

## REVIEW ESSAY:

# Individuals?

# Factors? Definitions?

## The sociological abstraction of the body

**Henning Eichberg**

University of Southern Denmark  
<heichberg@health.sdu.dk

### Abstract

When starting to teach university courses in Body Culture, I proposed Chris Shilling's *The Body & Social Theory* (1993) as basic literature. The book's intention was interesting, indeed. However, the book produced a lot of misunderstanding both for my students and for myself. Why was that? A closer examination of the third edition (2012) reveals some serious analytical and terminological problems. As these problems are not particular of Shilling's approach, but can be found in a wide range of sociological studies, they deserve a deeper analysis and a critical discussion. Are humanist studies allowed naively to talk about "the biological body", "individuals", "factors" or "us in modern society"? This is more than a linguistic question – it is not least a question of philosophy. Kate Cregan's *Key Concepts in Body & Society* (2012) follows the same track as Shilling, but presents a more practical application for students. Her book illustrates especially the problem of "defining" phenomena of human life. Can we really define – describe by strict limits – what is historically changing and socially diverse?

*Key words:* body, sociology, philosophy, terminology, culture, individual, factor, definition

In the 1970/80's sociology discovered the body. This was without doubt an analytical gain. And yet, it confronts sociology with new challenges.

In the Anglo-American world, Chris Shilling's book from 1993 about the body in social theory is regarded as an authoritative and indispensable standard work. The author, professor of sociology at the University of Kent at Canterbury, UK, presented what was indeed an impressive program:

- He searched for the place of the body in classical sociology and criticized his discipline for being mainly bodiless. As contrast to disembodied sociology, he referred to the works of Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu.
- Shilling does not place the sociological discourse about the body in the field of naturalism or of sociological constructivism. He searched for a third way.
- For this project, Shilling referred extensively to critical theory – from Karl Marx to Frantz Fanon, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Marie Brohm, Foucault, Bourdieu, and feminism. (However, the Frankfurt School, which has produced some remarkable studies of body, dance, and sport, remains absent.)
- In a new chapter added to the third edition, Shilling now includes observations concerning death and religion. He questions the secularist approach, which he himself earlier had applied.

All this is promising. However, the ambitious program of the book is hampered by some serious analytical and terminological problems. The complex human body culture is treated by a stiff reductive language following certain Anglo-American academic traditions of reification – and using authoritarian quotations. These problems are not unique to Shilling's approach but can be found in a broad range of studies, which is why they deserve a more profound critical discussion.

## From a critique of sociology to the study of religion

But let us first have a look at the structure of Shilling's book and argumentation.

The introduction unfolds the program of the study, describing it as a part of a broader *bodily turn in social theory*. This turn is said to have

its basis in a new popular interest in body-related “reflexivity”, which should be typical for “late modernity”. The body becomes “uncertain” and a “project” – from bodybuilding to plastic surgery. In the light of this new embodiment, the classical disembodied sociology must be critically revised. From Karl Marx over Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and further, the body was not absent, but rather present in a paradoxical way, which Shilling calls the “absent presence” of the body. In contrast to this tradition, Shilling joins Bryan S. Turner in calling for a “foundationalist view of the body”.

Chapter 2 explores the “absent presence” of the body in *classical sociology*. Sociologists concentrated on social order and social change, on consciousness and ideology – and thus marginalized the body. This happened in spite of some earlier societal concerns. Since the 19th century, military authorities were anxious about the recruitment of capable young men to the armed forces, and during the 1930s the Nazi Fascists focused on the perfect “Aryan” body. However, it was not until the 1980s that the body emerged as phenomenon worthy of sociological attention. Shilling explains this by six “factors”:

- feminism reclaiming the female body from patriarchy
- the ecological movement, connected with some elements from Oriental spirituality
- the ageing of Western societies
- a move from the hard work of production towards consumer culture
- a new uncertainty about the body resulting from transplant surgery, virtual reality medias, and body-machine combinations
- and – this is a new observation in this third edition – the provocation by Muslim body display like hijab.

Chapter 3 describes the “other” of the sociological body: the *naturalistic body*. During the 18th century, the so far rather ungendered body was fleshed out into dualisms of male and female, of productive and reproductive, based upon biological differences. From the 1960s on, sociobiology followed this line in reaction against feminism, and so do some recent tendencies in genetics and neuroscience. This can be compared with those other biologist approaches, which were interested in “racial” otherness, using craniometry, skin color science, health studies, and – also here – genetics.

In contrast to this, chapter 4 shows the new emerging *social constructionism* and its view that the body is just invented by society. The works of Mary Douglas, Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault, and Bruno Latour (Actor Network Theory, ANT) are presented. Shilling criticizes these approaches as reproducing – once more – the dual body/mind approach of classical sociology. Now it is social interactions, “symbols”, “discourses” etc. that make the body disappear again. Also Bryan S. Turner is criticized for continuing on this line with his abstract model of bodily order, while Arthur Frank presented yet another abstract model of body use in action.

Against both naturalist and constructivist reductionism, chapter 5 shows some approaches towards an *embodied sociology*, especially around questions of social inequalities. Besides the classical works of Norbert Elias, Simone de Beauvoir, Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, Shilling presents some more secondary studies about stress, gender identity, unemployment and work, emotion work, etc.

Chapter 6 focuses on Bourdieu’s sociology of cultural, social and *bodily capital* (which Shilling calls “physical capital”). This chapter is about class, habitus, taste and distinction. It also contains some relevant critique of Bourdieu for not paying sufficient attention to the phenomenological, lived body – and to diachronic change.

Apropos history, it is confusing that the chapter on Bourdieu is followed by a chapter about the sociology of the *civilizing process* and Norbert Elias, who rather prefigured Bourdieu’s approach. Shilling presents Elias as a thinker of “individualization” – which Elias definitively was not. Elias (1970) developed his concepts of figuration and figurational sociology in declared opposition to the established discourse about “individual versus society”.

Chapter 8 mixes two rather different topics: the so-called *self-identity* and *death*. “Self-identity” is borrowed from Anthony Giddens, who postulated this as characteristic for the so-called late modern society, and Shilling follows him uncritically. Death, in contrast, is an existential phenomenon in human life, which, indeed, social theory has neglected as thoroughly as it neglected the body. Shilling tries to bring the reality of death back into sociology, and this deserves attention.

The book should have ended there. However, there is an “afterword”, chapter 9, which is a voluminous comment on what the book should do, wanted to do, and did. It also contains some materials that should have been presented and discussed in the previous chapters.

As this summary shows, Shilling's book is hampered by some structural and analytical deficiencies. But more seriously, it is written in a language that obfuscates the understanding of the body. As this language is not particular to this author, it deserves a special critical attention.

## Static physical body – or bodily movement?

“The body” is treated in this book as a static body – a body of shape and health, “blood, flesh, bones and senses” (p. 213). What is missing in Shilling's discourse is not only sport, dance, and play, but also the moving body more generally. The “materiality” of the body is presented as static. This impedes the insight that the human material body fundamentally is a body in movement.

The one-sided understanding and conceptualization of the body is also expressed by the use of the word “physical”. The book is about “the physical body” as well as – interpreting Bourdieu – the “physical capital”. However, the “physical” is derived from physics, and this natural science is far from the living body and from human bodily existence. Indeed, Bourdieu's achievement was to analyze bodily capital rather than physical capital.

Furthermore, the book follows the scientistic and mechanistic view of a body without feelings, though it tries to be critical against this fiction and mentions the “discovery” of feelings by sociology as part of the recent holistic wave. And yet, the body appears as an isolated individual skin bag – without the inter-bodily dimensions of atmospheres, mood, and aura, all of which have been treated in details by recent philosophy (Sloterdijk, 1998). In other words, by the terminology of “material” and “physical”, the book divides the bodily existence of the human being in half – it presents an epistemologically halved body.

## The biological body – or the pre-cognitive body?

A further problematic term in this connection is “the biological body”. The book uses this expression in order to contrast the social body. However, the social and the biological are epistemologically placed on different levels. “Social” is a human condition, while “biology” is not – it is knowledge about the natural life. Bio-logy is the science (logos, word)

of life (bios) – and a scientific body does not exist. The body is not scientific, but pre-scientific, even pre-cognitive.

If one wants to contrast the biological body (as the body in biology), one has to talk about the sociological body (as the body in sociology). What Shilling means by the “biological” body, however, is the body as given by nature – the body in the sense that human beings may have in common with animals. In contrast to the existence of the body before human knowledge, biology is – as science – a human cultural creation. That is why the “biological body” as the body of natural science is a cultural body – and not the opposite, not a matter of nature. The concept “biological body”, thus, bears witness of a non-reflected language. If one wants to find a contrast to the social body, one should talk about the natural body, or about the body of bios, i.e. of natural life.

## Body in singular – or body cultures in plural?

Systematically, the study presents “the body” in singular, instead of asking for and describing body cultures in plural. It is true that the book mentions also the neo-colonial spreading of certain Western body ideals among African, Asian and Hispanic people. And it refers to the confrontation between Western obesity on one hand and hunger in other parts of the world on the other. And yet, by treating “the body” in singular the discourse remains mono-cultural.

However, it matters analytically whether the sociologist talks about an Indonesian village, a suburb of Stockholm, an African metropolis or a slum in Los Angeles, when talking about “the body in contemporary society”. The body in singular, as treated in this study, is ethnocentric Western, and it may have neo-colonial undertones.

## The one body – or the body we have and the body we are?

In addition, language carries a deeper plurality of the body to be aware of. Shilling touches upon it briefly when referring to the distinction between German *Körper* and *Leib* (42-43). However, he interprets the difference as being an expression of the “fifth factor” creating the recent bodily turn of sociology. This is historically wrong.

The distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* has roots longer back in German etymology. Phenomenologists discovered the deep-rooted *Körper-Leib* dualism during early 20th century as relevant for understanding human bodily existence. It describes a difference between having a body (*Körper*) – and being a body (*Leib*), between body as a thing and property – and the body as part of life. Helmuth Plessner (1941) called this double relation the “eccentric positionality” of the human being, and he was followed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, when looking at Scandinavian languages – where for instance Danish language knows a similar distinction between *krop* (living body) and *legeme* (dead body) – the relation becomes more complicated (Eichberg, 1995). The insight into the significance of – at least – two bodies in one has also entered the Anglo-American debate. American Somatics tried, with a background in hippie culture and Californian alternative body practices, to build up a corresponding dualism between (dead) body and (living) soma (Hanna, 1970).

The case of *Körper/Leib* shows that social and cultural knowledge of the body requires more than one language and a more than superficial knowledge of other languages. In philosophical terms: We need a nominalist – not just a realist – approach. English terms may – as in this case – be too narrow to catch the deeper meaning.

Comparative studies can, however, also lead to the inverse distinctive relation. In the case of play and game, English language differentiates between two words, thus denoting what is just one word in German, *Spiel*, or in French, *jeu*. Scandinavian languages know a similar, though not quite identical duality – Danish *leg* and *spil*. For the case of Basque language, it has been analyzed in detail how *jolas* (play) unites the players in feelings of communion and festivity, while *joko* (game) splits the wholeness of play up into pairs of opposition in the spirit of competition (González Abrisketa, 2012).

A further case of linguistic differentiation can be found in the terminology of sport. In Scandinavian languages, one uses side by side with “sport” the Old Nordic terms: Danish *idræt*, Swedish *idrott*, Norwegian *idrett*. These embrace a broader field, including gymnastics, exercise, as well as play and games. For the Chinese language, similar differentiations between the Western word “sport” and *yundong* have been discovered (Tang, 2010).



## Explanation – or understanding?

Shilling's study wants to explain certain phenomena, among them the changing historical importance of the body. However, the term "explanation" has different meanings and layers. In common-sense language, explanation means something rather unspecific like deeper knowledge, insight, understanding and reasonable interpretation. Children conquer the world by their questions of the type: Why is the sky blue? Why is the grass green? Why are there men and women? And after every answer, they will continue by an endless chain: Why that... why that... why that? – Children want to understand. In this case, explanation and understanding seem to be the same.

In theory of science, however, explanation and understanding are two different procedures (Seiffert, 1969/70; Wright, 1971; Eichberg, 2014). Explanation is linked to the so-called analytical-empirical method, which is derived from natural science, mainly from physics. It asks for causality: What is causing what? Causal explanation strives for and ends by a correct answer. In contrast, understanding is at home in humanist studies of historical, phenomenological and hermeneutical character. It asks: In which context can a given phenomenon be understood? Understanding opens up into different dimensions, and it will never be exhaustive, always leading to new questions. An explanation can be tested; understanding can be discussed.

## Factors – or connections?

Shilling's study is rich in reflections about certain factors causing anything from the recent "bodily turn" (4, 37) over human civilization (168) to thousands of years of biological evolution (15). Even death appears as "factor" (192). The whole project of body sociology, he sums up as a way "away from our blood, flesh, bones and senses and towards a disembodied vision of organizational, technological or other factors" (213).

However, the term "factor" is neither self-evident nor harmless. It is derived from physics and mathematics and has kept its original undertone of scientific objectiveness and abstractness. A factor is a single element that can be defined and measured. Factor is a "factum", a fact – like a little box. Or critically put: "Factor" is a form of reification. This objective box "makes" something, it has an effect – the word being derived



from Latin *facere*, to make. A factor acts – it is associated with causal thinking.

In social studies, the “factor” is associated with human action and its driving forces. These may – seen from inside – be motivations, or – from outside – interventions. The “making” of a factor often means: what human beings want to do themselves or what they could be motivated to do by administrative, pedagogical or political actors. This makes factor thinking attractive for administrators and sponsors of research. Factors can be handled in a normative, political context, teaching us what should be done – as if human beings lived in a laboratory, where their life can be determined and changed by factors – as in physics.

Anything can be treated as “factor” – religion, gender, society, “race”, technology, even death. This makes “factor” from a humanist perspective a junk word. Instead, social studies should talk about relations and connections.

## System – or patterns and relations?

The word “systemic factor” (173) points towards another problematic term: system. The term denotes a sort of building, consisting of connected structural parts. This underlines the static perspective, not unlike the word “construct”.

In his chapter about constructivism, Shilling criticizes the approaches of Goffman, Turner and Frank, but his own study seems to fall into a similar trap. The word “system” is linked to the world of natural science, explanation, reification, and factorial thinking. In humanist studies, “system” should also be replaced by connection or relation, and be considered alongside patterns and configurations, which create differences as well as a flow and change in human life.

## Normality – or pain?

“In contrast to our normal engagement with the world”, pain makes – as the study claims – our body dys-appear or re-appear (217-18). Pain and the pain-related dys-appearance of the body are “socially deviant”. The normal body is healthy (219).

What does this term of normality mean? Is pain not normal among human beings? Are illness, disease, and disability not normal?

Not too long ago, science did not hesitate to characterize normality as being male, white, middle-class, or young or middle age, and healthy and heterosexual. This ethnocentrism has to some extent been broken down, also by Shilling's study. Now, females, non-white ethnics, lower-class and elderly people are to some degree regarded as normal. And yet, the question of health and normality shows that the critique of normality has remained on the surface.

Pain delivers important perspectives, indeed. In everyday life, people try to keep pain away, especially by medication. In the field of sports, in contrast, pain may even be valued: "No pain – no gain". Pain in sport may be regarded as indicator of decisive striving for top achievement. The place of pain among professional musicians is also different. They neither just push it away, nor do they "search" it in a sportive way, but they may accept it as part of their identity as artist (Andersen et al., 2013).

The term "normality" is closely linked to the abstract concepts of the "individual" and of "us in modern society" (see below). It normalizes conditions that sociology should de-normalize (Eichberg, 2011). Recently, periodicals like *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik* (Journal of Anomalistics) (2001 ff) and *Jahrbuch für Marginalistik* (Yearbook of Marginalistics) (2000 ff) have in different ways – with paranormal references the one, with humoristic mood the other – shown the limits of the mainstream understanding of normality.

## Tradition versus (late) modernity – or cultural change?

Centrally, the study postulates "late modernity" as a period when "the individual" chooses its body and life-style, thus "reflexively" creating its own "self-identity" (I, 191). This is, as Shilling writes, based on "my own analysis", though he refers to Anthony Giddens.

This discourse can be questioned critically. Late modernity: How can we know how late it is? – Reflexive: Should this mean that people at the time of early industrial modernity were not reflexive? – Choice: Is this not just a remnant from Thatcher-type neoliberal ideology?

Particular questions rise with the term of "self-identity", launched by Giddens. Self-identity as a combination of Self and identity contains two different elements. Self means Me or I, while identity means We, as

which it was introduced by the classic study of Erik H. Erikson (1950). The I-We combination of “self-identity” is, thus, contradictory, not unlike as if one would talk about “self-society”, “my individual class” or “personal gender”. The fact that self-identity nevertheless made a career in current pop sociology seems to reflect the feeling of some groups of Western middle-class youngsters before they are engaged in family and job: “I am just myself”. And this is restricted to affluent metropolis and cannot be extended to “late-modern” Indian slums, Brazilian favelas or Nigerian villages. Language reveals again some – unwanted – neo-colonial undertones.

Late-modern? reflexive? choice? of self-identity? – Shilling himself seems to be not quite sure about the certainty of his assumption: “Quite simply, the body is potentially no longer subject to the constraints that once characterized its existence” (p. 5). This is either quite simple, and then it cannot be just potential, or it is just potential, then it is not quite simple.

The emphatic assumption is strange, as Shilling – quite appropriately – criticizes the classical sociology for its over-focus on the difference between “traditional” and “modern”. His own study, however, falls into the same trap – replacing cultural change by structural dualism. The terminology contradicts the critical intention.

### “We” in modern society – or diverse habitus cultures?

The book has a strong preference for some unspecified, who are called “we in contemporary society” – instead of describing sociologically, which concrete subject or class the analysis is about. The class-perspective of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of the social habitus is mentioned, indeed, but detailed empirical studies from the Bourdieu school have shown that age, gender, and class continue to have important influence on people’s bodily practices. The same has been found by empirical studies about sports participation in Denmark (Larsen 2003).

Findings like these, however, are without further empirical or theoretical argumentation brushed aside as “Bourdieu’s view”. Bourdieu’s analysis of class habitus and class cultures appears as one among other “views” – in a post-modern way where anything goes. Finally, the reader is told that the “old class categories” are finally “broken down” or “eroded”. But all this is not a question of “views” and opinions. In contrast, the

discourse about “us in late modern society” is an ideological opinion in itself.

It leaves the important question open, how to describe the new class categories under the aspect of body and habitus. This could be an important challenge for future generations of sociologists.

## Individual – or human being?

“Self-identity” and “we in late-modern society” are connected with the terminology of “the individual”. The book quotes a body-builder’s feeling:

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. (9).

The book does not quote this in order to criticize it for its naivety, but takes it as a factual argument for “late-modern individualization”.

However, sociological studies have in detail shown how fitness activities follow socio-cultural patterns and are not just the individual’s private choice of “my own” life (Maguire, 2008; Eichberg, 2010). The sociological meaning of the quoted example is: I see myself in the mirror, therefore I am – I am alone in the world. This is an updated version of Descartes’ *Cogito ergo sum* and his *homo clausus*, which Shilling for good reasons treats critically (178, 211). Taking the mirror as argument shows furthermore that the postulated connection between “late modernity” and “individualization” fails historically. The mirror is not late-modern, but known from ancient cultures and was manufactured in large quantities since the 16th and 17th centuries. It was as early-modern as Descartes and, on the religious level, as the type of individualization that was promoted by early Protestantism (195). And fitness practices with the use of mirrors and other media of aesthetic self-reflection developed since around 1900, i.e. again long time before the so-called late modernity. At that time it was already an established assumption what Theodor Fontane (1899, 489) expressed in a novel:

The main contradiction between all modern and the old is that the human beings are no longer by birth at their appropriate place. Now they

have the freedom to apply their abilities to all sides and in any field. Earlier, one was during 300 years a lord of the manor or a linen weaver. Now any linen weaver can also become lord of the castle. Or maybe the other way round.

During the 19th century, thinkers as different as Max Stirner, Søren Kierkegaard, and Ralph Waldo Emerson had already developed philosophies radically centering around the “single individual” or Ego being itself and nothing else (Sloterdijk 2014, 446-470). It is unhistorical to label this as “late modern individualization”.

By placing “individualization” side by side with consumerism and medicalization, the study postulates the social reality of this term. This is, however, also a problematical assumption. The study presents no closer empirical investigation or deeper theoretical analysis that would justify this “individualization”. It is rather a fashionable market slogan: You are what you buy – you are the architect of your own fortune. References to Giddens and Ulrich Beck, the prophets of “late-modern individualization”, do not make the thesis more convincing.

Here and there, the book articulates the impression that “the individual” could be a concept of selling and advertising. This is, indeed, worth a deeper reflection, as it would make it possible to interpret “the individual” as a specific form of capitalist mythology. Margaret Thatcher became notorious for her statement: “There is no such thing as society, only a collection of individuals.” Nevertheless, the concept of “individualization” remains a central thesis of Shilling’s book, as if it did not describe an ideology, but a social reality.

An etymological problem illustrates the dilemma. “In-dividual” denotes something that cannot be divided. But is the human being really indivisible?

The human being is a dividual (in German: *Dividuum*) – which is what already Friedrich Nietzsche expressed (in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, 1878/79). He described the deep split “dividing” the Apollonian and the Dionysian inside the human being. And especially: *In der Moral behandelt sich der Mensch nicht als Individuum, sondern als Dividuum* – in moral, the human being does not treat itself as individual, but as dividual. The human being is characterized by *Selbstzertheilung*, self-division.

Later, Sigmund Freud directed attention towards the split between Ego, Superego, and Id. This division became the basis for psychoanalysis as a psychology of the dividual.

Martin Buber (1923) followed by his philosophy of the Thou. There are existential differences between the I that observes or handles an It, and the I that meets a You. Soon, the concentration camps of totalitarianism, where human beings reified human beings as some "material" It, confirmed this dividualization in a horrifying way.

On another level again, the eccentric positionality of the human being, as described by the phenomenology of Helmuth Plessner (1941), shows a dividual relation to one's own body. There is the body that I have as well as the body that I am – and furthermore, I can and will situationally shift between these two. – And recently, concerning the human brain, neurology has described the right and the left hemisphere as different and applied this to medical practices.

All this shows that the human being is neither indivisible nor alone in the world. In modern society, the human being is still less alone, as according to Elias, this is characterized by intensified networks (*Vernetzung*) between the human beings. Thus, the talk about the "individual" is an anachronistic relic from Western mythology of Self. Instead, the sociologist can talk about the person, about the human as subject – its subjectivity as well as its inter-subjectivity – and about the human being. All these words fit better to human complexity. Norbert Elias has for good reasons called his sociology a *Menschenwissenschaft*, knowledge of the human being.

## The temptation of scholarly authoritarianism

"Physical" instead of bodies in movement, "explanation" instead of understanding, "factors" instead of connections, "modernity" instead of cultural change, "individual" instead of human being... – the applied reductive language hampers the understanding of the sociality of the body, which is the intention of Shilling's book. This is a deficiency of terminology, and yet it is more. The book is less about theory than about writers and their opinions and arguments – opinions about opinions – what Habermas means, what Beck argues, according to Giddens... It presents – collected in a scholarly manner – a lot of literature of secondary and tertiary rank, mostly Anglo-American. This is typical for some parts of Anglo-American sociology (Petersen, 2007; a critique: Eichberg, 2008). In some parts, the book has the character of a superficial overview of literature – of selected, though authoritatively presented literature. What

is lacking are – beside Scandinavian sociology and East Asian thinkers – the contributions of the Frankfurt School, the body philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Peter Sloterdijk (2011), and from the Anglo-American research, one will not find references to the works of John Bale, Susan Brownell, Allen Guttmann, and Patricia Vertinsky.

So when the publisher presents the book by words as: unrivalled, canonical, clarity, sparkling, masterful, authoritative, invaluable, at the forefront, original, indispensable – this may be doubted.

## Definition – or phenomenology?

Reductive terminology, as already pointed out, is not a problem particular to Shilling's book. This becomes obvious in the book of Kate Cregan, which presents a more practical application of body sociology for students.

Cregan, senior lecturer at Monash University, Australia, follows critical intentions similar to Shilling: feminist, post-modern, post-colonial, anti-racist, with reference to key thinkers as Bourdieu, Foucault, Ariès and Elias. She presents, in an alphabetical order, key concepts like ageing and childhood, appearance and beauty, civilizing processes, class/caste, colonialism, death, difference, emotion, feminism, food, gender/sex, habitus, health, identity, pain, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, queer, race/ethnicity, religion, sport, technology etc. In spite of the aim “to cover all the dominant, relevant themes” around body and society (3), however, one will not find keywords like dance, laughter, movement, play, and popular culture. The focus is on market, health, and the Anglo-American world.

The key concepts are treated in a more or less authoritative way. Each chapter starts by a definition of the concept. These definitions are to some part banal (“Death is the cessation of life”, “Food is what we ingest to sustain life”), and to some part already minor discussions. The chapters then shows in detail how to look at the concept in a correct way, and propose further reading. It is like reading a schoolbook – without raising the question: What is the problem? (Or: Why just these key concepts?)

Also in Cregan's book, it is the language that matters. In an un-problematized way, the words already discussed and problematized, “explanation”, “factors”, “identity” (“self”?), “individual”, and “we”, are used.



As each key concept is started up by a “definition”, the special question arises, which status definition can have in social studies. Definition is taken as given in an un-problematic way. But what does it mean to define, and can we really define human phenomena?

Definition – de-fini-tion – is linguistically derived from Latin *finis*. Its analytical meaning is derived from physical and mathematical science, where strict lines are used to delimit certain terms in a clear way. Definition is associated with a picture of little boxes, which are characterized by neat limits against each other. This picture appears very usually in social studies, too. But can one describe by strict limits, what is historically changing, what is socio-culturally diverse or linguistically different?

The first was doubted already by Friedrich Nietzsche (1887, 2: 13) “Only something which has no history can be defined.” Philosophers have – at least since Ludwig Wittgenstein – agreed that for instance a definition of play is not possible. And sport, having a history from some non-sport games, displays, and competitions to modern sport, cannot be defined either. And yet, play and sport are important phenomena among human activities.

The second point concerns differences as for instance between male and female. Cregan is well aware of the implied problem and differentiates between gender as “social category of differentiation” and sex as “biological definition of maleness and femaleness” (89). However, the problem is deeper than “biology” versus “social construction”. We cannot define what is “man”, or what is “woman”. There is no strict line given by nature. The construction of a rigid line was tried in sport separating male sport competitions and female sport competitions. This social construction produced the need of gender testing, and indeed, highly sophisticated gender testing started in 1966 – first as visual inspection, than as gynecological examination and finally as high-tech chromosomal analysis. But science could not help – and there appeared too many cases of “third” gender questioning the clear line, *finis*, between male and female. IAAF and IOC had to capitulate and gave up their attempts around 1999/2000 (Cole, 2005). And yet, though the male and the female are not little boxes, they remain fundamental phenomena of human life.

And the third point: Phenomena of human life are always mediated through language, and languages mean difference and are different among each other. One may try to define “play” against “game” – and meets German *Spiel*, which makes no difference between the two words.

The other way round, one may try to define the “body”, but will meet the dual relation between German *Körper* and *Leib*, between the body we have and the body we are – and other dual relations again in Danish *krop* and *legeme*.

That is why there are profound differences between the two procedures of defining phenomena on the one hand and identifying phenomena phenomenologically on the other – and this in spite of widespread sloppiness in common speech – and in academic terminology as well, as Cregan’s book documents.

Besides the epistemological impossibility to define phenomena of human life, there is a problem of “knowledge politics” involved. If the academic system demands a definition from human studies, this forces the student or scholar to start not by him- or herself, but by an external authority. Someone who not at all has studied my case, but who owns a certain authority, has delivered a definition, which I am urged to take as starting point and to apply on my own study. First second-hand definition, than first-hand research – this is a formula of academic authoritarianism. In this perspective, the demand of initial definition, which now has been established in social and cultural studies, expresses a ritual of submission. It is part of the culture of anxiety in behavioral sciences: Do not trust in your own analysis, before you have adopted an authority! Do not dare to do your research before anxiously bowing to authoritative definition! (Devereux, 1967).

Is this really what we should teach our students?

## The human being as measure of all things

In other words, we have to pay attention to the invasion of certain reductive terminologies, authoritarian habits, and junk language in human studies. In academic junk language, one says “physical”, means the living body, and yet not really. One says “material” and forgets bodily movement. One says “biological body” and means the natural body, but not really, also biology. One says “explanation”, means understanding, and yet not really. One says “factor” and “system”, means relations, connections and patterns, and yet with undertones derived from physics. One says “definition”, means what a phenomenon is, and yet adopts the imagination of little boxes from physical science. One says “individual” and means the human being, but in an abstract way.

Finally, this language contributes – by its physicalism – to abolish the human being. It expresses a sort of half-positivism, which is non-positivistic in intention, but physicalist reductionist by terminology nevertheless. For the critical discussion of this language, philosophy is needed.

The human being is the measure of all things – this has been a philosophical wisdom since Ancient Greek philosophy, expressed by Protagoras. The sentence is still more challenging at a time, when positivist science tries to make us – the other way round – measuring human beings by things, by technical devices, by numbers. Surely, Shilling's book opposes against this positivist obsession – and this contributes to its attraction. However, the reifying language implies that virtual things like "physical bodies", "individuals", "factors", and "definitions" "explain" living human beings and their complex bodily relations. There appears a deeper contradiction, which demands self-critical attention.

## The books

- Chris Shilling *The Body and Social Theory: Third Edition* 313 pages, pb.  
 London: Sage Publications 2012 (Theory, Culture & Society)  
 ISBN 978-0-87502-533-3
- Kate Cregan *Key Concepts in Body & Society* 213 pages, pb. London:  
 Sage Publications 2012 (Sage Key Concepts)  
 ISBN 978-1-84787-544-0

## References

- Andersen, L.N., Roessler, K.K., Eichberg, H. (2013) Pain among professional orchestral musicians. A case study in body culture and health psychology. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 28: 3, 124-130.
- Buber, M. (1923). *Ich und Du*. – English 1986: *I and Thou*. New York: Collier (first 1937).
- Cole, C. (2005). Enchanted sporting bodies & sex testing. *Athletics, Society & Identity*. (= Imeros, Journal for Culture and Technology, 5:1) Athens: Foundation of the Hellenic World.
- Devereux, G. (1967). *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*. Mouton.
- Eichberg, H. (1995). Body, soma – and nothing else? Bodies in language. *Sport Science Review*, 4, 1: 5-25. – Enlarged (2010) in: *Bodily Democracy. Towards a Philosophy of Sport for All*. London & New York: Routledge. 257-282.
- Eichberg, H. (2008). The body, the power and the people – New perspectives of body politics. *Idrottsforum*, Malmö, no. 90, 19.3. 2008.
- Eichberg, H. (2010) Fitness on the market: Forget 'the single individual'! In: *Bodily Democracy. Towards a Philosophy of Sport for All*. London & New York: Routledge, 58-79.

- Eichberg, H. (2011). The normal body. Anthropology of bodily otherness. *Physical Culture and Sport – Studies and Research*. Warsaw, 51: 5-14.
- Eichberg, H. (2014). Explanation or understanding? Movement studies between natural sciences and cultural studies. *Physical Culture and Sport – Studies and Research*, Warsaw, in print.
- Elias, N. (1970). *Was ist Soziologie?* [What is sociology?] München: Juventa.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.
- Fontane, T. (1899). *Der Stechlin* [The Stechlin]. In: Fontane. (n.d.). *Werke*. (Works). Wiesbaden: Vollmer.
- González Abrisketa, O. (2012). *Basque Pelota. A Ritual, an Aesthetic*. Reno: Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada.
- Hanna, T. (1970). *Bodies in Revolt. A Primer in Somatic Thinking*. New York: Freeperson.
- Larsen, K. (2003). *Idretsdeltagelse og idrætsforbrug i Danmark* [Sport participation and sport consumption in Denmark]. Århus: Klim.
- Maguire, J. S. (2008). *Fit for Consumption. Sociology and the Business of Fitness*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nietzsche, F. (1887). *Zur Genealogie der Moral* [On the genealogy of morality]. Leipzig: Naumann.
- Petersen, A. (2007). *The Body in Question. A Socio-Cultural Approach*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Plessner, H. (1941). Lachen und Weinen [Laughter and weeping]. Bern. New ed. in: Plessner: *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1982, vol. 7: 201-387.
- Seiffert, H. (1969/70). *Einführung in die Wissenschaftstheorie* [Introduction to the theory of science]. München: Beck.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1998). *Sphären. Plurale Sphärologie* [Spheres. A plural spherology]. Vol.1. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Sloterdijk, P. (2011). *Du musst dein Leben ändern. Über Anthropotechnik*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp. – English (2013): *You Must Change Your Life*. Polity.
- Sloterdijk, P. (2014). *Die schrecklichen Kinder der Neuzeit* [The terrible children of modernity]. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Tang, C. (2010). Yundong: One term for two different body cultures. *East Asian Sports Thoughts*, Taiwan, 1: 73-103.
- Wright, G. H. von (1971). *Explanation and Understanding*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

