

# Revisioning the Body Politic

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## 1. Introduction

What does “the body politic” mean? Claire Rasmussen and Michael Brown use this term to draw a comparison between the human body and the polis (470). Like the body, the polity has one skin, a bounded area, in which it must operate; it relies on systems and organs, operated by individuals, to function (Rasmussen and Brown 472). Therefore, the body politic encompasses and represents the connectivity of many bodies that create *one* body of government; the faces of the polity are incorporated into this single body, identified as the “artificial man” (excluding those political communities historically fostered by marginalized groups and women) (Gatens 21). The artificial man becomes the symbolic representation of the citizens within the body politic. He is charged with protecting, defending, and representing all natural men (Gatens 22). Is the artificial man capable of incorporating the differences of all members of the polity? This essay will explore the relationship between individual bodies and the body politic, focusing on the artificial man’s inability to incorporate the diversity of all members of the polity and then question how the body politic can be expanded in such a way as to include all bodies.

## 2. Historical Background of the Body Politic

Since the advent of modernity in the seventeenth century, the idea and use of the body politic flourished. In 1615, Antoine de Montchrétien, author of *Treatise of Political Economy*, introduced the notion of the body politics’ health; the state provides

nourishment to every member of its polity, but when individuals are deprived of nourishment, their spirit fades, causing the disintegration of the entire body politic (Harvey 30). In theory, the well-being of every individual body would secure the longevity and quality of the body politic. By the 1700s, communication systems allowed for legitimate social control and the subsequent popularisation of the body politic metaphor (Harvey 59). In the 1800s, Johann Kaspar Bluntschli identified the body politic as a copy of the human body (Harvey 62). Prior to Bluntschli, the body-state comparison was a mere analogy, but Bluntschli brought it to life. The body politic became an organism that was born, surviving, and mortal, just like humans. However, Herbert Spencer advocated for a simpler organism to represent the state, arguing that not every individual action impacts the body politic and some decisions are of greater value than others. Essentially, some individuals are more empowered to determine societal actions than others (Harvey 70). By the late 1800s, inherent power inequalities in the body politic were popularized and hegemonic state actors became normalized.

### **3. Imagined Communities and Imagined Politics**

To cultivate a relationship without inequalities between the individual and the body politic, one must look to the origin of the state: the community. In Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism*, the nation is described as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). For Anderson, any proclaimed community larger than one that engages in face-to-face contact is imagined, as it does not possess the same level of connectivity and kinship (Anderson 6). This community is deep, horizontal, and void of inequalities (Anderson 7). According to Anderson, the

imagined community is dependent on a “neurosis” situated deep within each individual that convinces them of the capabilities of the artificial man to incorporate individual differences (5). But the imagined community and the artificial man are usually not inclusive; the real polity is diverse but is often strained, silenced, and shunned in the shell of the artificial man.

Engin F. Isin, in his article, “City.State: Critique of Scalar Thought,” states that virtual ideas keep communities together (221). Communities’ virtual ideas differentiate members from “outsiders”, or citizens from foreigners (Isin 222). In modern politics, Isin argues, community is built on disagreement and conflicting identities that ‘other’ people. Creating intimate loyalties within communities requires its members to wholeheartedly believe and reproduce the imagined community. Similarly, in William T. Cavanaugh’s “Disciplined Imaginations of Space and Time,” he states that politics are imagined (1). Cavanaugh thinks that the theatre of politics is precisely that, a theatre, filled with actors and plots, used to fool the audience into subscribing to the politics of the current hegemonic power (1). Cavanaugh asks: “How does a provincial farm boy become persuaded that he must travel as a soldier to another part of the world and kill people he knows nothing about? He must be convinced of the reality of borders, and imagine himself deeply mystically, united to a wider national community that stops abruptly at those borders” (1). The farm boy is fooled by his imagined surroundings – his choice to fight is not his own. The agency of the farm boy is compromised by the state’s ability to invoke feelings of nationalism in the body politic. The only agent in the body politic is the artificial man, a relationship that may be considered morally illegitimate by those who are unable to be incorporated or represented by a man.

#### 4. The Problematic Artificial Man

Imagined communities and imagined politics dictate the lives of real human bodies, represented by an artificial man. Assuming Anderson and Cavanaugh's arguments of imagination are correct, why must the artificial man be a *man*? Spencer's reasoning, borrowed from Greek philosophy, encourages the idea that only *some* bodies are capable of logic and sacrifice, making them deserving of a voice (Harvey 70). Modern political theory is still largely defined by Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who were concerned with the distinction between war and peace. They argued that war binds the body politic out of necessity, but in the process culminates civic ideals, such as a unified class (Elshtain 54). Aristotle's proposed order places individual experience within the polis to limit freedoms and resist violence (Elshtain 55). The male warrior trades violence for active political participation. While the citizen-warrior serves the polis, a man without a polis remains an uncivilized lover of war (Elshtain 55). The nature of the polis is orderly and peaceful, yet citizenship is inherently masculinized. While some bodies are deemed worthy of political participation because of their corporeality, others have been historically excluded (Gatens 23).

The artificial man trope is productive for men. In Moira Gatens' *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality*, she says that the human body is historically assumed to be male (23). Not recognizing women is convenient for the artificial man because it allows him to exploit women's invisible labour and regulate and control women's bodies (Gatens 22). If the artificial man were to incorporate difference, his narcissistic image would be compromised (Gatens 27). Instead, the artificial man remains autonomous and unified as *one* body. By not being recognized in the polity,

“the natural woman is left unprotected, undefended, and so is easy prey for the monstrous leviathan” (Gatens 23). Some bodies have always been excluded from the body politic because the body politic relies on the illusion of unity. The body politic fails to be inclusive of all bodies when the *one* body representing them is male or masculinized.

For the out-group, exclusion is frustrating and can spur reaction. In Juliana Spahr’s “The Remedy,” she describes her experience of being a pregnant woman in patriarchy (106-109). She recalls being shocked when spit on by men while breastfeeding in public, later accepting and normalizing the reaction (Spahr 106). By breastfeeding in public, Spahr was no longer a neutral citizen that the artificial man could easily incorporate -- her difference was too great, too ‘other’. Realizing she no longer fit the natural order, Spahr stopped fucking her partner, the embodiment of patriarchy, knowing he could no longer fill the hole in herself -- he was not enough anymore. Instead, Spahr rejected her neutral citizenship and used work, fucking, masturbation, and collaboration to reclaim her identity (106-109). Despite Spahr’s empowering reaction to exclusion, the fact that she was spit on by members of *her own polis* is still disturbing. The real consequences of exclusion can be detrimental.

When bodies are excluded from the polis, they are vulnerable in the private and public spheres. In Judy El-Bushra and Eugenia Piza Lopez’s “Gender-Related Violence: Its Scope and Relevance,” they discuss the far-reaching consequences of the state’s inability to account for a plurality of bodies (1). Personal violence is reinforced by cultural constructions of gender roles and norms. For instance, in women’s subordinated position, they fear provoking men and alter their behaviour to be more passive (El-Bushra and Lopez 2). In turn, women’s passivity serves the artificial man,

allowing women to be easily hidden behind the hegemonic white male. Public violence can be produced culturally or may result from an oppressive state. A government has the power to enact laws or policy and can play a protective role to vulnerable groups if it wants to (El-Bushra and Lopez 2). When the state is oppressive, violent regimes targeting minority groups may emerge. Gender-related violence is reproduced at both personal and state levels. For instance, rape is used in war as a method of torture, often by state militias, but is further aided by personal attitudes and beliefs (El-Bushra and Lopez 5). To ensure that no bodies are rendered vulnerable in either sphere, the body politic needs to embrace plurality.

### **5. The Challenge of Incorporating Difference in the Body Politic**

Incorporating representations of different bodies in the body politic is challenging. In Elizabeth Grosz's article, "Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason," she expands on plural representation in the body politic using "explicit sexualization of knowledges" (26). Historically, the body has been reduced to a singular masculine model, a universal masculinity of knowledges. Grosz explains that the appropriation of knowledge by the male mind left women to function as the body, reducing their desires to those of men and ignoring women's knowledge altogether (38). Subsequently, male systems of knowledge became inscribed on all bodies, securing the centrality of the phallus and male superiority in society and culture. Neutral universal knowledges do not exist, according to Grosz, because masculine interests are inscribed in the minds of others (42). To renegotiate the maleness of the artificial man, the production of knowledge needs to be rethought and patriarchy reevaluated (Grosz 44).

The artificial man will need to be revisited as globalisation challenges the permeability of borders and flows of information. Suddenly, the state's territorial boundary is facing mobile people, ideas, and information (Appadurai 161). The state's strategy of using force and violence to hold the polity together is failing in the face of globalization, states Arjun Appadurai in "Patriotism and Its Futures" (162). When violence fails or is avoided, the movement of people pushing and prodding state boundaries is barely held off by nationalism in a post-national age (Appadurai 167). However, promoting too much nationalism risks producing a reactionary by-product of othering (Appadurai 162). Appadurai says that "minorities are as often made as they are born," an appropriate statement to make in the diasporic twenty-first century (163). Appadurai discusses the genocide against the minority Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina as an example. Ethno-nationalist ideas in the form of Greater Serbia prompted the main perpetrators, the Serbs, to rape and kill thousands of Bosnian Muslims (Appadurai 163). In the age of globalization, nationalistic discourses are less relevant.

## **6. The Role of Post-Nationalism**

Post-nationalism, abolishing the state in favour of large-scale political loyalties and de-territorialized states, is in conflict with the state, prompting them to react forcibly or violently to the threats of post-national Others (Appadurai 169). New social forms are needed, ones that are more fluid and less organized (Appadurai 168). Interestingly, multicultural states have emerged that do not react violently to immigrants. Appadurai gives the example of the United States, a global superpower with permeable borders and a top destination for immigrants (169). On the surface, the U.S.

is prosperous, full of opportunity, and free. Yet, the growing xenophobia in the U.S. suggests resistance to their own plurality. The inability of the state to incorporate difference may mean that it could be overcome by “an unbounded fantasy space” (Appadurai 170). If the U.S., the birthplace of ‘The American Dream’, is unable to be multicultural, it prompts the question: What does a tolerant, plural, borderless place look like?

Canada is often stereotyped as a successfully inclusive state, but many scholars have argued that this is a myth. In Eva Mackey’s *House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*, she disagrees with Canada’s multicultural policy and ideology, saying that despite it being ingrained in Canadian identity, it does not *actually* celebrate difference (11). The notion of multiculturalism places an English-Canadian majority at the center and other cultures at the periphery (Mackey 11). The mere existence of other cultures upholds the multicultural myth of inclusivity in the Canadian national identity (Mackey 12). Canada’s plural identity makes it unique from other forms of nationhood because it is constantly negotiating its identity, which Mackey identifies as constant “crisis” (18). Subsequently, Canada’s lack of a homogenous identity promotes the idea of inclusivity. Instead of a “national cultural homogeneity,” there is white Anglophone dominance (Mackey 18). Domination of other groups is not a new idea in Canada.

Nation-building in Canada involved uprooting Indigenous communities from their lands and confining them to reserves, enabling the settlers to transform “wilderness” into “civilisation” (Mackey 20). Grave injustices against Indigenous peoples were viewed by the white, English settlers as progress and essential to Western nation-building: “the project specifies a (Western) *belief system* within which



continuous moral and physical ‘improvement’ -- progress -- is seen as necessary and natural” (Mackey 21). For improvements to be made, the people needed to be “governable”. Flexible and adaptable strategies were employed, allowing Canada to appear inclusive when they were actually colonizing. Mackey notes that while Canada lacks a homogenous identity, “the shared belief in progressive nation-hood based on Western principles” is strongly apparent (21). The Royal Canadian Mounted Police brought alternative forms of Western nation-building to the Indigenous peoples. Canadian Mounties have been historically viewed by Canadians as the calm, peaceful negotiators to the Indigenous peoples during settlement rather than the enforcers of oppressive, assimilation practices (Mackey 48). Compared to the U.S. and Britain, the Mounties’ methods seemed fair and just, and were thus institutionalized in the Indian Act of 1876 (Mackey 49). While the Mounties, and subsequently the Canadian government, appear to be tolerant and plural, their establishment and espousal of laws and borders on Indigenous land is evidence of the opposite. Although many would claim that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a milestone on the path to reconciliation, Mackey argues that Canada remains anti-multicultural (21). Multiculturalism in Canada, viewed as a strong ideological belief, alienates groups, according to Mackey, and thus is not the site of Appadurai’s “unbounded fantasy space” (170). Instead, Canada’s ideological dilemma is evidence that contemporary notions of the body politic need to be re-written.

## **7. Conclusion**

Re-writing the body politic requires creative and careful exploration of alternative representations of the polity that are capable of incorporating all

standpoints. In practice, this requires an open-mind and active listening, efforts which will invite marginalized groups, typically excluded by the body politic, to share their standpoints. I have argued that individual bodies cannot be adequately represented in the body politic, offering Canada's indigenous peoples as an example, and suggest that an alternative for the body politic is needed.

What will an alternative to the traditional body politic look like? How can the body politic be re-written? In "Embodying Strangers," Sarah Ahmed rejects the idea that bodies will *ever* unify because of the way they are read; differences between bodies are not inherent, they only *seem* alternative or strange when viewed from pre-existing power hierarchies, thus preventing their unification. As space is being renegotiated to maintain and uphold power inequalities, bodies are being partially remade through interactions at the tactile level, the skin (Ahmed 42). Skin, the affective opening to other bodies, simultaneously connects and separates bodies. Ahmed says that the "body carries traces of the differences that are registered in the bodies of others," suggesting that the body is not a neutral plane, but skin is already inscribed with privilege (44). Each body is bound, contained, and bordered by skin; overcoming the binary created by skin is difficult, like crossing physical borders of imagined states and communities. Instead of differences between bodies being mapped out and marked with boundaries, Ahmed proposes looking *through* the skin to see how differences are formed *between* bodies and to understand how these differences are read in the bodies of others (44). By analyzing the lived experience of bodies inside and out, Ahmed seeks to understand how "the very habits and gestures of marking out bodily space involve differentiating 'others' into familiar (assimilable, touchable) and strange (unassimilable, untouchable)" (44). The skin can be used to realize and address difference in a way that current paradigms

cannot. Instead of trying to find enough space to represent all bodies in the body politic, Ahmed's proposal of looking through the skin addresses the real issue: inclusion.

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