

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MICHAEL ATKINSON, *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2003. xiv + 288p. Index. Colour Photos

This book sets out to discover why so “many Canadians are now turning to tattooing as a form of self-expression” (13). Atkinson frames his answer in the work of Norbert Elias (1897-1990) and a theory of “figurational sociology” and on data from 65 tattoo enthusiasts and 27 tattoo artists in Calgary and Toronto, data collected in the ethnographic method of participant observation (here called ethnosociology). A figuration is defined as “a collection of social actors bound together by chains or webs of interdependency” and is a substitute for the concept of society (4). The term sociogenesis refers to the long-term, indeed historical, processes that are the ‘genesis’ of today’s society. Since the self is constructed through the controlling agencies or ‘civilizing processes’ of the web of social relations (9), psychogenesis is understood as the “development of personality structures within specific figurations” (8). These personalities are our “second nature,” those “seemingly taken-for-granted ways (i.e. habits) of experiencing, utilizing and interpreting” our bodies (8). As Atkinson interprets Elias, the body is a site of social control, a “text of civilization,” and what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate bodily display has much to say about current cultural values and meanings pertaining to bodies. Therefore, an enquiry into tattooing as body modification should provide insight into changing figurations (dependencies among individuals) and changing meanings about bodies, their presentation and representation, in culture and society.

Atkinson reviews social scientific theories, especially from psychology and anthropology, which are found wanting, thus setting up the theory of sociogenesis as the means for understanding human behaviour. However, the present analysis is found wanting as well. First, the citation dates used for Elias’s publications fail to note that these ideas were published in English between 1965 and 1989 (The Civilizing Process was published in German in 1939), thus overlooking the historical context of Elias’s theory making. There is little acknowledgement of leading sociological theorists whose work informs Elias’s, hence Atkinson’s, theorizing. For example, the “figurational web” echoes Weber’s ‘webs of meaning.’ Also, Atkinson paraphrases Elias to note that “[a]s social functions within institutions became increasingly differentiated ... individuals became increasingly attuned to the needs of others in society” (128), but there is no mention of Durkheim’s discussions of mechanical society, the division of labour,

religion, alienation or suicide. This is sociology bereft of its historical context. Second, despite dismissing anthropological contributions to understanding tattooing, Atkinson whole-heartedly accepts the anthropological method of field research and participant observation “for making informed (or what sociologists call empirical) claims” and “thick accounts” so that “first-hand knowledge paves the way for enlightened understanding of social practices and spaces” from “the ‘natives’ point of view” (original emphasis, 59). While extolling its virtues, there is no nod to the century or more of practice that has gone into refining the anthropological method which is merely appropriated and renamed “ethnology.” All of this will enable tattoo enthusiasts’ own “accounts [to be] presented alongside sociological understandings of the figuration” (59). Tattoo enthusiasts do have their say; I doubt, however, they would recognize themselves in the analysis.

More problematic is the way Atkinson falls into an early twentieth century, social neo-Darwinist, reductivist pit by positing an essentialist human first ‘nature’. As societies evolve, social controls develop to inhibit innate drives and impulses disruptive of group life and over-rides them with a second nature or learned ‘habitus.’ Then “[f]earing both the formal punishment levied against affective outburst and the social stigma assigned to unbridled behaviour, individuals carefully self-regulate all facets of their public conduct” (129). This is the ‘civilizing process’ of figurations. Clearly this is a treatise on the relationship between the individual and society, deviance and social control. Tattooing, which Atkinson unfortunately never raises above the level of deviant behaviour, is an indication of the ‘decivilizing process’ in Canada and some people use their bodies as cultural canvases to protest social constraints (132). Thus Atkinson argues that “[t]he skin is utilized as a communicative text upon which personalized messages about the individual are written” (198). Messages are meant to be read, but who can read (decode) a text that is individualized, private, and personal? This suggests that the tattoo enthusiast exists in a bubble of meaning which is not shared (what enculturation and habituses are all about); if so, then this is the ultimate alienation and the ‘text’ communicates nothing. If said texts are so obscure that their only significance is to the individual who writes the body, then the reader will assert his/her own interpretation, usually one of deviance.

So why do Canadians tattoo themselves? Among themselves, tattoo enthusiasts don’t agree on what tattooing is all about: art, defiance, life transitions, bodily control, sexuality, rebellion (many adult tattoo enthusiasts never disclose their tattoos to parents because they are afraid of parental anger and rejection), deviance, group membership, self-identity and more. There is little attention given to why many Canadians who are not tattoo enthusiasts find the practice more acceptable than in the past. Thus, figurations are Durkheimian social facts: external, general and coercive. The individual is caught up in but on occasion resists society, sometimes unconsciously (by altering the body) and sometimes consciously (by altering the body). Yet, we are not given insights into the ‘current cultural values and meanings pertaining to bodies’ that this study promised. Despite many interesting forays into the topic, Atkinson never

really answers the question about why more Canadians are tattooing their bodies beyond exploring this phenomenon in functionalist terms as a form of deviance (decivilizing process).

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