

This is their body

Sébastien ROUX

How did the body come to play such a crucial part in the definition of contemporary identities? Relying on studies on transplants, childbirth or people's relation to corpses, Dominique Memmi brings to light what is socially and politically at stake in the fact that the self is rooted in the body.

Book reviewed: Dominique Memmi, *La revanche de la chair. Essai sur les nouveaux supports de l'identité*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2014. 288 pages, 22 €.

What stories do modern bodies tell? With *La Revanche de la chair. Essai sur les nouveaux supports de l'identité*, Dominique Memmi adds another chapter to the ambitious reflection she has been leading over the years on “the body, whole or in parts” (p. 8). The book deals more particularly with processes of identification that rely on the flesh in order to “ascribe social positions and identities”, and highlights the way we “build up legitimate identities” through “recourse to the body and to nature” – through a genuine social process that the author defines as a process of “incarnation” (p. 11).

A process of incarnation

Unlike a great part of the research on identity – a fuzzy and difficult notion in today's social sciences – Memmi's book focuses “not so much on the bearers of these identities (that is, virtually each and every one of us) as on those who seek identification through incarnation” (p. 15). Dominique Memmi, whose book testifies to a thorough understanding of the subject, defines identity as the result of a social process that must be objectivated rather than as an essence or a quality. The book does not contain any digression on what we “really” are or on the meaning of our affiliations. The purpose of *Revanche de la chair* is less ambitious but more convincing: Memmi explains why and how the body has become the subjects' locus of truth.

D. Memmi identifies the concrete operations that lead to the process of incarnation through the study of various topics and fields: the disposal of the bodies of dead babies, thanatopraxis, adoption, transplants, organ and gamete donation, the uses of placenta, breastfeeding, mourning, etc. Far from hampering the demonstration, the large variety of themes contributes to its development. Obviously, the author is not quite familiar with all the topics she refers to and she goes into more details in the pages she devotes to the fields she is more familiar with. However, even when she embarks on risky and unexpected topics, Dominique Memmi organizes the data, references, observations or the interviews (mostly conducted by herself) she collected in a brilliant way, so that she gives meaning to social logics that are often apprehended separately. For instance, in the first part of the book, she analyses the predominant discourse on the “need” and the “necessity” for close relatives of people who have been victims of catastrophes to regain possession of or retrieve or put back together the bodies of their loved ones before they can enter into the “grieving process” (chapter 2).

A more detailed analysis of these terms might have highlighted the emergence of contemporary forms of expressions of grief or the kind of professional interventions, which make psychological care necessary. However, Dominique Memmi gives her reflection a wider scope by putting other social dynamics into perspective, like the recent emergence of a “right to access information about one’s origins” in the context of adoption (chapters 6 and 13) for instance, or the symbolical investment placed in placenta in some “alternative” birthing methods (chapter 5). Various cross-references and echoes enrich each analysis. Thus, the grieving process, the right to access information about one’s origins or placenta appear as local *manifestations* of wider *trends* that have been refined by the knowledge and practices that are peculiar to each object. These practices and discourses are understood as reflecting a way of “governing through the flesh” (p. 261 ff.) – after “Governing through Speech” about which Memmi wrote her previous book, *Faire vivre et laisser mourir* –, which relies on the “concreteness of bodies” in order to govern social conducts and construct identities. Anchored in psychologizing and normative representations of what is prescribed as good, but what is also considered as compulsory or necessary, biopolitics is deployed through the management of the body, of its exposure and of the biological knowledge of life and living things that go with it.

The first part of the book – “The Reincarnation of the living and of the dead” – deals with death, bereavement, transplants, birth and filiation. Dominique Memmi looks into the way society deals with life’s margins. Liminal experiences such as the beginning of life, the end of life or situations of indetermination have given rise to a variety of expert-led as well as lay discourses and practices that define what is considered as normal and desirable in terms of behaviour and what is expected in terms of management of the body. A mother grieving the loss of a baby feels, communicates and acts in a specific socially-prescribed way and (claims) she wants to keep tangible remembrances of her child; a diseased person declares she incorporated a donor’s graft as if it was a foreign although non-intrusive part of a body that has only partly become hers; a woman having a child anonymously and giving it up for adoption leaves traces that will enable the child to identify her later, so that the tenuous but irrevocable biological link between her and “her” baby is maintained... These various manifestations highlight the importance of flesh as a substance through which individuals can think of and identify themselves. Obviously, giving meaning to blood, muscle, organ or gene has been done before. But apprehending the body through the management of life and death, conceiving of it as the starting-point of a “reorganization of the subject” (p. 81) is evidence of a remarkable evolution in biopolitics.

The second part, “Undertaking reform”, comprises five chapters on the process of incarnation. Although Dominique Memmi repeatedly reminds the reader that the evolutions she observed were “typical of a period” (p. 217), which invalidates all mechanistic interpretations, she never loses sight of the explanatory role of sociological objectivation. She takes a particular interest in agents impacting upon bodies and subjects. These various types of intervention mostly take place in a professional context: Dominique Memmi offers the reader compelling analyses on psychological care (for the bereaved, chapter 8), and also on the spread – or democratization – of this type of knowledge to other parts of the medical community (like midwives and embalmers, chapter 10).

For all that, these agents are more instrumental in revealing our new relationship to identity than simply just promoting it. Indeed, Dominique Memmi reminds us that “the professionals working in bereavement counselling services, in the care sector or in funeral homes live in the same socio-cultural context as the public with whom they interact and whose expectations they are striving to meet. From this perspective, the kind of sensibility

they express with such acuteness might well reflect a more diffuse uneasiness” (p. 191). This uncomfortable feeling partly results from the ambiguous way people relate and refer to nature. According to D. Memmi, we “constantly refer to nature as our model so as to confer additional legitimacy to our actions”; this “naturalism in action”, as the author calls it, operates in the discourse as well as in the practices of the professionals and the public they are getting involved with. This leads us to understand why and how the flesh, perceived as the “natural” – that is, given and biological – substrate of our existences, is apprehended (and referred to) as the very basis of our identities.

A Desire for Eternity

The last fifty pages of the book introduce the reader to a “Vast Placental fantasy”, in which Dominique Memmi offers thought-provoking analyses on the process of incarnation and on what it reveals about our society. Following in the steps of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault (and also on Nikolas Rose, Giorgio Agamben and Cars Wouters), Memmi’s work gives the full measure of its political significance in these last pages. In her eyes – and this is what her placental fantasy is about – our relation to the world (as subjects, professionals, members of the public...) is tinged with “melancholy”, it is affected by “a despondency resulting from the transience or the vacuity of our existence, a dejection at the inexorable passing of time, which presupposes death and loss” (p. 250). Nature – or more precisely, the idea of nature – appears to be stable, permanent and durable. This is the reason why people see it as a resource that enables them to “stop the passing of time: seeing nature in things amounts to essentializing them through the negation of history” (*ibid.*).

Dominique Memmi suggests that our present relation to flesh and to nature is the outcome of the “uneasiness” caused by the individuation process that has transformed our relation to other people, especially since “the great break of the 1960-1970s” (p. 265). Being utterly liberal, we today have become choice subjects for reformers aiming at re-rooting us back in a (corporeal) destiny that the celebration of free choice and of autonomy has made more difficult to apprehend. The author ends on the responsibility of the professionals (reformers) for those changes and claims that this came as “a surprise in (her) work” (p. 278). Nurses, counsellors, social workers, midwives... in her eyes, these agents are “in a crucial position, which allows them to feel, interpret and then provoke changes” (p. 279). But mostly, they have a very efficient tool for acting and theorizing: the psyche (p. 280), which they (and everybody else) imagine to be built *and* grounded in a corporeal substrate that is always already given. Their action is based on the government of souls (as Nikolas Rose would say); it consists in stating what souls ought to feel, think, say, express on the grounds that, in their own way, they are determined by the materiality of the body.

Revanche de la chair is an important book. It is well organized and highly stimulating, like all great books are. It is written in a straightforward and unpretentious style; the arguments are backed by careful empirical research and the book carries a genuine thesis that gives meaning to experiences often apprehended separately and makes them more intelligible in spite of their resistance to analysis. Some suggestions might be questioned (in particular, the notion of melancholy, which is attractive but vague), and likewise some theoretical positions (why not mention the research conducted by feminist authors on the flesh and on affectivity?). Actually, these choices result from the fact that D. Memmi’s unique research is evidence that social sciences are alive and highly stimulating. Indeed, Dominique Memmi’s book reminds the reader that, with their scientific as well as political scopes, social sciences enable people not only to understand themselves – “the self and the others” as governed

subjects –, but also, in a more general way, to grasp the logic of our period and of our times. *Revanche de la chair* definitely deserves to be held as a milestone.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, on November 13, 2015. Translated from the French by Nathalie Ferron, with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in Books&Ideas, March 24, 2016

©booksandideas.net