

The Social Body

The Western image of the social body undoubtedly derives from the Medieval image of the body politic, which was an attempt to assert continuity of the political entity despite the death of kings, coup d'etats, and foreign invasions. Sovereignty was symbolically invested in ceremonial (one could say 'sacred') objects such as crowns, the court, and, in the most extreme European case, in the English political theory that kings literally possessed two bodies, corporeal and political; the first corruptible, the second mystically passing from the physical body of one sovereign to the physical body of his successor at the moment of death. See Kantorowicz (1957). Medieval images of the social body seem to have been sexless, since it was assumed that the body politic automatically resided in a king and not in a queen. The male gender attributed to the metaphor was probably the result of the slow disintegration of the Western European cognatic clan system, which had defined households royal and peasant for centuries by uniting opposed criteria of tracing relationships (bilateral when looking to the past to identify a putative ancestor, lineal when looking to the future to define a lineage) to produce ambiguous social and political frontiers around households. Women became important vehicles by which strategic alliances were created to clarify and reduce the political strife that inevitably resulted when people claimed dual allegiances in households whose boundaries were simultaneously defined as impermeable and porous depending on what local politics of time were invoked to frame conflicts. Modern states became male and misogynist when they campaigned against all intermediate organisational forms that could claim people's allegiances, whether clans, regional states, or even households and families, and devalued older, feminine symbols of inter-household alliances – Germania, Italia, Britannia, who had never symbolised nations as such but symbolise women's role in defining unclear social boundaries in a cognatic context. Interestingly, as the image of the implicitly male social body was naturalised, symbols attached to women became increasingly divorced from all explicit references to the political and social dimensions of experiential reality. They became 'culturalised' as the male gender became naturalised – women became associated with idealised purity and with the idea of nurturing, the latter's reproductive associations being a semiotic displacement from their earlier role as means of creating 'horizontal' alliances that temporarily clarified ambiguities in 'vertical' cognatic filiation. Not surprisingly, the more ephemeral became the links between the category 'woman' and the social body and the more female symbols of alliance were devalued, the easier it became to displace its metaphoric reference from reified purity to biological and psychological weakness, political naivety, frivolity and passivity (see the discussion in Mosse 1985:17, chap.5, on how representations of these 'national' symbols became tamer and less representative of an aggressive defence of the nation).