

Culture/Nature

Helen Thomas

Sociology's concern to establish itself as a legitimate scientific mode of investigation in the late nineteenth century centred on a rejection of the positivist claim that human activity could be understood in terms of a causal biological explanation. At the same time, sociology maintained that the natural world is moulded by society and is transformed through human behaviour and social processes. In other words, the social is not reducible to the biological, and the natural world is constituted through the social. The clearest example of this position can be found in Émile Durkheim's approach to sociology. Durkheim (1982) maintained that society constituted a reality in its own right. He argued that in order to establish itself as a credible scientific discipline, sociology had to have its own subject matter which would delineate it from the other sciences such as biology and psychology. Although Durkheim considered that sociology should conform to the canons laid down by the other more established natural sciences, he insisted that it should have its own order of facts – *social facts*. Social facts, for Durkheim, have three characteristics: they are *external* to the individual, they are *typical* throughout society, and they *constrain* the individual to act in particular ways. Sociology's task, Durkheim argued, is to examine, classify and provide a causal explanation of the emergence and establishment of social facts and the function they perform in maintaining social order. Although Durkheim in his early work, in line with the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, sought to establish that social facts were subject to laws, it is important to note that he maintained that the law-like characteristics of social facts had their own specificity, which was constituted by and through the social, and these were not

reducible to physical or biological laws. The idea of nature in Durkheim finds its expression in the *nature of society*, as the following quotation demonstrates:

It was not sufficient to establish that social facts had their own laws. It had also to be made clear that they have their own laws, specific in nature and comparable to physical or biological laws, without being directly reducible to the latter. (Durkheim 1982: 178)

The opposition between the world of nature and that of culture also finds an expression in the German tradition of sociology through, for example, the work of Max Weber and the neo-Kantian tradition of thought. Positivism, which took its starting point from the natural sciences, did not gain such a strong hold in German cultural and historical thought as it did in France and Britain in the nineteenth century. The idealist philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) retained a dominant influence in German cultural thought from the middle of the eighteenth century through to the Revolution of 1848. F.W.D. Hegel's (1770–1831) philosophy, generally regarded as the culminating point in the development in post-Kantian thought, was based on the idealist premise that the true reality of our knowledge of the world is founded on the 'spirit' or the 'idea' as opposed to sensory perception, as the English empiricist philosophers such as David Hume (1711–76) had postulated. This emphasis on the spirit or the *Geist* separated Germany from the mainstream of European social thought. In German historical and social thought the world of the natural sciences and the world of human activity were presumed to be radically different. The natural sciences were concerned with the phenomenal world, while the cultural sciences dealt in the spiritual world (consciousness). Facts were the stuff of the natural sciences, while values were the stuff of the cultural sciences. As a result of the emphasis on the *Geist*, the Germans came to draw a sharp distinction between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the cultural or historical sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Because the two scientific fields had different objects, it was argued that the cultural sciences could not take their starting point from the natural sciences as the positivists had advocated. This left the exponents of the cultural sciences with the vexing problem of how to develop an approach towards an understanding of human (spiritual) behaviour that was not grounded in a mechanistic or naturalistic model. As H. Stuart Hughes (1974) notes, the result was the development of the method of interpretive understanding, or *verstehen*. The method of *verstehen* was formulated explicitly by the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey in the 1880s but it received its greater elaboration in Weber's sociology which was directed towards an interpretive understanding of social action with a view to coming to an understanding of their significant causes. Although Weber was concerned to generate a scientific sociology, he nevertheless maintained the strict fact/value

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

distinction which is the cornerstone of the *Geisteswissenschaften* tradition. The rigid separation between the social and the biological and individual psychology which lies at the heart of the classical tradition of sociology, for the most part, has formed the basis of modern sociology. As Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley have noted:

Sociologists have, on the whole, energetically denied the importance of genetic, physical and individual psychological factors in human social life. In so doing they have reinforced and theorized a traditional cultural opposition between nature and culture. Social relations can even be seen as a *denial* of nature. (1982: 22)

There are a number of topics that could be used to explore further the cultural opposition to nature that has continued to haunt foundationalist approaches to sociology (see, for example, the chapters 'Sex/Gender' and 'Culture/Nature' in this volume). The topic under discussion in this chapter, however, is that of the body. The subject of the body as a topic of inquiry in its own right, until quite recently, has largely been ignored by sociology. That is, sociology has paid scant attention to the singularly most apparent fact of human life, which is that human beings *have* bodies that are both physically delimiting and enabling and that, to a certain extent, they *are* bodies (Turner 1984). It is, after all, through our bodies that we feel, see, smell, touch, speak and experience the world.

Although the fact of embodiment was not placed at the centre of the discourses of sociology, not all the human sciences ignored the body or kept it hidden from direct view. The study of the body, like the study of dance in society (Thomas 1995), has been the focus of attention of anthropologists and ethnographers since the late nineteenth century (see Polhemus 1975 for a detailed discussion of the various phases of development in the anthropology of the body). A consideration of the reasons why the body was featured in the discourses of anthropology as opposed to sociology in the first instance will shed some light on the nature/culture division within sociology.

According to Brian Turner (1991) there are a number of related reasons why anthropology developed a research interest in the body while sociology did not. In its initial stages in the nineteenth century, anthropology was concerned to consider the universal state of humanity. That is, philosophical anthropology within the context of European colonialism and cultural imperialism needed to consider what human beings had in common (the universals) in relation to wide ranging cultural differences of social relations. As a result the ontological importance of the fact of embodiment became a site of universality. This led to a consideration of what were the minimum social and cultural conditions required for the maintenance and continuation of the species. Thus, in part, according to Turner (1991) the body featured in the initial stages of anthropology

because it provided one answer to the vexing question of cultural relativism. That is, despite the wide ranging observable differences between cultures, human beings at root were deemed to share certain common characteristics which made the survival of the species possible. The concern, here, then, centred on the age-old question of 'What is man (*sic*)?' The answers ranged from 'man' as a tool maker to 'man' as a creature with a memory, language, culture etc. (Turner 1991: 2).

Another reason why anthropology generated a strong research interest in the body, as Turner (1991: 6) demonstrates, lies in the fact that often in premodern societies the body (the decoration or mutilation of it) plays a central role in the rite of passage between different social statuses. The tattoos, scarification, body decorations etc. are public signifiers of the individual's status, age, family, sex, and tribal affiliation. Although it is also the case that in modern cultural formations dress, demeanour and cosmetics are important indicators of lifestyle and social class, and women are constantly being invited to transform themselves by doing something to their bodies, the body in premodern societies is a more universal site for public symbolization through ritual, and anthropology did start out in the nineteenth century by studying premodern societies.

The incorporation of evolutionary theory, particularly social Darwinism, into anthropology in the nineteenth century provided yet another line of development which contributed to the anthropological study of the body. Charles Darwin's (1969) study of *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, first published in 1872, in which he argued that bodily expression is either innate or biologically determined and that it is cross-culturally universal, has been influential in the development of anthropology, although this influence has largely been of the negative kind. As Polhemus (1975) has pointed out, responses to Darwin's thesis led to the development of a nature/culture debate on the character of bodily expression within anthropology, namely the **universality** of bodily expression versus its cultural variability. The universalist position maintained that bodily expression is the same in all societies whilst the relativist position claimed that it is culturally variable. Anthropologists and ethnographers from the American tradition of 'cultural' anthropology in particular, which has its roots in Tylor's (1958) concept of culture, were concerned with the cultural aspects of human behaviour and therefore tended to adopt the cultural variability thesis (Hall 1969; Kroeber 1952; La Barre 1978). The followers of Darwin's position, however, were interested in the natural (non-social) aspects of behaviour and in order to establish the validity of their proposition they adopted the universality thesis. Over a period of time, this nature/culture debate developed into a second related debate, namely the *learned* versus the *innate* character of bodily expression, or the *nurture*/nature dichotomy. Two major landmarks in the **nurture** side of the debate published in the 1940s were David Efron's *Gesture, Race and Culture* (1972) and Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's *Balinese Character* (1942). These

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

studies influenced subsequent pioneering work in the field in the 1960s, such as Ray Birdwhistell's (1973) study of 'kinesics' (routine everyday movement) and Edward Hall's (1969) work on 'proxemics' (the study of interpersonal social space). Hall's work focused on the 'language of space' to demonstrate the congruences and differences in proxemic behaviour between different cultures. Birdwhistell attempted to treat the body movement as a distinct mode of communication which is learnt within a particular cultural context. Neo-Darwinists such as Paul Ekman (1977) and Ireneaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1972) on the other hand, rejected the nurture argument. On the basis of comparative studies of animals and humans they have argued that there is a high degree of association between the primary (natural) affects of anger, fear, surprise, disgust, happiness and sadness and the similar facial gestures that express them and that these are not culturally variable. The neo-Darwinist position also finds expression in more popular contemporary contributions such as Desmond Morris's *Intimate Behaviour* (1979). The notion of the 'human animal' exemplified in the naturalistic approach to the body has had an impact on and to a certain extent has reinforced contemporary popular perceptions of the body as the biological basis upon which the individual and culture are built (Thomas 1995). Social hierarchies and social divisions between groups and individuals, in this view, are not socially constructed but are an outcome of natural, biological or genetic programming. This form of reasoning also finds expression in the recent development of sociobiology (see Hirst and Woolley 1982: 66–89). However, as Turner (1991) notes, physical anthropology as a strand of anthropology has been slow to develop in comparison with the culturalist approach, and the most dominant theoretical trends in both anthropology and sociology have been concerned to focus on culture as opposed to nature.

There are several reasons why classical sociology did *not* give rise to a sociology of the body. To begin with, classical sociological theorists like Weber, Durkheim, Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Tönnies were concerned to define and understand the character of industrial urban societies rather than the differences between human beings in terms of social evolution. The more general philosophical question which sociology posed centred around the problem of *social order* in industrial societies. That is, it asked how it was possible for people to survive in a rapidly changing and alien social environment. For Weber, for example, industrial capitalist society is characterized by a particular form of action: rational action in relation to a goal, or instrumental rationality. He perceived that the bureaucratic social order to which capitalism gave rise would penetrate the very fabric of everyday life and this would lead to a loss of ultimate evaluations and the 'total disenchantment of the world'. That is, everything would be subsumed under instrumental reason. Thus, the issue of social action in German sociological theory, as Turner (1991) argues, came to be treated in terms of the most efficient means to attain a given end. The question of the

ontological status of social actors remained *hidden* under the models of law and economics that served to formulate the concepts of the actor, agency, choice, attitudes and goals. Hence, as Turner points out: 'whereas the body had entered anthropology at the fundamental level of ontology, sociology, partly evolving theoretically along the notion of rational economic action, never elaborated a sociology of the body' (1991: 8).

Moreover, while anthropology was concerned with the issue of culture/nature, sociology centred on the question of historicity (Turner 1991: 8). That is, classical sociological theorizing was concerned with the stages of development of societies, particularly their emergence into modernity or industrial capitalist society. Thus, Marx posed the question of historical development in terms of stages of production which culminated in capitalism, while Durkheim examined the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity, from a previous form of society founded on similarities to the emergence of industrial society founded on differences, and Weber considered the effect of puritanism on the development of modern capitalism. Capitalism, however, as Turner (1991: 8) notes, has distinctive qualities that separate it from other stages of development. Unlike the other older forms of socio-economic organization, capitalism achieves global proportions and in turn drags other forms of societies with different social and economic organizations, such as those in Asia and Africa, into its all-encompassing frame. Consequently, the central problematic of what is nature that had moulded anthropology, as the quotation from Hirst and Woolley (1982) cited earlier emphasizes, became absent in sociology. Sociology has privileged and thus reinforced the key features of mind over body, reason over desire, culture over nature, inscribed in the modernity project (see the chapter 'Modernity/Postmodernity' in this volume). It is important to note that it is precisely at the moment when these predominant ideas that shaped and moulded sociology began to be called into question in the 1980s, through the critiques of feminism and postmodernism, that the question of the body as a historical concern is brought back into the sociological frame: 'However, through most of its short history, sociology has been fundamentally a historical enquiry into the conditions for social change; it never successfully posed the question of the body as a historical issue' (Turner 1991: 8).

It is hardly surprising, then, that anthropology, rather than sociology, focused its attentions on the body. The major concern within the dominant 'cultural' anthropological avenue of research until the mid 1970s, as discussed earlier, has been to show that the ways in which we perceive our bodies and the ways in which we move are not just 'natural facts of existence', but rather are socially constructed. Thus, the aim has been to demonstrate that our routine bodily behaviours are relative to the culture in which they are performed and that they are learnt as opposed to being 'natural'. The cultural anthropological approaches mentioned above, such as those of Ray Birdwhistell and Edward Hall, however, did not develop

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

their insights into the culturally variable and learnt character of bodily behaviour towards a specifically sociological approach to the study of the human body. Although Birdwhistell (1973), for example, argued that you cannot understand bodily behaviour unless you relate it back to the total context of the situation in which it is expressed and performed, he did not attempt to push his analysis further towards a discussion of the relationship between bodily behaviour in specific micro-social contexts and the wider macro-societal level. That is, Birdwhistell did not consider how the body is viewed and represented in society and how in turn this might affect the ways that individuals conduct and manage themselves bodily in everyday life. For the most part, cultural anthropologists have been over-concerned to demonstrate the validity of their case over and above that of exponents of social Darwinism rather than directing their findings towards a more sociological approach to the body in which the body is treated as a symbol of society (Polhemus 1975).

A major exception to this rule within the dominant American tradition on the body can be found in the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman. In *Relations in Public* (1972), Goffman attempted to uncover the 'social rules' for appropriate bodily behaviour in public places and spaces. Goffman, whose main body of work can be located within the symbolic interactionist tradition of thought, pointed out in *Relations in Public* that he owed much of his insight into the social rules and norms of bodily behaviour to the Durkheimian tradition of thought. Within the European Durkheimian tradition, writers like Robert Hertz (1973) in 1909, Marcel Mauss (1973) in 1934 and much later Mary Douglas in the 1970s have pointed the way to secure a sociological approach to the study of bodily expression. Their concerns have centred on an exploration of the social aspects of human bodily expression in order to elucidate, and say something significant about, the rules and the categories that are expressed in the social body or society. Although this tradition of **body symbolism** has its roots in Durkheim's sociological theory, in light of the discussion of sociology's opposition to nature and its concern with historicity, it should come as no great surprise to find that when a sociological study of the body did begin to develop, it came out of social anthropology which had been influenced by Durkheim's ideas, as opposed to sociology itself.

Although Durkheim was not concerned particularly with the body, for the reasons given above, nevertheless it was his claims regarding the social construction of knowledge in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, first published in 1915, that provided the impetus for this social constructionist tradition of the body within anthropology. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Durkheim was concerned to demarcate the study of the social world from that of biology or psychology. He sought to demonstrate how society moulded the individual in its own light. Durkheim maintained that the whole (society) is always greater than the sum of its parts (social institutions and individuals). Society, according to Durkheim, constitutes a

reality in its own right (*sui generis*) and he maintained that social relations are different from and not reducible to individuals or other non-social factors. He sought to demonstrate the power of the social by focusing on such topics as the division of labour, suicide, and knowledge and beliefs. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (1976) set out to demonstrate the social basis of knowledge by seeking to explain the origin of religious beliefs from an examination of Aboriginal classificatory systems and Amerindian religions (in keeping with the nineteenth-century unilineal theory of history, these contemporary non-literate cultures were viewed as standing for earlier, more 'primitive' forms of social organization). Here, he argues that it was humanity's innate sociality that led to the development of a common set of symbols (language, rituals, rites). According to Durkheim, each individual contains a part of society within him/her. In order to become conscious of it and thereby organize themselves collectively, individuals had to communicate with each other. Symbolic forms and their potential for communally shared knowledge of the world have their roots in the social nature of human beings. Durkheim treats primitive belief systems as cosmological systems (systems of knowledge concerning the structure of the universe, creation and so forth). They constitute forms of knowledge that stem from the social realm. This is important because what Durkheim is saying is that knowledge, far from existing independently of the social realm, is generated from within the society itself; it is socially constructed.

Durkheim, however, did not apply his insights into the social construction of knowledge in 'primitive' belief systems to 'modern' industrial, scientific systems of thought (Douglas 1975). The reasons for this are twofold. First, as suggested above, he considered that 'primitive' societies were completely different from 'modern' industrial societies. The former corresponded to 'mechanical solidarity' and the latter to 'organic solidarity' (Durkheim 1947). Second, he believed that science, unlike primitive systems of knowledge, constituted an objective form of knowledge. Nevertheless, as Douglas (1975) has pointed out, despite his concern to exclude scientifically oriented forms of knowledge from his analysis, the theoretical impact of Durkheim's work remains, particularly if we refocus our attention and view ourselves in a similar light as the traditionally perceived denigrated 'other': primitive cultures. That is, forms of knowledge do not exist outside society: they are generated from and organized within the social realm and they are voiced in and through the various aspects of everyday experience.

'What,' we might ask, 'has this got to do with perceptions of the body?' Hertz (1973) and Mauss (1973), and latterly Douglas (1970; 1973; 1975), sought to apply Durkheim's ideas on the social construction of knowledge to the study of the body. Hertz turned his attention to the study of left/right body symbolism. He began from the proposition that the right hand and the left hand were classified and regarded differently in society: the right hand was elevated and the left was lowered in the eyes of society.

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

Hertz argued that there was no significant 'natural difference' between the two hands and that the clearly observed distinction between the right and the left was caused by the coercive power of society and maintained by the rules and the restrictions that surround it. Thus, just as Durkheim argued that society shapes the individual in its own image, so Hertz argued that the body is socially constructed. Hertz's perceived hierarchy of the right hand over the left, in turn, gave rise to a great deal of debate and refutation in French anthropology, although the principle that the body was symbolized by society was upheld (see Needham 1973). So, despite the fact that the validity of Hertz's observation of the 'pre-eminence of the right hand throughout society' was called into question, his theoretical premise that society gives meaning to and constrains the way the body is perceived was upheld. According to Hertz, the body has certain natural characteristics – left side and right side, back and front, top half and bottom half, hair, nails etc. – to which society can and does give meaning. The features of the human body are given a symbolic loading by society although for all practical purposes they are conceived as 'natural' (non-social).

Mauss (1973) focused on the learnt character of everyday techniques such as swimming, running and walking. He sought to demonstrate that our ordinary routine bodily behaviours, from waking to sleeping, from movement to stillness, are socially controlled. He also maintained that what we ordinarily conceive as 'natural' behaviour in relation to the body is also socially bound, such as the right amount of sleep the body requires to stay healthy. Although he considered that as he was concerned with movements of the body, the biological and psychological aspects must be considered, he nevertheless concluded that techniques of the body are governed by society through the educational process. Like Hertz, he adopted a social constructionist model.

The body, for Hertz (1973) and Mauss (1973), then, is a microcosm of society, and as such it is an appropriate area of sociological inquiry. The implications of this are that by focusing on bodily expression, the sociologist can draw out a number of layers of insight into our everyday experiences in society. This is particularly the case, Mauss (1973) argued, in relation to gender. All societies (as far as we know) seek to make distinctions between the sexes; and precisely because the body is an 'image of society', according to Mauss, it is an appropriate area to investigate the social construction of gender (see also the chapter 'Sex/Gender'). Although Hertz and Mauss indicated their intention of taking the 'nature' (of the body) into account, their social constructionist approach ultimately reinstated and sustained the culture/nature dichotomy in sociology. The concept of a 'natural' body is partially redundant in this view.

Douglas's (1970; 1973; 1975) work on the body draws on and extends the analysis put forward by Hertz and in particular by Mauss. Like Hertz (1973) and Mauss (1973), Douglas sees that the body is always treated as an image of society. While Hertz, in line with Durkheim, restricted his study to

the analysis of 'primitive' classification systems, both Mauss and Douglas draw from a range of cultures, including 'modern' industrial societies. Indeed, Douglas (1970) argues that ritual is not simply a feature of 'primitive' societies but cuts across the traditionally perceived divide between 'us' (modern industrial formations) and 'them' (primitive cultures), and that this may be clearly seen in the rituals enacted on the body. She attempts to demonstrate that the way we perceive our bodily functions, boundaries and margins mirrors the type of society we belong to.

The body is a model that can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries that are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The function of the different parts affords it a rich source of symbols for other complex structures. (Douglas 1970: 138)

For Douglas, the body symbolizes society and society symbolizes the body. This is not a one-way process from society to the body or vice versa; rather, there is a degree of reciprocity at work so that each body, the physical body and the social body, reinforce each other. This reciprocity is implicit in the way we use our bodies in everyday life and in the attention we afford them.

In *Purity and Danger* (1970), for example, Douglas considers the symbolic load carried in attitudes towards bodily waste, urine, faeces, nail parings etc. There she draws particular attention to boundary maintenance and social forces that influence pollution ideas in society. She argues that the social system's concern to maintain itself in its boundaries is reflected in the care taken by society to maintain the body's boundaries. Douglas proposes that by examining the care taken towards the body's boundaries and margins, we should be able to say something significant about the idea that a particular social system has of itself. She suggests that people come to know their own society through the rules and rituals that are routinely enacted on the body and are expressed in the care and attention that is afforded it.

In *Natural Symbols* (1973) Douglas develops her approach to body symbolism further, and is there concerned to provide a method for analysing ritual and body symbolism that would enable comparisons to be made between groups that share the same social environment. In this work and in *Implicit Meanings* (1975), Douglas expresses a concern to get away from the culture/nature hierarchy in anthropology and sociology in order to demonstrate that we are not quite as different from others as we might imagine: 'we must lower the fence between us, ourselves, and them, the primitive tribes, and between us, humanity, and them, animals' (1975: 212). In order to do this she seeks to distinguish what she terms a 'natural tendency' to represent situations of a certain kind in an 'appropriate bodily style' (1973: 97). Mauss (1973) had proposed that there is no such thing as a natural body. Douglas maintains, however, that the body is symbolized by

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

all societies and as such, she argues, it is a 'natural symbol'. At the same time, however, she argues that the ways in which the body is expressed and the meanings that surround it are culturally specific. 'The social body,' according to Douglas, 'constrains the way the physical body is perceived' (1973: 93). Since this natural expression is culturally determined, Douglas (1973: 97) insists that any consideration of the body as a natural symbol would entail paying careful attention to the 'social dimension'. Therefore, although she might start with the proposition of a 'natural body', the concern is always directed towards understanding of the particular social formation which the body expresses and through which the body is symbolized. As a result of her concern with the social body, as Chris Shilling (1993) points out, the individual body (that is, 'the ways in which people live, experience and perceive of their bodies') is in danger of collapsing 'into the positions and categories made available by the social system'.

Thus, the theoretical framework within this Durkheimian influenced tradition of the body is constructed in such a way as to examine the *social* aspects of human bodily expression in order to elucidate and say something significant about the rules and the categories that are expressed in the social order. It presents a sociological approach to the study of the body wherein the human body is treated as a symbol of society. This social constructionist approach has proved influential in anthropology. Its import for sociology has to do with the fact that it demonstrated that the body is a legitimate topic for sociological analysis. Since the mid 1980s, the body has emerged as an important topic of inquiry across the spectrum of the social sciences and the humanities. Sociologists, on the whole, have not drawn on the work of Douglas or Mauss and, as Shilling notes, 'have tended to look elsewhere for resources to assist their investigation of the body as a socially constructed entity' (1993: 73).

Feminist incursions into the social sciences, which have led to a rethinking of issues of culture/nature *vis-à-vis* gender inequalities, have proven important in the re-evaluation of the role of the body in large-scale industrial societies (see the chapter 'Sex/Gender'). Feminists from different theoretical perspectives have argued for the reclamation of women's bodies from the hands of patriarchal discourses, and have insisted that women be treated as agents of knowledge. Emily Martin's study *The Woman in the Body* (1989), for example, demonstrates that the ways in which women feel about their bodies in the contexts of their experiences of menstruation, giving birth and so on are often quite contrary to the assumptions made about women encapsulated in medical texts by medical science. These medicalized discourses on women's bodies, which are taken as a yardstick for measuring reality, are not value-free, as medical science would maintain. Rather, according to Martin (1989), they are ideological and oppressive to women and have wide ranging social consequences. Other developments in social theory, such as the analysis of class, status and consumption, have

CULTURE/NATURE

also led to a reconsideration of the role of the body in society. In Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) analysis, for example, the body turns out to be more than a written-on page: that is, it is not like a set of clothes that you can put on or take off at will. Rather, ideologies of class, gender and race are inscribed onto the anatomical surface of the body. Moreover, the current popularity of Foucault and the centrality of the modernity/postmodernity debate in the arts and the cultural sciences have led to a plethora of books and articles on the body in recent years. Foucault's (Rabinow 1991) radical anti-humanist approach to the body has been highly influential in sociology. His analysis has illuminated how bodies have been objectified and subjectified through a range of discursive practices. In fact, the body is not simply endowed with social meanings by these discursive practices, rather it is wholly constituted by them. The result is that the biological entity of the body simply 'disappears and instead becomes a socially constructed product which is infinitely malleable and highly unstable' (Shilling 1993: 74). In a sense, Foucault takes the social constructionist approach to its logical conclusion: the disappearing body. It is somewhat ironic that just as the body is brought into the discourse of sociology, the major theoretical influence in the area renders the fact of embodiment as a fiction. In Foucault's analysis the concept of nature is redundant, as it too is constituted through discourse.

Whilst it is important to note that social constructionist views of the body have tended to overemphasize the social at the expense of the natural, it also needs to be said that naturalistic conceptions of the body, for the most part, have been used to shore up and sustain continuing structural inequalities, such as inequalities of gender and race (1993: 55–60):

The naturalistic focus on the body has proved unsatisfactory for most sociologists . . . For sociologists, naturalistic views of the bodies of black people tended to say much less about what might be termed 'corporeal reality', than about the enormous utility of the body as a highly malleable ideological resource. (1993: 68–9)

In the battle between culture and nature in sociology, then, culture continues to have the last word.

KEY CONCEPTS

CULTURE Culture is a term often used in the place of society. It is a concept that describes the symbolic world that we inhabit when we are members of a social group. So each different society, big or small, has a different culture, different symbols, different rituals and different ways of expressing itself. Any culture can,

CORE SOCIOLOGICAL DICHOTOMIES

itself, be divided internally so that there exists a stratification of culture within a society, e.g. Bingo and the opera.

NATURE Nature is the natural state of being in the world before human kind exercises its influence upon it. As soon as a human being takes a leaf and cooks it, dresses in it or builds a shelter with it, it becomes a cultural object. Humans transform nature into culture.

Universality This concept means that a statement of a state of affairs has the same meaning and significance wherever and whenever it occurs – it is universal.

Nurture Nature exerts a natural force on human beings so part of us might be driven by physical forces that are natural to our bodies like hunger, sleep, and sexual desire. Nurture is the process through which the social world exerts a pressure upon our natural instincts and desires and makes them cultural. These two forces are important causal opposites in explaining behaviour – is someone criminal because of their genetic structure or because of their upbringing?

Body symbolism The human body is a natural thing that presents itself in the social world in cultural and symbolic ways. Body symbolism addresses that presentation. Think of: short skirts; high heel shoes; leather jackets; pin-stripe suits; body piercing; tattoos; hair fashions, etc. and you will begin to see the different messages that we can send by the way that we present our body in society.