

Richard Harvey Brown, Editor.

The Politics of Selfhood: Bodies and Identities in Global Capitalism.

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The Politics of Selfhood is a collection of nine essays which, according to the editor's Introduction, "show how embodied selves and politics of identities operate within 'systems'." Such a goal inspires the mostly American authors to approach a multitude of issues on power, sexuality, private/public dichotomies, consumerism, citizenship, health, technology and late capitalist global economies, aided by a creative borrowing of ideas from thinkers such as Arendt, Durkheim, Hobbes, Foucault, Weber, Baudrillard, Geertz, Bakhtin, Haraway, Elias, Giddens and Latour, amongst others. While the book gathers together areas of investigation usually isolated in the literature on selfhood and embodiment, this contribution is also counterbalanced by the uneven critical scholarly quality of the chapters and lack of clear theoretical and political vision. There is also a sense of datedness to the collection since the references and research rarely venture beyond the mid-1990s.

The first three chapters focus on women. Margaret J. Tally's study of female employees and 'sick leave' argues that newly stressful conditions of overwork and job insecurity in the post-industrial workplace have pressured female employees to use 'sick leave' as an instrumental form of resistance. Unfortunately, only one page (13) discusses the crucial significance of physical pain and concluding remarks confuse the practical relationship between processes of negotiation and resistance. Phillip W. Jenks' chapter on 'The Problematics of Democratic Action within Disciplinary Liberalism' takes up the legal and ethical issues associated with Norplant, a subdermal progestin implant. The writing, to be appreciated for its critique of the misuse of Norplant as form of imposed sterility on poor women, needs a more coherent organization. As it stands the messy juxtaposition of sections on Foucault and Arendt, Norplant, 'resistance' and critical theory, along with the neglect of the plentiful feminist research on the body and reproductive politics, fails to cumulate into the kind of consistent argument or theoretical synthesis Jenks assumes to have achieved. Antonella Fabri's interesting chapter on the Mayan women of Guatemala, a country torn by genocide, poverty and cultural destruction, is one of the few which addresses the 'global capitalism' theme of the book and treats globalization as more than just code for Americanization. Her research on a family-planning community health service highlights how biopolitics, Church and ethnicity join to make Mayan identity a combative process. Readers might question, however, what has happened since the time of this research in the early 1990s and how further feminist theorizing from the literature on gender and development might have enriched this writing.

The next four chapters in different ways concern the performativity of identities and bodies. Lauren Langman compares Brazilian carnival to American superbowl football as symbolic performances that both challenge and reinforce cultural norms and gender roles. While the justification for comparing the two events is not always obvious, their historical treatment is valuable as are the concluding statements about the global commodification of ritual. Timothy W. Luke's chapter, 'From Body Politics to Body Shops', is a lucid and compelling review of the 'cyberorganizing' power over the body and the 'quasi-subjective' and hybridized machined worlds it is made to inhabit. By theoretically

tracking back and forth between the modernity of Hobbes and the postmodernity of Haraway, Lukes maps out the embodied spaces of bionics, bio-engineering, technified therapies, organ transplants and fitness performance machines whereby “technocentric systems” operate “in symbiosis with organic life.” The following chapter by Eva Illouz also takes up the challenge of performing identities by looking at talk shows ‘as moral discourse.’ Academic observations of talk shows either condemn them for their sensationalistic and pseudo-therapeutic exploitation of vulnerable individuals or applaud their democratizing appeal to the socially marginalized identities fostered by the inequalities of our time. Illouz leans to the second position and takes from Beck and Giddens their ‘reflexive modernization’ thesis in order to illustrate how talk shows critique the ambiguities of middle-class liberal culture. Of the many questions raised here about emotional life, moral talk, narrative structure and professional expertise, the one that gathers strength and continues as a prominent theme in the final chapters of the book concerns the breakdown of moral communities and past traditions of social solidarity.

Following Timothy McGettigan’s short reflective chapter on the experience of making a documentary film aboard ‘The Green Turtle’ touring bus, Lauren Langman (‘From Subject to Citizen to Consumer’) and Richard Harvey Brown (‘Narration and Postmodern Mediations of Western Selfhood’) advance this theme with sweeping accounts of the social destruction wrought by postmodern, consumerist, visual culture. Brown’s final chapter, the more intellectually engaging of the two, provides a good concluding discussion by revisiting all the issues raised in the book – the body, selfhood, identity, global capitalism and postmodern consumerism. However, Brown’s overarching sentiment is one of nostalgia for a time when “people were more able to locate ‘their real self’ in their institutional positions and family contexts” and “social validation depended on participation in communities of work, church, neighborhood, or kin.” If today, “simple activities that formerly infused with affect, conducted within the family, and served collective memories, such as preparing food or caring for children, are now available for purchase or hire,” we must also ask who were the beneficiaries of this world we have lost and at what cost to those who suffered to sustain the traditional patriarchal and imperialist orders of family, church, household and kin so wistfully evoked here? And what of the potentialities of postmodern and postcolonial cultural and linguistic forms outside the Western world? As Brown shifts his critique of postmodern conditions to a critique of postmodern thinkers (some of whom were referenced in support of the earlier critique), he argues for a ‘more inclusive vision’ and greater participation in civic life through giving voice to critical narratives of the self that eschew their colonization by consumerism, expertise and hyperreal fragmentation. But whose narratives are being promoted here? And is there a way of aligning the truly critical resources of narrativity, steeped in the depths of time and human experience against the timeless and reckless excesses of global capitalism, without re-familizing gender roles and re-traditionalizing diverse social identities?

Taken as a whole, *The Politics of Selfhood* is an inconsistent text; its topics, writing, theoretical and empirical investigations scatter the problems of life under global capitalism but fail to outline unifying conceptual sets with which to understand it. Perhaps the value of the book is its struggle to sketch out the difficult terrain where macro-structural and micro-experiential dimensions of global capitalism intersect; hence, we have something to learn from the book’s weaknesses as well as its strengths.

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