
Introduction

This book is intended to be a theoretical contribution to the sociology of the body and the rapidly expanding field of 'body studies'. In what follows I examine the changing status of the body in the discipline, evaluate and build upon the major perspectives utilized by sociological studies of the body, explore the implications of these perspectives for key social issues, and offer my own analysis of the relationship between the body, self-identity and death in the contemporary period of 'late' modernity (Giddens, 1991). In this analysis I argue that, in the current era, there is a particular tendency for the body to become central to the modern person's sense of self-identity. Against this background, the prospect of mortality assumes an importance that only recently received the sociological attention it deserves, yet is key to understanding people's contrasting engagements with the shifting boundaries that delineate life and death. This opening chapter introduces these issues, familiarizing the reader with the main themes informing this study.

In recent decades there has been a large growth of academic interest in the body. The sociology of the body is now firmly established: the international journal *Body & Society* was launched in 1995, the British Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association contain study sections on body matters, and there have been calls for the body to serve as an organizing principle for sociology. Bryan Turner (1992a: 12, 162) has coined the term 'somatic society', for example, to describe how the body in modern social systems has become 'the principal field of political and cultural activity'. This academic interest in the body has culminated in the establishment of a large, inter-disciplinary field of body studies characterized by important contributions from across the academic landscape, and by the publication in 2012 of the first *Handbook of Body Studies* (Turner, 2012).

There has also been a massive rise of popular interest in body matters. Newspapers, magazines and television are replete with features on body image and how to keep the body looking young, taut, sexy and beautiful, while weight loss, keep-fit and cosmetic surgery are

huge industries. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) reported that over 13 million cosmetic procedures were conducted in the United States in 2010, for example, a 77 per cent increase since 2000 (ASPS, 2011a). Of these, nearly 300,000 women spent a total of nearly \$1 billion on breast augmentation alone.

Interest in the body is not new. In terms of its aesthetics, the first recorded accounts of facial reconstruction on the living were found in ancient Indian sanscrit texts, and modern surgeons can trace their history back to at least 600 B.C. when the Hindu surgeon Sushruta described an early form of rhinoplasty (Haiken, 1997: 4). In terms of its performative capacities, governments have traditionally displayed concern about the health and fitness of nations during times of war, international tension or rapid social change. The 'national efficiency' movements in America and Britain around the turn of the 20th century focused on physical and reproductive fitness, while earlier military crises in China during the mid-19th century resulted in a self-strengthening movement that scrutinized the physical adequacy of the population (Searle, 1971; De Bary, 2001; Overy, 2009). Nevertheless, the position of the body within contemporary culture is indicative of a degree of *reflexivity* towards the body and identity that is, arguably, without precedent.¹

The self-monitoring and internal dialogues that constitute this reflexivity are not the only ways in which individuals relate to contemporary bodily ideals: habitual, and emotional responses continue to overlap with, and shape the content and direction of, personal reflection (Shilling, 2008; Archer, 2010; Sayer, 2010). Nevertheless, recent developments suggest that growing numbers of people are deliberating about the health, shape, 'purity' or appearance of their own bodies as expressions of individual, group, cultural or religious identities. These deliberations have the potential to disrupt, or at least prompt a pause in or a re-evaluation of, previously taken-for-granted modes of relating to the embodied self.

This reflexive concern may be especially acute among the 'new' middle classes in the relatively affluent West (Bourdieu, 1984), for whom the body is often integral to highly differentiated and individualized identities, but it is also evident within urbanizing populations in the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere across the world (e.g. Miller, 2006; Turner and Yangwen, 2009; Yan, 2009). As Archer (2010) argues, the pace and extent of change in the current era is such that it becomes extremely difficult for individuals to pursue traditional lifestyles – through choice or as a result of external authorities – without having to address reflexively the challenge of maintaining past practices

in altered contexts. The new or renewed commitments to cultivating bodily capacities, habits, dress and identities that have followed these deliberations incorporate a diverse range of locally based but globally inflected techniques, norms and appearances associated variously with economic prosperity, sporting efficiency, religious fundamentalism, specific forms of beauty and sexual identity, counter-cultural affiliations, political revolt and a range of other social phenomena (e.g. Mahmood, 2005; Ishiguro, 2009; van Wichelen, 2009).

The body in late modernity

Any serious attempt to understand this increased interest in the body needs to comprehend the conditions that formed the context for this trend. In this respect, it is instructive to mention some of the developments accompanying the rise of modernity that have been radicalized in the contemporary globalizing era. Modernity refers to those modes of social life and organization emerging initially in post-feudal Europe that in the 20th century became increasingly global. Modernity can be understood roughly as the 'industrialized world', although it consists of several institutional dimensions possessed of specific trajectories (Giddens, 1990; Hall and Gieben, 1992). In recent decades, it has been shaped increasingly by economic, cultural, political and other developments in post-colonial societies that have led some to refer to the current era as one of 'global modernity' (e.g. Dirlik, 2007; Domingues, 2011; see also Featherstone et al., 1995). Among its many effects, the progression of this modern age facilitated an increase in the control that nation states in general, and medical professions in particular, exerted over the bodies of citizens. It led also to a reduction in the power of traditional religious authorities in the West to define and regulate bodies (Turner, 1982), if not an end to the attractions or the power of religion. Indeed, the relationship between modernity and religion is crucial for our contemporary concern with the body.

Theorists of modernity have long argued that while the modern age developed alongside a gradual desacralization of society in the West, it has failed to replace religious certainties with scientific certainties of the same order. Science may have increased our control over certain aspects of life (though, crucially, it has not conquered death), yet it has failed to provide us with values to guide our lives (Weber, 1948 [1919]). Instead, a variety of scholars have identified a gradual privatization of meaning in modernity that has left increasing numbers of individuals alone with the task of establishing and maintaining values

to make sense out of their daily lives (Berger et al., 1973; Beck, 2010). This desacralization of social life and privatization of meaning was perhaps never as widespread as these writers suggested (Woodhead, 2001; Mellor, 2004), and seems to have been concentrated largely within certain parts of Europe (Hervieu-Leger, 2001). Irrespective of the partiality and unevenness of these processes, however, the growth of cosmopolitan cities, the spread of global media such as the Internet and satellite television, and the increased internationalization of consumer culture that valorizes the body as a bearer of symbolic value, have encouraged people to become increasingly reflexive about their embodied identities (Beck et al., 1994; Roberson and Suzuki, 2002; Kim, 2010). Taken together, these developments confront people with the knowledge that there are other ways of living, looking, appearing and believing, and that there are choices to be made for those possessed of the resources and the freedom to make them (Berger, 1999). In turn, these factors have encouraged either a search for new forms of meaning, experience and expression, or a more considered and deliberative emphasis on returning to previous traditions, customs or religious 'fundamentals' as a way of maintaining a degree of self-assurance, stability and faith in a fast-changing world (Hervieu-Leger, 2000; Eade, 2010; van Wichelen, 2012).

This is an important part of the context in which the body has become, for many, increasingly constitutive of the self. There are those who have become disenchanted by traditional religious frameworks that constructed and sustained existential and ontological certainties residing *outside* the individual (Gauchet, 1998), while some have become enchanted by the possibilities associated with the rise of the body in consumer culture as a bearer of symbolic value (Coy and Garner, 2010). Others have embarked upon a search for 'new age' forms of spiritual practice (Philips and Aarons, 2007), or have adopted a renewed focus on the core practices of a faith (Mahmood, 2005). Bodily practices, commitments and appearances are central to these and to other life-choice alternatives, however, a circumstance that would appear initially to suggest that the body provides a firm foundation on which it is possible to reconstruct a reliable sense of self.

The uncertain body

These introductory comments only begin to sketch out the context in which the body has emerged as a fundamental social and academic issue in the contemporary period. Of all the factors contributing

to its visibility, however, two apparently paradoxical developments have been particularly important. *We now have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over bodies, yet are living in an age that has the potential to throw into radical doubt our knowledge of what bodies are and how we should control them.*

As a result of developments in spheres as diverse as biological reproduction, genetic engineering, stem cell research, nutrigenomics, plastic surgery and sports science, the body is no longer a 'natural given', but more a phenomenon of options and choices. These advances have increased the potential many people have to control their bodies, and to have them controlled by others. This does not mean that we all possess the resources enabling us to reconstruct radically our bodies. Indeed, bodily alterations usually take the mundane forms of diet, dress, make-up and keep-fit (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001). Furthermore, the bodily concerns of the business executive and the homeless are usually very different. Nonetheless, we are living in a media age when knowledge of these developments is widespread, and the subjective deprivation of those without the resources to control and care for their bodies (a fast growing category in the current economic context) is likely to be accentuated by possession of this knowledge. Quite simply, the body is potentially no longer subject to the constraints that once characterized its existence. Nevertheless, as well as providing growing numbers of people with the capacity to control their bodies, this situation has also stimulated among many individuals a heightened degree of uncertainty about what the body is and how it should be controlled. As science facilitates greater interventions into the body, it destabilizes our knowledge of what bodies are, running ahead of our ability to make moral judgements about how far science and medicine should be allowed to reconstruct the body.

Indeed, it would seem that the more we have been able to control and alter the body's limits, the greater has been our uncertainty about what constitutes an individual's body, and what is 'natural' about a body. For example, artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization have enabled reproduction to be distanced from the corporeal relations that traditionally defined heterosexual experience. The moral panics over 'virgin births' in Britain illustrate the threat that these developments pose to many people's sense of what is natural about the body and the family (Golden and Hope, 1991), while there have been repeated media expressions of outrage about the 'selfish' behaviour of women in their fifties and sixties undergoing fertility treatment (Perrone, 2006). The possibilities of medically assisted procreation have also stimulated an additional set of anxieties

and controversies within the Islamic world where concerns are also located within wider questions regarding religious propriety (Fortier, 2007; Inhorn, 2007).

Advances in transplant surgery and virtual reality exacerbate this uncertainty by threatening to collapse the boundaries that traditionally existed between bodies, and between technology and the body (Bell and Kennedy, 2000; Munster, 2006; Miller, 2011). This has important consequences. As Turner notes, in a future society where implants and transplants are widespread and highly developed, 'the hypothetical puzzles in classical philosophy about identities and parts will be issues of major legal and political importance. Can I be held responsible for the actions of a body which is substantially not my own body?' (Turner, 1992a: 37). These developments also promise to increase those dilemmas surrounding the *ownership* of bodies that have been raised in relation to such issues as abortion and surrogacy, and the general commodification of bodies (Diprose, 1994; Scheper-Hughes, 2001; Twine, 2011).

Body projects

In this time of uncertainty, knowledge about what bodies are, increasingly takes the form of hypotheses: 'claims which may very well be true, but which are in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned' (Giddens, 1991: 3). This situation is consequential for the modern individual's identity – their sense of self as understood and manifest in terms of their own embodied biography. In the West in particular, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity in the process of becoming; a *project* to be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual's self-identity. We can trace individuals' attempts to shape and mould their bodies back to the early Christian era and even to Classical Antiquity (Brown, 1988; Foucault, 1988). However, modern body projects differ from how the flesh was decorated, inscribed and altered in traditional societies as they involve a reflexivity that is more frequently cut adrift from customary models of socially acceptable bodies forged through communal rituals (Rudofsky, 1986 [1971]; cf. Sweetman, 2012). Body projects still vary along social lines, especially in the case of gender, but there has in recent years been a proliferation of the ways in which women and men develop their bodies.

Recognizing that the body has become a project for many modern persons entails accepting that its appearance, size, shape and contents are potentially open to reconstruction in line with its owner's

designs. Treating the body as a project does not necessarily entail full-time preoccupation with its transformation, although it may do so. However, it does involve individuals being conscious of, and actively concerned about, the management and appearance of their bodies. This involves practical recognition of the significance of bodies as both personal resources and social symbols that 'give off' messages about identity. In this context, bodies become malleable entities to be shaped and honed by the vigilance and hard work of their owners. As Mol and Law (2004: 47) suggest, moreover, the typical experience of inhabiting such a body is not one of 'a body-that-hangs-together, naturally, all by itself', but is rather a sense that keeping the embodied self whole 'must be achieved, both beneath the skin and beyond'.

Perhaps the most common example of the body as a project exists in the unprecedented attention given to the construction of healthy bodies (Shilling, 2002a). At a time when health is threatened increasingly by *global* dangers, we are exhorted to take *individual* responsibility for our bodies by engaging in self-care regimes directed towards maintaining our health or managing our existing medical conditions (especially by governments seeking to shift the costs of welfare away from the state) (Balfe, 2009). Heart disease, cancer and other illnesses are portrayed as avoidable for individuals who eat correctly, stop smoking and exercise sufficiently. Self-care regimes require individuals to accept the notion that the body is a project whose interiors and exteriors can be maintained as fully functioning and optimized in terms of their efficiency (Rose, 2007). These regimes promote an image of the body as an island of security in a global system characterized by multiple risks (Beck, 1992). Again, such scrutiny of the physical self is not new – as evident in Foucault's (1988) discussion of techniques of the self in ancient Rome – but while it occurred traditionally within a pursuit of broader *ethical* goals, these types of contemporary body projects are steered more frequently by an *instrumental* rationality linked often to broader governmental regulatory regimes (Brewis and Grey, 2008).

Health-based body projects are not simply about preventing disease. They are also concerned with making us feel good or less worried about how our bodies *look*. Health has become associated increasingly with appearances and the 'presentation of self' (Goffman, 1969 [1959]). These concerns have been facilitated by the production of an almost limitless number of self-help books, dietary supplements and exercise plans. Consumer goods compete to make people's bodies look and feel reliable and sensuous, and provide programmes for

people to achieve skin quality and muscle tone which give off messages about health by *looking* healthy and youthful (Banner, 1983; Dittmar, 2010). Media and advertising cultures are key here, seeking to promote their products not only via images of good looking bodies but also by employing actors who radiate health through the character and intensity of the movements and emotions they display (Featherstone, 2010). As Anna Munster (2006: 18, 142) suggests, these displays encourage affectual responses from us based upon the distance that exists between the experience of 'being in' our own body and the promise of a body *differently* mapped and imagined through the media. Such factors have contributed to a culture in which the influence of health-based body projects is such that even those who smoke and drink heavily, and consume other drugs, find it difficult not to reflect on how such actions may damage their health and appearance. In an era characterized in and increasingly beyond the West by a political emphasis on 'self-help' and 'personal responsibility', and a cultural valuation of the 'body beautiful', those who engage in such habits are the new moral deviants. The pervasive influence on us of what Robert Crawford (1987) termed 'the new health consciousness' is not, however, the only way in which the body has become a project.

Plastic surgery provides individuals with the opportunity for a more radical way of reconstructing their bodies in line with notions of youthfulness, femininity, masculinity and even 'celebrity' (Elliott, 2012). Face-lifts, liposuction, tummy tucks, nose and chin 'jobs' are just a small selection of the operations and procedures open to people with enough money wanting to reconstruct their bodies (Throsby, 2008; Parker, 2010; Edmonds, 2011). Millions of breast implant operations have been performed in the United States since the early 1960s on women seeking to achieve bodies that are more 'feminine', despite having to negotiate the risks and potential social stigma sometimes associated with opting for this surgery (Boulton and Malacrida, 2012). Increasing numbers of men have followed their example by having chest implants in search of a more muscular appearance. Penile engorgement operations are also available for those willing to pay for a more 'fully masculine' body (Grant, 1992). Plastic surgery can be seen as a form of 'identity work', enabling individuals to engage in 'performances of self' (Gimlin, 2010), but it also helps to raise the question 'What is the body?' by enabling people to add to or subtract from their fat, flesh and bones. In this respect, television, newspapers and magazines have featured a number of programmes and articles about people who, by undergoing multiple

operations, become obsessed with changing the appearances and boundaries of their bodies in line with some idealized version of the self. The issue of plastic surgery also illustrates one of the ways in which body projects and globalization have become closely interrelated as a result of the large and growing numbers of people who travel abroad not only for medical operations and transplants, but also for cosmetic procedures directed towards enhancing their appearance. Medical tourism, in all its varieties, has become big business (Hancock, 2006; Scheper-Hughes, 2011). In Thailand alone, more than a million foreigners annually undergo medical treatment in a country that has become one of the world leaders for many cosmetic surgical procedures including LASIK eye surgery, face-lifts and sex-reassignment surgery (Wilson, 2011: 123–4).

For those not willing or able to undergo the risks involved in surgery, there is always bodybuilding: an activity that used to reside on the deviant margins of the exercise industry. Bodybuilding is a good example of a body project precisely because the quality and size of the muscles achieved by bodybuilders challenges accepted notions of what is natural about male and female bodies. At a time when machines are increasingly taking over the manual work traditionally carried out by men in factories, and when women continue to challenge the limited roles of housewife and mother, the construction and display of ‘unnaturally’ large and defined bodies allows people to make strong, public and personal statements about who they are (Bunsell and Shilling, 2011). As one of the respondents in Trix Rosen’s (1983: 72) study of women bodybuilders remarked, ‘When I look in the mirror I see somebody who’s finding herself, who has said once and for all it doesn’t really matter what role society said I should play. I can do anything I want and feel proud about doing it.’

The projects of health, plastic surgery and bodybuilding illustrate the opportunities and limitations that accompany the tightening relationship between the body and self-identity. Such corporeal investments provide people with a means of self-expression and a way of potentially feeling good and increasing control over their bodies. It is one of the paradoxes of modernity that if one feels unable to exert influence over an increasingly complex society, one can at least affect the size, shape and appearance of one’s body. The benefits of this opportunity may be qualified in the absence of ultimate criteria for deciding *how* the body should be treated, or even what the body is, but it would be wrong to dismiss the pleasures and other advantages accruing to people as a result of the rise of the body as a project.

Investment in the body is also limited, and in one sense the effort expended by individuals is doomed to failure: the inescapable reality of death can appear particularly disturbing to modern people with an identity centred upon the body. What could signal to us more effectively the limitations of our concern with the young and fit, ideally feminine or masculine body than the brute facts of its thickening waistline, sagging flesh and inevitable death? Bodies are limited not only in the sense that they die, but also in frequently refusing to be moulded in accordance with our intentions. Susie Orbach (1988 [1978], 2009) and Kim Chernin (1983, 1994) are just two of the many writers who have pointed to the difficulties involved in changing body shape by dieting, and Emily Martin (1989 [1987]) has demonstrated how women frequently experience their bodies as beyond control. As Young (2005: 49, 52) argues, women's bodies are rarely the 'pure medium' of 'projects', as evident by the fluctuating boundaries and 'redoubling up of the body' during pregnancy, and any attempt to portray them as such risks echoing the continued Western philosophical legacy that views 'humanity as spirit' (see also Teman, 2009). It is also clear that attempts to change the size and shape of our bodies are risky (e.g. increasing evidence attests to the dangers associated with plastic surgery and frequent dieting). People are experiencing anxiety about their body shape and weight at younger ages, and studies conducted during the last couple of decades suggest that up to 80 per cent of 9-year-old girls have been on diets (Hall, 1992; Bordo, 2003: 270; see also Grogan, 2007). Concerned with what has been termed the 'obesity epidemic' (Gard and Wright, 2005), governments have sought to monitor the weight of school children, increase their exercise levels, and enhance education about nutrition (e.g. French and Crabbe, 2010). However, research suggests that teachers and pupils have at times interpreted these developments through a metric of 'corporeal perfection' that associates health with slimness and is potentially damaging (Evans et al., 2005). It is perhaps not surprising that our contemporary obsession with the body has been associated with a worrying rise in eating disorders among children as well as adults (Gordon, 2001; Grogan, 2007; Bordo, 2012).

Another limitation in the rise of the body as a project is the potential for images of the desirable body to get harnessed to pre-existing social inequalities. The manner in which the body has become a project for some women, for example, would appear to be more reflective of male designs and fantasies than an expression of individuality, and it is no surprise that the large majority of cosmetic

surgery operations continue to be performed on women. There are national and cultural variations in images of perfect femininity, but this does not mean to say that these contrasting designs are any more attainable. Referring to the defining characteristics of female beauty in Japan, for example, Spielvogel (2003: 158) notes that '[a]chieving perfectly balanced proportions is just as anatomically impossible as metamorphosing into the top-heavy Barbie-esque figure idealized in the US.' These inequalities extend into other areas too, accentuating long-standing forms of what I have referred to as *corporeal imperialism*, the valuation and prioritization of certain types of skin colour and physiognomic appearance over others (Fanon, 1984 [1952]; Sayad, 2004). Examples of the continued existence of racial inequalities in body projects include the popularity of skin lightening creams in India, and the influence of White western norms in the types of cosmetic surgery chosen (e.g. eyelid crease insertion) by Asian-American women (Kaw, 2003: 184–5; ASPS, 2011b).

In these senses our bodies are *constraining*, as well as *facilitating*, while they are alive and not simply because they die, and can be harnessed to social inequalities as well as forming the basis of positive, enabling experiences. Nevertheless, Zygmunt Bauman's point about the relationship between the body and death is applicable generally to our concern with body projects. As he argues in the case of health, the modern obsession with the body 'is an attempt to belie the ultimate limits of the body by breaking, successively, its *currently* encountered, *specific* limitations' (Bauman, 1992a: 18). This pragmatic focus enables many people to defer temporarily worrying existential questions about the *ultimate* limitation of the body (death), about *why* the body should have become so significant to our self-identity, and about *what* the body is. In the context of these issues, it is timely to identify a fourth example of body projects.

Traditional forms of religious influence may have declined, but there has in recent years been an increase in those *choosing* to style their bodies in accordance with religious prescriptions (McGinty, 2006; Shilling and Mellor, 2007). During the last decades of the 20th century, the expansion of Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity, the spread of Islam, and the rise of other forms of religious and spiritual devotion prompted growing numbers of people to choose to develop their diet, dress and other bodily habits on the basis of religious priorities (Anway, 1995; Berger, 1999; Poloma, 2003). In terms of our concern with body projects, this trend can be analysed as an attempt to connect the frailty of the body to practices that have as their end the *transcendence* of the earthly flesh; a

commitment that seeks to end the contingency and fragility of body projects, and that poses a challenge to the rationality and relativism pervasive within reflexive, late modern dealings with the flesh.

Sociology and the body

For these and other reasons examined in Chapter 2 the body has become an important social issue. However, it is only since the mid-1980s that it became central to theoretical debates in Europe and Australia, while there still exists a degree of ambivalence towards the subject in North America despite the formation of a section on the body in the American Sociological Association. Contemporary explanations for this late 'arrival' tend to suggest that it can be explained on the basis of the *disembodied* approach which classical sociology adopted towards its subject matter (e.g. Turner, 1992a). Having been influenced profoundly by Cartesian thought, sociology followed a longstanding tradition in philosophy by accepting a mind/body dichotomy and focusing on the mind as that which defines humans as social beings.

There is value in this explanation, which describes accurately how a significant strand of sociology approached the mind/body relationship, but it does less than justice to sociology's specific dealings with human embodiment as a subject in its own right. Equally unsatisfactory is the view that the body can simply be 'recovered' by revisiting the classics (Williams and Bendelow, 1998). At the very least, a substantial work of elaboration and development is required to fashion comprehensive classical sociological theories of the body. In contrast to these two approaches, I suggest that classical sociology displayed a *dual approach* to the body: instead of being neglected completely, the body has historically been something of an *absent presence* in sociology.

The body has been absent from classical sociology in so far as the discipline rarely focused in a sustained manner on the body as an area of investigation in its own right. The discipline's concern with the body has too frequently been implicit rather than explicit, and has tended to focus selectively on aspects of human embodiment. For example, traditional sociological theory seldom takes into account the fact that we have fleshy bodies that allow us to taste, smell, touch and exchange bodily fluids (Connell and Dowsett, 1992). Sociology has also explored language and consciousness without recognizing that these capacities are themselves embodied. As Norbert Elias (1991b) argued, our capacities for language and consciousness are contained within, are part of, and are limited by our

bodies. A related point concerns classical sociology's sporadic recognition of the body as integral to human agency. It is our bodies that allow us to act, to intervene in, and to alter the flow of daily life, and I would suggest that it is impossible to have an adequate theory of human agency without taking into account the reflexive, thoughtful and practical potentialities facilitated by our embodiment (see also Damasio, 1994). In a very important sense, acting people are acting bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Classical sociology's concern with the structure and functioning of societies and the nature of human action, however, inevitably led it to deal with important aspects of human embodiment: its approach was rarely entirely disembodied. Karl Marx (1954 [1887]) was concerned with the assimilation of the body into capitalist technology, and also had an early interest in shame as a variable in revolutionary action (Marx, 1997: 204). Georg Simmel (1990 [1907], 1950) wrote about the embodied dispositions that propelled people towards others, and the social emotions that helped maintain relationships, as well as the effects of the money economy in eroding these emotions. Max Weber (1948 [1915], 1985 [1904–05]) analysed the rationalization of the body, and the 'shelters' from physical instrumentalism provided by art, friendship, love and eroticism. Emile Durkheim (1995 [1912]) viewed the body as a source of, as well as a location for, those sacred phenomena that bound individuals into moral wholes through the generation and absorption of effervescent energies (Shilling and Mellor, 2011). Indeed, the implicit presence of the body in sociology is illustrated by the fact that much recent work on the subject has been able to draw productively on the legacy of classical sociology. Pierre Bourdieu's writings on the body, for instance, reflect a Marxian concern with social class and social reproduction, a Durkheimian interest in the social and cognitive functions of 'collective representations' and 'primitive classifications', and a Weberian focus on the particular styles of life and attributions of honour or dishonour that define status groups (Brubaker, 1985).

Defending classical sociology from accusations that it adopted an entirely disembodied approach to its subject matter is not an endorsement of its treatment of the body. In this respect, it is important to mention recent social theorists who sought to overcome the dual approach that sociology traditionally adopted to the body. Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault placed the body at the core of their respective analyses of the 'interaction order' and disciplinary systems, and exerted considerable influence on contemporary analyses of the body as a *socially constructed* phenomenon. Rather than

overcoming fully the deficiencies of classical sociology, however, their work can be seen as *reproducing in a different form* the dual approach sociology adopted towards the body. Social constructionist views of the body such as these tell us much about how society has invaded, shaped, classified and made the body meaningful, but we learn much less about what the body is and how it assumes such social importance. The body is named as a *theoretical space*, but remains relatively neglected as an object and subject of analysis. Indeed, it would probably be more accurate to categorize the more extreme social constructionist views of the body as *symptoms*, rather than analyses, of our modern concern with the body.

It should be clear from this that social constructionist approaches have provided us with less than ideal views of the body. It is all very well saying that the body is socially constructed, but this tells us little about the specific character of the body. What, exactly, is being constructed? Instead of addressing this question, and allowing us to understand how social forces mould our physical selves, constructionism has tended to evacuate the embodied agent from social theory. In the case of feminism, for example, Susan Hekman (2008: 88–90) has argued that the adoption of constructionist perspectives came at ‘too high a price’, resulting in immaterial conceptions of reality that brought about ‘The Incredible Shrinking Woman’ (Di Stefano, 1987). In this respect, I agree to a degree with Turner’s argument that we need a foundationalist view of the body (Turner, 1992a), though I would want to supplement this with an emphasis on the need to acknowledge how these foundations change over time (see Mellor and Shilling, 1997). To begin to achieve an adequate analysis of the body, we need to regard it as a material, physical and biological phenomenon irreducible to contemporary social processes or classifications. Furthermore, our senses, knowledgeability and capability to act are integrally related to the fact that we are embodied beings. Social relations profoundly affect the development of our bodies in almost every respect; in terms of their size and shape and in terms of how we see, hear, touch, smell and think (Duroche, 1990; Elias, 1991b), but bodies cannot be ‘explained away’ by these relations. Human bodies are taken up and transformed as a result of living in society, but remain material, physical and biological entities possessed of specific capacities, formed as they have been through socio-natural processes within the *longue duree* of human evolution. Even when inhabiting the outer reaches of cyberspace, it is still our senses that structure and facilitate our experiences.

Embodying sociology

This introductory discussion leads me to the five main aims of this book. First, I seek to provide a distinctive analysis of the position and treatment of the body in sociology, an analysis that suggests the body has been an *absent presence* in the discipline.

Second, I offer a critical overview of the main perspectives and theories relevant to the sociology of the body by exploring what they do and do not allow us to say about the body in society. What do they reveal about the body, and what are their silences? In Parson's (1968 [1937]: 17) terms, what are the 'residual categories', the facts or observations that cannot be explained by the main 'positively defined categories' of each approach? Does a particular theory recognize the body's importance to human agency? Can it explain the changing historical importance of the body? Does it help us analyse why the body has become such a concern for many modern people? Will a particular perspective allow us to examine why so many social systems appear still to reinforce the view that women's bodies are inferior to men's bodies? This concern with positive and residual categories facilitates an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of particular perspectives on the body.

Third, I want to go beyond description and analysis of existing perspectives by developing a more satisfactory theoretical approach to our embodiment. This builds on the gains already made in sociology and philosophical anthropology, and I work towards it by developing the most useful characteristics of the perspectives outlined in the early chapters of this book. As I describe and assess existing work, I also seek to develop its insights in a significantly new direction by suggesting that the body is best conceptualized as an unfinished biological and social phenomenon possessed of its own emergent properties (including those that enable individuals to walk, talk, think, supplement themselves with technological additions, and alter their environment); properties that can also be transformed, within certain limits, as a result of its participation in society. These emergent qualities are founded upon evolutionary processes that have been ongoing for thousands of years – involving the interrelationship of social, biological, technological and environmental factors – but the species capacities with which we are equipped at birth, such as the potential for upright walking, speech and tool use, require social and cultural activation (Elias, 1991b). Our embodied being is not just a location for society and culture, however, but *forms a basis for* and *shapes* our relationships and creations. For example,

our embodiment means that we cannot be *fully* physically present in two places at once (despite the enhanced possibilities that new media provide for a mediated presence in multiple locations), provides us with the capacity for speech and movement, and is possessed of various needs and drives that propel us into making contact with others. Social relations take up and transform our embodied capacities in all manner of ways, but they still have a basis in human bodies.

It is this simultaneously biological and social quality that makes the body at once such an obvious, and yet such an elusive phenomenon. On the one hand, we 'all know' that while the body consists of flesh, muscles, bones and blood, and contains species-specific capacities that identify us as humans, even the most 'natural' features of the body change over a lifetime. As we get older our faces change, our eyesight deteriorates, our bones become brittle, and our flesh starts to sag, while the sizes, shapes and heights of bodies vary according to the care and nutrition they receive. Our upbringing as girls and boys who walk, talk, look, argue, fight and urinate differently is informed by the body training we receive from our parents and others, and the body techniques common to our culture (Mauss, 1973 [1934]; Haug, 1987).

In promoting this general approach to embodiment as an emergent phenomena – possessed of its own properties and capacities that continue over time to interact with and change within its surroundings – I also suggest that the sociology of the body needs to say something about the mind/body relationship. My preference, as will become clear, is for a view of the mind and body as inextricably linked as a result of the mind's location within the body. However, I shall not be exploring in any detail *philosophical* debates on this subject. Instead, drawing on the work of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and R. W. Connell, and engaging with Antonio Damasio's neuroscientific discussions of the conscious and non-conscious ways in which embodied beings process information, I consider the *sociological* implications of the close relationship that exists between the categories and classificatory schemes we work with, and our bodily existence. This is accomplished through explicit discussion of the issues in Chapter 5, and an implicit concern with the sociological consequences of the mind's embodiment in Chapters 6 to 8. While sociologists are rightly concerned about the reductionist tendencies in much neuroscience – an approach which often reduces the mind to the brain (Crossley, 2001a) – certain of its exponents enable us to think creatively about the neurological

processes that may inform social actions and interactions (Damasio, 2010; Franks, 2010).

In establishing the outlines of this emergentist perspective towards the body, Chapter 5 seeks to move beyond the limitations of both naturalistic and social constructionist approaches. I briefly consider the role of human evolution in providing us with species-specific capacities, and draw on R.W. Connell's and Peter Freund's important analyses of the 'gendered body' and the 'emotional body'. Taken together, and supplemented by feminist contributions, their work suggests how social inequalities become embodied in women and men. These gendered bodies then form the basis for subsequent social relationships, partly because of the ways in which they give rise to particular conceptions about the body. In Chapters 6 and 7, I also make the more controversial argument that the work of Pierre Bourdieu and, more especially, that of Norbert Elias can be interpreted as major theories of the body in society.

The writings of Bourdieu and Elias have been interpreted in many ways, and my fourth main aim in this book is to suggest that at their core exist specific views of the body that enable us to explore creatively the sociological consequences of human embodiment. Bourdieu's writings can be read as providing us with a theory of the body as a form of *physical capital*, while Elias's work elaborates what I refer to as a theory of the *civilized body*. Both authors provide sociologists with powerful, contrasting approaches to the body that help overcome the discipline's dual approach to the subject. It is the work of Elias, however, that does most to move us away from considering the body as an object towards a concern with interdependent embodied subjects *as a whole*.

Bourdieu's writings highlight the pervasive commodification of the body (a commodification that harnesses people's identities to the social values attributed to the sizes, shapes and appearances of their bodies) but also deal with issues such as taste, dispositions and the relationship between our embodied socialization and our cultural values and beliefs. In contrast, Elias reveals how our bodies have become historically increasingly individualized, serving phenomenologically to separate us from others. He combines this with an analysis of how conflicts that used to occur *between* bodies now often occur *within* the embodied individual as a result of the rising demands of affect control. These processes leave us alone with our bodies; investing more effort in managing and monitoring them, yet losing the satisfaction people once gained from satiating their desires. Elias has more to say about the 'lived body' than Bourdieu; about

how we experience our environment through our embodiment, but both explore the modern tendency for us to adopt a heightened reflexivity towards our bodies and why, in this context, the prospect of death can appear so disturbing.

This brings me to the fifth and final goal of this study: to promote the analysis of death as important to the sociology of the body. In contrast to many existing studies, I suggest that it is only by taking into account the prospect of death that we can understand fully the conditions associated with living as an embodied person. In contrast to many of the secular assumptions underpinning sociological accounts of death, however, I also take seriously religious views of physical death as a transition to another form of existence rather than as 'point zero', the end. These enable us to appreciate how the contingencies and limitations of body projects can be mitigated, at least potentially, for those who structure their this-worldly existence on the basis of other-worldly criteria.

Outlining the body

In what follows, Chapter 2 explores the body's dual status in sociology and the rise of the body as an object of study. After examining the body's absent presence in contemporary and classical sociology, it identifies reasons for the growing popularity of the body in sociology. In Chapters 3 and 4, I examine the two most important traditions of thought that contemporary studies of the body have drawn on and reacted against. Chapter 3 focuses on naturalistic views of the body. The 'naturalistic approach' is an umbrella term referring to a wide range of views that conceptualize the body as the biological base on which arise the superstructures of self-identity and society. Society springs from the body and is constrained by the body that is, in turn, formed by the unchanging realities of nature. Most usually associated with sociobiology, naturalistic views have a long, varied history and influenced, mostly negatively, contemporary sociological conceptions of the body. Naturalistic views have been, and remain, influential in legitimizing social inequalities, but are coming under increased scientific criticism as a result of the anti-determinist sensitivities of the 'new genetics' (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2007).

Most recent sociological work on the body has reacted against naturalistic approaches and Chapter 4 examines constructionist views of the body. Instead of being the natural base of society, the body is here seen as the *outcome* of social forces and technological relations. Five main sources have influenced constructionist views of the body

in sociology: the anthropology of Mary Douglas; the writings of social historians; the analyses of Michel Foucault; the studies of Erving Goffman; and the more recent contributions of actor network theorists (ANT). Chapter 4 focuses on Foucault and Goffman, interrogates two contemporary theories of the body that build on their writings (Turner's theory of 'bodily order' and Frank's 'action problems' approach), and examines critically the analytical potential of ANT.

As mentioned above, Chapter 5 makes the case for a bridge to be built between the naturalistic view of the body as a biological phenomenon and the constructionist view of the body as infinitely malleable, and develops this by utilizing the work of R.W. Connell and Peter Freund; two writers whose analyses of the gendered body and emotional body go some way toward meeting this goal. I also argue that their work can be developed in a direction that helps overcome the problematic mind/body and nature/culture divisions that have characterized the body literature, before extending their concerns with the body and social inequality into the area of bodywork. Chapters 6 and 7 build on Chapter 5 by examining how Bourdieu and Elias enable us to turn a general approach towards the body into a theory of the body in society. These writers provide us with two of the most powerful theories of embodiment in existence.

Chapter 8 brings together many of the themes of this study by focusing on the relationship between the body, self-identity and death. Sociology has been concerned traditionally with life, rather than with the subject of death, but I suggest that the importance of the body in the contemporary age can only be understood by exploring the modern individual's confrontation with physical finitude. In a time that has witnessed a growing association between the body and self-identity, our bodies come simultaneously to assume great importance, as carriers of life, but can also appear acutely fragile and insignificant, as mortal entities that will inevitably die. In this context, the resurgence of religious affiliation that occurred in much of the world since the end of the 20th century raises important questions about future orientations to the body.

Finally, the Afterword analyses the fate of body projects – a theme pervading the previous chapters in this book – in the context of recent technological innovations, explores alternative conceptions of the body and self-identity, and seeks to develop further the broad emergentist approach towards our embodied selves adopted in this book. This involves reappraising some of the major theories examined in Chapters 3 to 9, and explicating the parameters of corporeal realism as a basis for the development of body studies.

Note

- 1 By 'reflexivity' I am referring here to the ability of embodied individuals to reflect upon their own biological constitution, appearance, sense of self, actions, and relationships with others; to treat themselves as both subject and object (Archer, 2010). In sociology, this capacity is usually explicated with reference to Mead's (1962 [1934]) 'I/Me' distinction; a distinction that suggests we are able to think about and hold internal conversations with ourselves by 'taking the role of', and adopting perspectives held by, other people. Reflexivity can involve drawing upon normative or minority opinions held in one's own community, and can be stimulated by various factors ranging from watching cultures and opinions remote from one's own on satellite television, to becoming aware of one's internal physical reactions and responses to events. Acknowledging the importance of reflexive orientations to the body based upon our creative responses to other views and perspectives does *not* entail that the mind is somehow separate from the body (Crossley, 2005), nor does it exclude the importance of emotions and habits to the conclusions we draw from this reflexivity (Shilling, 2008: 8–43). As Norbert Elias (2000 [1939]) suggests, the extent to which people immerse themselves in reflexive considerations varies and is also dependent in part upon historical, social and cultural patterns of socialization, and the degree to which individuals experience themselves as separate from others.