

EDITORIAL

The present issue of *Slovak Ethnology* is dedicated to the cultural conceptions of the body, which is a central notion in a specific branch of contemporary anthropology. Today anthropology of the body is one of the most dynamic and diverse fields within the social sciences and humanities. Yet, in the post-socialistic countries this area of research seems to cover only specific topics derived from local academic traditions. Our aim is to contribute to the development of this discipline in our area by addressing important issues, resonating in Central European cultural context.

Anthropology of the body is a relatively new academic field; its development reflects an important turn in epistemology of social sciences linked to the global changes of human societies after the Second World War, including the fall of colonial empires. It has been noticed that the notion of the body emerged only in the late 1970s “as a central site from which scholars across the humanities and social sciences questioned the ontological and epistemological basis of almost all forms of inquiry” (Mascia-Lees, 2011: 1). The related ‘rationality debates’ from the 1960s to the 1980s were connected to plurality of cultural meanings ascribed to the body and to the validity of traditional knowledge of human health (Yoder, 1982). They deeply affected theory as well as methodology of social sciences.

Since the 1970s anthropologists studied the conceptions of the body as products of both biology and culture. Many current approaches in socio-cultural studies of the body originated in the work of Marcel Mauss (1934) implying that the body is a socially constructed notion; it is not only a physical entity, but is rather constituted within the context of culture, society, gender, and class. Mauss’ concept of habitus had been elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) in his complex theory of practice. The emphasis on bodily practice emerged again in a notion of embodiment which shifted attention from studying the body to taking the perspective on a living experience of the body. Embodiment became an important paradigm in anthropology for the study of culture and the self (Csordas, 1994). On the other hand, the symbolic aspects of the body have been explored in various ways since the pioneering works of Mary Douglas (1966, 1970), who stressed the close link between the social and individual dimensions of the body as well as the importance of the body politics.

Whether understood as symbol or habitus, from the 1980s the body has served as the basic concept in examining the operations of power, oppression, and political change. In his ground-breaking works Michel Foucault (1975, 2000) explored mecha-

nisms of regulation of bodies and introduced the notion of biopower. This perspective, where human body appears as an object of social control, has inspired many works in social sciences and humanities dealing with political dimension of body practices and experience. It has been closely linked to the feminist agenda, which criticized the Western separation of the mind and body, the individual and society (Lock, Kaufert, 1998). These same dichotomies have been examined in an interdisciplinary discipline of medical anthropology, which utilized various anthropological theories to explain social aspects of health care. In this field of inquiry, Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) identified three bodies, or three different theoretical approaches and epistemologies: phenomenology (individual body, the lived self), structuralism and symbolism (the social body), and poststructuralism (the body politics).

Anthropologists also made use of the sociological approach in study of the body, represented by the key work of Bryan S. Turner (1996), who proposed the concept of post-modern “somatic society” where the leading political and moral problems are expressed through various discourses on carnality. Turner (1992: 43) notes that anthropologists were traditionally concerned primarily with using the body as part of a social classificatory scheme rather than with understanding the phenomenology of the lived body, emphasizing how the body is represented and how culture is “inscribed” on the body rather than focus on the lived body. From the “somatic” perspective, the body has become the object of commerce and consumption; pleasure and hedonism are legitimized; ageing is denied; and medical technologies of the body manipulation are booming.

In general, the notions of the body as a natural and universal object have been criticized. Anthropologists examined how bodies are perceived and understood by various traditions around the world, to understand the human experience and to explore the ways in which social relationships and cultural symbols have been linked to the body. There is a tendency to consider the body as a physical as well as symbolic artefact, as both naturally and culturally conceived, and as a product of historical situation. The current ethnology/cultural anthropology in the post-socialist countries follows this vein. It offers various works on the cultural notions of the body, including examination of linguistic and symbolic aspects (e.g., Brocki, 2000); the link between the body and religion (e.g., Doležalová, Hamar, Bělka, 2006); historical dimension (e. g., Oravcová, 2011); sexuality and reproduction (e. g., Botiková, Jakubíková, Kiczková, Szapuová, 2014); ageing (e. g., Herzánová, 2007); and the recent publications on the body and health (e. g., Plašienková, 2015). The present issue of the *Slovak Ethnology* aims to contribute to this growing body of research by presenting several studies on cultural meanings of the body. To make the selection inspirational for readers, we invited authors who worked on various topics related to the body, describing different cultural contexts and using different theoretical approaches. The collection of the empirically based articles therefore touches diverse issues.

The rubric of the main articles opens with the study of Mojca Ramšak who explores the symbolism of blood in South Slavic place-names and explains them in terms of the specific cultural notions connected to the present political rhetoric. Her text can be linked to the broader field of symbolic anthropology studying mosaics of cultural meanings in specific historical circumstances.

The next study also deals with the southern Slavic cultural context, but addresses a different issue: Marija Geiger Zeman and Zdenko Zeman analyze empirical data obtained during research in Croatian retirement houses. They apply the focus group methodology and examine the particular aspects of the body – gender and age. Their

results demonstrate how perception, experience, interpretation and strategies of managing of ageing/aged body are gendered.

Gender and institutions related to a specific phase of life cycle are central also to Zuzana Pešťanská's article. She presents the results of long-term ethnographic research at the gynaecological department in a hospital situated in Central Slovakia. To interpret the empirical data, she combines the theories of symbolic anthropology and cultural psychology; her study therefore corresponds to the interdisciplinary approach of medical anthropology.

Whereas Zuzana Pešťanská deals with both symbolism and the notion of power in relation to reproduction at present, Marta Botiková addresses reproduction from a historical perspective. Her article is dedicated to the explanation of the single-child system of reproduction in Slovakia in terms of partnership, pregnancy, childbirth, and health care, and presents an example of applying historical approach in ethnology/anthropology.

The rubric Research Reports brings an article of Kornélia Jakubíková and Veronika Špirková considering communication about the body among young adults in Slovakia. The authors examine how young people reflect communication about sexuality and reproduction, to demonstrate the role of such factors as age, gender, family and peers in talking about the body. This text gives a glimpse into linguistic analysis and the theory of communication.

The essay of Martin Soukup and Michaela Dvořáková provides a general overview of anthropology of the body. The authors make a distinction between three structural levels of studying the body – artefacts, norms and meanings – and apply this perspective to eating disorders. The article therefore points to the strong link between anthropology of the body and medical anthropology, which is visible in the studies of Zeman and Zeman, Pešťanská, and Botiková.

The issue also includes a review of the edited volume by Petr Číhal *Léčení a léčitelství v lidové tradici [Healing and natural medicine in folk tradition]* (2015), written by Zuzana Pešťanská. It is complemented by annotations of new publications in Slovak and Czech related to the body, provided by Nadežda Holubová. The last section of the issue brings the news about recent events in the sphere of ethnology in Slovakia, Czechia and Estonia.

We believe that the present volume offers relevant conceptual, empirical and methodological contributions to studying the cultural meanings and the politics of the body in Central European region. We hope that this collection will stimulate more ethnologists and anthropologists to explore issues related to the body, to enhance the anthropological theory and to better understand contemporary social processes.

MARTA BOTIKOVÁ,
TATIANA BUŽEKOVÁ,
*Department of Ethnology and Museology,
Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, Bratislava*

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