

## REVIEWS

Hervé Juvin, *L'avènement du corps*  
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### THE WORLD MADE FLESH

Social agendas in the West are in flux, as new kinds of issues gain salience—pension-systems, immigration regimes, reproductive rights, marital arrangements. Each is giving rise to large blocs of literature. On the left, Robin Blackburn's *Banking on Death* and Göran Therborn's *Between Sex and Power* stand out. On the right, Francis Fukuyama's *The Great Disruption* and *Our Posthuman Future* were well-received interventions. Ongoing changes have found a vaster anthropological setting in Maurice Godelier's *Métamorphoses de la parenté*. In different ways, all these works aim at the forms of social science. *L'avènement du corps* belongs to another genre: the philosophical essay, illustrated with an abundance of striking—if rarely sourced—data, and delivered with an intellectual mordancy and crisp literary éclat that remain, even today, peculiarly French. Its author, Hervé Juvin, might also be regarded as a local phenomenon. In Anglophone societies business and culture are typically strangers, yielding at best—if we exclude the distinguished example of W. G. Runciman, a throw-back to hereditary wealth closer to the time of Rosebery or Balfour than the CBI—earnest middle-brow apologetics at the level of Adair Turner's *Just Capital*; but in France the intellectual executive is a not unfamiliar figure. Operating in the insurance world, Juvin writes without overt political attachments. But in so far as he can be situated, his connexions lie with *Le Débat*, the country's liveliest journal of the Centre-Right.

*L'avènement du corps* announces a time when the human body has started to pre-empt all other measures of value in the West, separating the experience of contemporary generations from that of all predecessors, and the rest of the world. At the basis of this sea change lies a spectacular transformation of life expectancy. When the Revolution broke out in 1789, the average span of life in France was 22. By 1900 it was just under 45. Today, it is 75 for men, and over 83 for women, and continually increasing. 'We have every reason to hope that one girl out of two born in France since 2000 will live to be a hundred years old'. This prolongation of life is 'the present that a century of blood and iron has left us—the present of a life that has doubled'. It amounts to 'the invention of a new body, against need, against suffering and against time; against the world too—the world of nature, which was destiny'. The gift is restricted to the rich. 'An entire generation will soon separate Europe from its neighbours to the south, when the median age of its population passes 50 (towards 2050), while that of the Maghreb remains under 30'.

If the new longevity is a result of the advances of traditional medicine, beyond them lies the new 'industry of life', already capable of the production of human beings without intercourse, and on the brink of laboratory manufacture proper. Eugenics beckons at the future entrance to life, euthanasia as the normal exit from it. Social isolation can already count for more than physical decay in the decease of the elderly: 'the time is near when death will come from distance or disgust with a world that is no longer one's own—where life will no longer be what the body betrays, but what the spirit abandons, betraying the body'. Such parting with existence still remains passive. Ahead is 'active death, willed and chosen, as the last stage in the invention of a new kind of body'—the logical conclusion of 'the claim to life as property, as domain *par excellence* of individual choice and the exercise of free will'.

In between entry and exit, meanwhile, the body-shops of maintenance, repair, transformation and perfection are proliferating, as expenditures on dietetics, health care, cosmetic surgery, embellishment soar. The fabricated faces of Madonna or Mariah Carey are the new icons of beauty, and the pressure they express is felt at all levels of education and career.

At every stage of life, the same gap recurs: children deemed good-looking by peers or adults have a 40 per cent greater chance of finishing their schooling without mishap, just as new employees judged good-looking by their colleagues at work and their professional milieu have a 40 per cent greater chance of regular promotions and an ascending career, and will be likely to meet the handsome young man or attractive young woman who will help them rise in life, etc.

In public affairs, physical appearance becomes an even more essential condition of success, as the political class illustrates to satiety.

Freed from physical labours, protected from ancient maladies, enhanced by novel additives, extended to longer durations, the reinvented body detaches itself from traditional obligations and constraints, as a machine for pleasure that is an end to itself. With this change, marriage as once understood—‘an institution that had nothing to do with desire, pleasure, the couple, and everything to do with the child, the prolongation of the line and its patrimony’—makes little sense. If, as experts point out, sexually speaking

the number of performances is closely tied to the number of partners, is not conjugal commitment contrary to our moral duty of well-being? It would seem the French have got the message. In urban society, more than one marriage in two ends in divorce or separation. In 2002 the average Frenchman is more faithful to his bank than his wife—he puts up with it longer, an average of sixteen years for love, and twenty-two for money.

As for children, the lengthening of the life of one generation reduces its interest in producing another.

An important part of the biological capital of each individual is spent when it reproduces itself. In the current choice not to reproduce, or do so only seldom, or parsimoniously, may be seen a preference for the prolongation of life. At the limit, a generation that lived forever would have no need to reproduce itself at all.

The consequences of this thinning of the threads binding one generation to the next are likely to be drastic for those born into the new order. They arrive, separated not only from parents more and more absorbed in themselves, but from any of the forms of culture or relations with nature that once gave continuity of experience between the generations. Instead, they increasingly inhabit a virtual universe of digitalization, erasing the boundaries between the real and the simulacrum.

The majority of children between three and twelve, initially in the United States, and henceforward also in France and Europe, spend more time in front of a screen—television, computer, video-game, mobile phone—than with their parents, teachers or their friends: on average more than five hours a day, as against four with teachers, less than three with friends—and scarcely more than an hour with parents.

In these conditions, the transmission of customs and values that was once assured by the family, the school system, the army, the church or the party

tends to shrivel to the passing on of one value only: money, as if in reparation for the abandonment of all the rest. Legacies get steadily larger, and investments in children—typically, privileged forms of education that will pay off in the labour market—continue to climb, even as the imaginative and moral distance between progenitors and their offspring grows.

What conclusions does Juvin draw from his portrait of societies dominated by a reinvented body? Economically, parents may ultimately leave larger bequests to their children, but meanwhile they have been taking—and will go on taking—far more from society at large, in a gigantic redistribution of assets at the expense of newer generations through the pension system. In France, he observes, the total purchasing power allocated to those who have retired has exploded in the last thirty years: a couple retiring in 1980 could expect to receive triple the sum in pensions that their parents would have got in 1956. Indeed, since the war the purchasing power of the retired has increased six times over, as against four times for wage-earners. Social benefits—not just pensions, but every kind of tax exemption and subsidized or free services—overwhelmingly go to those who have ceased to work, in a system whose deficits will soon tot up to some 10 per cent of GDP. This concentration of resources cannot last for ever. ‘Sooner or later it will make an accumulation of privileges that gives social spending the role once occupied by inflation—but with inverse redistributive effects, benefiting creditor retirees rather than young wage-earning debtors—insupportable’.

This sounds like a standard refrain of neo-liberal critiques of the French welfare state, which regularly denounce the same distortions, and count on the entry of Anglo-Saxon pension funds and flexible labour laws to rectify them, in confident reliance on the globalizing logic of today’s world market. Juvin, however, while otherwise at one with such critics, evinces none of their optimism. The market economy, he argues, was the bearer of the project of the West, ‘born under the sign of reason, mistress of universalism and of individuation’, and long remained its last criterion of the real and rational.

The masters of suspicion shook our physical, psychic and moral certitudes; the market economy restored the principle of truth that we need to speak, to compare, to exchange—in a word, to live. Amidst abundance, peace, riches, it has been all that upheld reason in the world of ideologies, which contested but could not overthrow it, all that remained of logic between isolated individuals; all that united them, the only common language among those who no longer share anything, the only reason for acting among those who no longer have any other.

An overly extravagant homage? Alas, simply a tribute to the past. ‘That is finished. A welfare economy, under the aegis of the primacy of the body, is operating an immense reshuffling of values and prices, of preferences

and norms'—one that 'places health, well-being and physical integrity above the economy', and in so doing signifies a return of 'collective choices'. In no way does this mean an eclipse of markets, which on the contrary are poised to invade ever more domains of the corporeal, and privatize them. But the financial markets that are today our nearest thing to a regime of truth will have to adapt to this successor system, and derive their legitimacy from subserving it, by 'introducing calculations of value-added into the production of welfare'. Satisfactory profits lie ahead, as 'the capitalism to come focuses unexamined means on the human body', in health care, procreation and physical enhancement, 'investing in what has never been the object of investment, inventing forms of private property over what has never been anyone's property, determining monetary flows to pay for what has never been the object of exchange or demand'. But the days when financial markets call the shots will soon be over. Another kind of regime is waiting.

What will be its politics? For Juvin, born in 1958, the culture of the body descends from the sixties, when the rebels of 1968 raised the demand for sexual freedom. 'Naturally, behind it, nothing, or very little was at stake; the only real liberation in this area is one that individuals achieve for themselves—collective political demonstrations are of small consequence for it'. Behind the banners and slogans, in fact, the deadening opposite of desire was on the march, the saturation and banalization of sex, with its generalized appropriation by the market. Alongside this flattening of the libidinal landscape, moreover, has gone the fading of all past forms of the transcendent. Longevity extinguishes belief in eternity. Not that a need for the sacred simply disappears. Religion, like nature, still has its appeal. But in this regime, genuine belief in either of them has all but vanished, and will not return. Instead, we have ersatz versions: techno raves rather than holy communion, not woods or wetlands but municipal parks.

Still, whatever the fate of desire or devotion, surely democracy itself is safe? Unfortunately not. The new technologies of permanent connectivity 'put the world at the disposal of the body, dispensing it from belonging, being represented, debating or voting'. They thereby undermine the traditional institutions of democracy without as yet creating any viable forms to replace them.

With the exhaustion of collective adventures, the deep weariness of the mind at the futile quest for the truth of History, of nature or of matter, only the narrative of the body, of its satisfactions and pleasures, and the search for new modes of sensibility, experience and emotion, still hold our attention.

What is the upshot? Juvin's central message is a sinister paradox: what communism set out to do, and disastrously failed to achieve, capitalism is in the process of realizing. The wildest of all the utopian dreams of revolutions

gone by is now taking shape, unseen, before our eyes. 'The project abandoned by a defunct political ideology, the transformation of the human condition, has become the object of the unexpected couple of science and the market'. For the discredited messianic conception of an anthropological transfiguration of humanity is at length coming to pass. 'The economy of free enterprise has succeeded in delivering, and more, what the various socialisms promised and what they pursued with all the means at the disposal of a virtually unlimited power, in China as in the USSR: it has given birth to the new man'.

How should *L'avènement du corps* be situated? At first glance, it might seem to belong to the literature of bio-politics set in train by Foucault, and an abundant source of demagogy and posturing ever since. In the Anglophone academy, in particular, where it has been picked up by cultural studies, the term 'body' is a fairly reliable warning of hot air to come: a flashing sign to stay well away. Juvin, however, does not descend from this line of speculation. Standard references to Saint Michel are missing. His background is more that of the sober actuary than the goggle-eyed *fumiste*. Still, the question remains how far the notion of the body as deployed by him is less a definable object than an all-purpose operator allowing him to sweep up a range of heterogeneous processes into a single diagnostic. His chosen genre lends itself to this. Without citation of sources, the evidence for many of his most arresting claims is not readily testable. In that respect, *L'avènement du corps* might be regarded as an example of Kulturkritik. But here that broad category assumes a more specific guise. The essential register of the book is vatic: possessed of a driving vision of the future, commanding the selection of the data mustered to illustrate it. Extrapolation and exaggeration are inherent to this form. Does it thereby fall under an epistemological ban? Only for the most prudish scientism. Provided its nature and limits are understood, the practice of the genre can be a sign of intellectual vitality, without which cultural life would be poorer. Juvin is plainly such a case.

That said, the horizon of the book is more local than its intention. Ostensibly, the new regime it describes is coming into force across the advanced capitalist world. In practice, however, the general zone of reference is Europe—the Venusian sector of the West, in Robert Kagan's trenchant dichotomy, rather than its Martial terrain in the United States. A comparison of Juvin's work with Fukuyama's pair of books on related topics brings home the differences. The former splices together problematics that remain distinct in the latter: marriage and the family in *The Great Disruption*, and biotechnology in *Our Posthuman Future*. Missing from Juvin's European prospectus, on the other hand, are the American preoccupations with crime and psychotropes that feature prominently in Fukuyama's work. The intellectual setting of *L'avènement du corps*, however, is still more delimited than

its European framework. The book comes out of a set of peculiarly national debates in France.

Juvin's emphasis on the deracinated abstraction of the electronic universe, and the de-naturalization of the human body, the atomism of podsters and surfers, is continually set against the historic connexions of human beings with the harsh resistances of the land that marked French rural society up to the 50s, and the bracing disciplines of the State that moulded the institutions—schools, regiments, public services—of the French republic up to a more recent date. The dissolution of these two worlds, with mass urbanism, consumerism and now incipient multiculturalism, has left acute tensions in France's political and intellectual life, splitting former friends and foes in all directions. In the ensuing disputes over what direction French society is or should be taking, *Le Débat*—the journal in whose collection *L'avènement du corps* appears—has ranged itself with those who regret the weakening of the classical Republic, and view with scepticism the arrival of more gelatinous, de-sublimated, Americanized norms of existence. Juvin's affiliations are with this circle. But similar attachments to an older order, and a related hostility—more savagely expressed—to the new, can be found on the left, most eloquently in the writing of Régis Debray. At various points in his book, as in his reflections on 1968, Juvin's judgements are very close to those of Debray. *L'avènement du corps*, indeed, can be read as a dialectical sequel to Debray's famous verdict on the late sixties: that the ardent revolutionaries of May imagined, like Columbus, that they were setting out for China, only to land in America—more specifically California, launching a cultural revolution in the name of a dreamland communism that in fact ushered in, rather than overthrew, a capitalism of demoralized consumption in France. The punch-line of *L'avènement du corps* takes the cunning of reason one stage further. The arrival of a capitalism reduced to the ministrations and transactions of the body will be the ironic triumph of the most extravagant deliria of socialism.

What of the antibodies that might prevent this? Daniel Bell, whose *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) is the ancestral foreboding of misgivings on the centre-right about the antinomian consequences of unfettered individualism, put his bets on the 'return of the sacred' as the eventual bulwark against the complete disintegration of an orderly bourgeois world. Religion would step in to stem the tide of self-indulgence, where morals and politics had failed. From the left, Debray would make a parallel move, if with a much more ambitious historical theory, positing transcendent faith as a virtual anthropological necessity—typically a world religion, though he has more recently scaled this back to any, even lay, communion. Juvin declines such consolation, in tones more reminiscent of Weber's scornful dismissal in *Science as a Vocation* of the cults of his own day. *L'avènement du corps* ends

on a muted note. Financial markets are about to be dethroned as masters of the globe. But they will not cease to thrive in the regime that succeeds theirs, which will require collective political choices to determine the orders and distributions of welfare, yet erodes the democratic foundations for doing so. Neo-liberalism is indispensable, yet insupportable. The book is a contribution to a literature with a future: bitter-sweet reflections—these distinctly more bitter than sweet—on the surprises of victory in the Cold War.