereference and the organs' fatigue. Old age scares less than aging, which provokes erasing social conducts, as Le Breton mentioned. In fact, a body that stops being complete and completely functional (illness, disability, old age) must receive a certain treatment and, in its case, being confined to specialized places: nursing houses, hospitals, re-education centers, etc., "Old age is a feeling" declares the author, when affirming that the construction of the old age is culturally connoted. For example, in Africa, people tend to say they are older because the elderly are granted a higher status since they incarnate wisdom and because they are but a few. But in the industrialized countries, the elderly are more numerous and older, since they are offered all kinds of services and attentions to keep them busy: there are travel agencies focused on the third age people, clubs where they can meet to discuss, play, television programs for the elderly, etc. All these benefits are in look on one single thing: re-socialize the western elderly who generally life far from their children, at the margin of the society and out from the labour market. In this sense, even if the city can provide the elderly a larger number of activities, in many cases they are nothing but a surrogate of the real social relations.

David Le Breton affirms, with reason, that the development of the city had a significant consequence over the social uses and representations. The proxemic socialization of the cities imposed its rules: seeing without looking with the massive use of polarized crystals, hearing without listening with the noise of the cars, smell without perceiving the scent due to the pollution. The design of the cities and the public spaces has provoked a noticeable reduction of the capability of the senses to understand the world that surrounds us, limiting our perceptions and appreciations of the others. The look of the citizens faces living walls and angles. "Public spaces and apartments limit the vision. In these rooms of the body the arbitrarily defined sum of needs is reduced, the body assimilated a form of pure existence, without history, without qualities, simple volume". In the western cities' daily life nobody escapes from the cameras set in public spaces, of surreptitious vigilance of the police in name of the anti-terrorist fight, of

the repeated control of identity documents, or the throughout register of all our visits to the doctor, the hospitals, purchase of medicaments by means of the microprocessor of the Vital card all French people with social security have. The modern society and its control systems make an indication, a test of the body.

Image of God, the body became an image of the society through the historic process of materialization of the values and reification of the social relations. Divided in individual (personality) and body, men life schizophrenic, nature that tends to sink him in the impossibility of being what he really is. This societal illness is manifested in the development of bio-control techniques that lead to the homogenization of appearances making the expectations uniform. Before this globalization and references, there are resistance isles that submit the dominant doxe to the existence test. The search of happiness offers uncountable paths for those who want to life according to what the trends dictate as well as for those who explore the possibilities of re-finding themselves and going back to the primordial unit of the body and the spirit.

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