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TABLE OF CONTENT

Editorial.....	3
Liviu Warter	
Management Education and Duff McDonald's Report on the Harvard Business School.....	7
J.-C. Spender	
Culture, Vuca and the All-Encompassing Unrest. What Will Happen?	25
Huib Wursten	
The Erosion of Multiculturalism in the Western World.....	31
Jorge Diener	
Accounting and Statistical Methods for a New Ethic of the History. Case Study for Romania's Recent History	37
Băluță Aurelian Virgil	
How to Integrate Nature & Nurture in Coaching?	47
Philippe Rosinski	
Sacred Rituals, the Body's Religious Symbolism and Human Trafficking	57
Cristina Gavriluță, Nicu Gavriluță	

SACRED RITUALS, THE BODY'S RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING¹

Associate Professor Cristina Gavriluță

E-mail: cristina_gavriluță@yahoo.fr

Professor Nicu Gavriluță

E-mail: nicolas@uaic.ro

Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iasi, Romania

Abstract

This text assumes a socio-anthropological perspective on human trafficking. Thus, the trafficking phenomenon proves to be at the heart of an entire set of symbols and social representations that have as their subject the human body. In order to prove this, we believe that studying the ways the body is assigned value in religious societies makes it possible to understand certain current deviant phenomena, such as human trafficking. Moreover, placing the body in a dual discourse of the "religious/secular" type allows the cultural dimension of the body to be understood, irrespective of the social circumstances the latter operates in. Obviously, the paradigm – inspired by Michel Foucault's writings – we have applied in this work allows us to descend into the universe of the body, thus letting us focus on a whole range of body-related modalities and practices. They form a veritable code or mark of inter-human relations, as well as being a mirror for our positioning within the world and in relation to our own bodies.

In our perspective, the assumption of the body's sacred and symbolic dimensions may become an essential key for improving control and for increasing the authorities' effectiveness in preventing, fighting and reducing human trafficking.

Keywords: body, representation, control, authority, power, sacred, desacralisation.

1. ON THE FORMIDABLE PERSISTENCE IN TIME OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is by no means not a recent practice. History shows that our attitudes and behaviours in relation to the Other, to the body and person of our neighbour, have not always operated in the positive modes of mutual respect, understanding and appreciation. Slavery, prostitution, kidnapping, various forms of punishment are just a few examples that have had a long career over time. Nowadays, deceit, kidnapping, blackmail, disinformation, manipulation and intimidation techniques are successful strategies in the practice of human trafficking. Official statistics and data from Europe, the US and the entire world are proof to that.

However, the human trafficking phenomenon involves a number of socio-cultural data. Behind it are individual or collective values, attitudes and representations that have proven remarkably long-lasting. We might say that they act like Pareto's residues. It is only the forms in which they manifest themselves that change and adapt to the social context.

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In such a context, the following questions appear as justified: how is it possible that in the 21st century, where there is more talk than ever about human rights and where the Western laws protect such rights, that these practices exist? How to explain the phenomenon's persistence in time, as well as its formidable capacity to reproduce?

The assumptions we start from in constructing our answers and an explanatory pattern concern chiefly the simultaneous existence of positive and negative representations of the human body and person, both in religious and lay spaces. They evolve in time and are materialised in desirable or predicted behaviours.

2. THE RITUALISTIC TAMING OF THE BODY

In any religious space of the world, the human body has constantly enjoyed special attention. Irrespective of time and of cultural area, religious beliefs and practices have reserved a special place for representations and practices concerning the body. The latter has been worshipped, adorned, mortified in various ways. Other times it has been embalmed and mummified, but also ritualistically devoured.

Basically, we cannot conceive of the religious act or rituals outside the body. The latter acts as an *Axis Mundi*, a point of reference and of connection between this world and the next.

Worth mentioning however are the dual, sometimes extreme attitudes embraced by religion in its relationship with the body. The accounts of ethnologists and anthropologists, picked up by Mircea Eliade in order to illustrate various initiation rites, are illustrative in this respect. The puberty initiations recorded in various parts of Africa or in the Fiji Islands for instance, involved body mortification rituals. The treatments applied to the body were quite harsh: penitence, beatings, fights with animals, the test of survival in a forest, subincision etc. "In South-East Africa, the tutors hit the novices mercilessly, and the latter are not allowed to manifest their pain in any way. Such excesses result sometimes in the death of the boys." (Eliade, 1995, p.51) Under the same extreme category fall the rituals of remote populations such as those of the Pacific Islands, which practice anthropophagy (Moros Pena, 2009; Avramenscu, 2003). Whether we are dealing with funerary cannibalism, such as that practised in the Congo, or with a war ritual, like the one mentioned by Garry Hogg in 1958 (Hogg, 1973), its ritualistic and sacred dimension stands out.

Even in the European space, a number of religious norms belonging to various Christian cults surprise with their embrace of terrible penitence acts that have to be inflicted on the body. For example, some written accounts (Maior, 1906, vol. 1) concerning folk devotion in 18th century Transylvania show that strategies of body mortification abounded in the area: "fasting, cilices, Christic stigmata and other similar techniques meant to repress the rebellion of the flesh" (Marginean, 2000, p.139).

Recommendations and advice regarding the adoption if certain body conducts can be found in the book of moralities *Floarea darurilor (The anthology of virtues)* (Moraru, 1996), very popular in the 18th century. Along the same line we have the practice of self-flagellation or the ritual exercise of radical ascetic and concentration practices such as immobility or the suppression of food or sleep etc.

All these radical forms of relating to the body have also been present in India, in the Far East and even in Eastern and Western Europe. These are just a few classic examples that illustrate certain harsh behaviours that religion assumes in its relationship with the body. At the same time, in religious manifestations we find kind, gentle formulas for the valorisation of the body. Ritualistic practices of caring for and adorning the body, together with embalming, mummification or body worship indicate a friendly relationship with the body.

The common denominator of the positive and negative variables mentioned above is the assumption of a sacred and ritualistic dimension of life. In archaic and traditional

communities, certain body techniques, as well as radical treatments applied to it, were performed in well-established (sacred) contexts and were approved by a number of spiritual leaders or professionals of the sacred (priests, shamans, masters etc.). In this case, religion mediates the opening towards divinity through a number of concrete gestures rather than through an abstract or rational conduit.

Under the sign of sacrality, the representations of the body and the various behaviours associated to it go beyond any usual labelling (as a normal or pathological act). Human trafficking in the shape of a mutual exchange of men/women takes on different connotations when it occurs in a ritualistic setting, par excellence sacred (Mauss, 1997).

Given this context, a number of justified questions arise: why are such extreme, dual approaches concerning the representations of the body present in religion? what is their role in society? what is the connection with human trafficking in the guise of exchange, gift or sacrifice?

In his writings, Rudolf Otto (Otto, 1917; Otto, 1923) shows that the encounter with the sacred falls outside the limits of the mundane. It overwhelms the individual both through majesty, mystery (*misterium majestas*), as well as through awe and terror (*misterium tremendum*). All these strong and contradictory feelings are experienced not only at spiritual level, but also concretely, at social level, through the body. Thus, *the body turns into a true mediator between the social and the spiritual dimension of existence*. Practices such as the exchange, the gift and even human sacrifice leave the sphere of the mundane deviance and enter the symbolic universe of rituals.

On the other hand, a number of sociological and anthropological studies and investigations highlight the therapeutic and social role of religion (Weber, 1998). Through rituals, social actors assert their membership in the community and in the group. They assume a certain social order and organisation and, most importantly, violence and all social humours are eradicated and controlled precisely through their amplification at the moment of the ritual. "The religious always aims to calm violence, to stop it from breaking out. Religious and moral behaviours aim for non-violence in an immediate manner in daily life and, in a mediated manner, frequently in ritual life, through the paradoxical intermediary of violence." (Girard, 1995, p.26) The social effectiveness of radical practices on the body is paired with the authority the religious institution acquires in social life through the control it has on the body. This fact is remarkably useful if we take into consideration the entire host of anthropological and ethnological approaches postulating the fact that aggressiveness has a hereditary and biological component (J. Ornith., 1935; Tierpsychol, 1943; Wien, 1963; München, 1973).²: "It can only be «tamed» by the culture of a society." (Gavriliuță, pp. 197-207)

Thus, in the realm of the sacred, the body is tamed and educated in order to ensure social order. Violence, interdictions, the practices of exchanging human beings in guise of *potlatch*, become means of social and symbolic therapy through which evil is extirpated from society. Religion manages to extract from the category of the pathological a number of deviant phenomena, such as that of trafficking. However, normality is acquired by the strict observance of ritualistic rigours. Nowadays, outside any sacred ritual, the exchange of human beings has become a deviant, negative phenomenon, profoundly harmful to man, to the social group, the community and the society.

² There are, however, other explanations for aggressiveness, rejecting or nuancing the theory of the hereditary given. Henri Laborit, for example, places aggressiveness and violence at the intersection between the biological and the cultural. Erich Fromm finds the motivations for aggressiveness in the area of the unconscious, while Robert Muchembled calls violence "a residue of primitive times" (Toader Nicoară, "Istorie și violență", in the journal *Caiete de antropologie istorică*, Year I, issue 2, July-December, 2002, p. 14)

This approach also evokes a certain philosophy that religion acknowledges, concerning the presence of evil in the world. The negative of the various religious practices and valorisations asserts, in fact, that *good and evil coexist, and only their conscious and ritualistic assumption makes social normality possible*. In this picture, the body becomes both the object and the subject of the establishment of normality in the world. However, in the modern world the body continues to be a central actor, despite desacralisation, despite the multiplication of social representations, discourses and practices. In this plural disposition, the modern and contemporary world continues the effort to tame the body. The aim is not just to ensure social normality, but also to use it lucratively as part of delinquent activities.

3. THE DESACRALISATION OF RITUALS AND THE ISSUE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Michel Foucault is one of the few researchers and authors who have analysed the body in the context of a post-modern society, to a great extent a desacralised one. The French author brings into discussion "the political technology of the body" (Le Breron, 2002, p.76) – interpreted from the angle of the evolution of knowledge and of social control. The issues he raises in *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (Foucault, 1975) concern chiefly the relations of power and authority acting on the body, thus placing human corporeity in the sphere of politics and its power games. We therefore find ourselves in an eminently laic context, one that generates various forms of control and of body enslavement. "But the body is the same as immediately involved in a political field; power relations operate on it an immediate integration, they invest it, they mark it, they shape it, they torture it, they make it work, they force it into ceremonies, they ask it for signs. This political investment is connected, through complex and mutual relations, to its economic utility; (...) the body does not become a useful force unless it is at the same time a productive body and an enslaved one." (Foucault, 2005, pp.32-33)

This is valid not only in terms of the punitive practices used by the state and its institutions, but also when it comes to *human trafficking*. Although the subtle operating mechanisms seem to be the same, irrespective of the power relations the body is engaged in, we see a transition from the state, abstract entity towards a personalised form of the exercise of authority and power. *We are dealing here with the person of the trafficker, who exercises his authority and power on the victim*. Moreover, research shows that the trafficker is, as a rule, someone known to the victim, part of its entourage. It is precisely this personalised, direct relationship between victims and criminals, that makes human trafficking such a complex and difficult to handle issue.

Traffickers prove to be people with a remarkable social sense. They are quite familiar with the art of mastering and manipulating authority in inter-human relations. They know how to use and to make profitable particularly the economic utility of the body. They are fully aware of the fact that bodies can be productive as long as they are submissive and accept the traffickers' domination.

The strategies the traffickers develop become arguments in this respect. The victims are supervised, deceived, blackmailed, attacked and aggressed. Most of the means used target chiefly the body. They fall into a profane ritualistic category, one through which the victims lose control over their own bodies. They end up, oftentimes, accepting the trafficker's authority, losing their identity. Thus, the body becomes a commodity (Baudrillard, 2008, 165-180).

Undoubtedly, human trafficking is part of the sphere of social pathologies. Such behaviours are obviously outside the sacred and the religious sphere, as well as outside the jurisdiction of the authority and power relations instituted on bodies by the lay state.

In the case of trafficking we are dealing instead with a transfer of these power relations from a macrosocial to an inter-individual level. In this context, the body is a profitable means of domination. A whole diversity of practices and strategies are used; their ultimate purpose is to destroy identity and to obtain the victim's recognition of the perpetrator's authority. The domination and enslavement mechanism (De La Boetie, 1996) present in human trafficking makes possible the development of genuine social networks. Within them, the operation and the social reproduction of criminal behaviours as part of the trafficking activity is greatly influenced by the daily rituals in which the bodies of the victims, as much as those of the traffickers, are engaged.

Gestures, attitudes and social behaviours are thus invested with new meanings and significances. We are witnessing thus a multiplication of identity-related and symbolic reference points, through the mediation of the body. These aspects are visible not only in the criminal trafficking activity, but also in the sphere of everyday normality. Irrespective of whether we are dealing with a relativisation of values in a transparent society (Vattimo, 1995), or whether these values are in a constant movement and inadequacy in a fluid society (Baumann, 2007), they indicate, in fact, a desacralisation of the body. This fact also has direct implications on social control.

The identification of mistreatments applied to the body as delinquent attitudes and their increase in number are a consequence of the repositioning of human behaviour in another reading grid, provided by the mutations that have occurred once the society has become secular and desacralised. Crime is no longer a condemnable sin, nor is it a form of excess through which society ritualistically purges evil in order to connect to the transcendent plane.

All these mutations indicate that the very relation of power between the secular and the religious in the modern world results in the outlining of certain patterns in the exercise of authority and control. Robertson R. and Chirico J. point out that "the lay state has begun to act in realms that hitherto have been sacred" (Robertson & Chirico, 1985, p.210-242). Control over bodies through certain ethics, social practices, ideological recipes (Baudrillard, 1970) or through scientific discoveries lend power and authority to the state.

Nevertheless, the fact that the importance of the sacred in people's social life and in the operation of their bodies decreases and is contested causes *the lay authority to have less symbolic effectiveness*, despite efforts to the contrary. In addition, the means used by the state become banal, turning into inspiration models for groups and individuals for whom the economic value of bodies (Foucault, 2007, p.233) in a consumer society comes first. For instance: the strategies for pursuing the traffickers often become models for the methods used by the traffickers themselves in order to control their victims. *This may explain why the state's institutional efforts to control human trafficking are left behind by the developments in the phenomenon.*

The desacralisation of the body and the reassertion of its importance in contemporary society are also visible in the case of various forms of delinquency. Rape, assault, false imprisonment, aggressiveness and violence are illustrative in this respect. However, in the case of human trafficking, the issue of corporeity is much more apparent. One explanation could be that the victim's body is accompanied in the deviant manifestations themselves by a certain profane ritualisation of gestures, routines or activities, natural or imposed. *All these become devices through which the bondage condition of the trafficked individuals is experienced chiefly in relation to one's own body.*

In this case, the anthropological perspective provided by David le Breton can nuance and explain the relationship with the body in everyday life, as well as in crisis situations, such as those generated by human trafficking. The assumptions behind Breton's interpretation state that the socialisation of certain body modalities and practices ultimately have a *transparency*

effect. The body that appears as a *forgotten evidence* in the contemporary world, becomes in the circumstances of human trafficking an important, often uncomfortable, awkward and unpredictable actor. This because "in the feeling of security that derives from the intelligible and familiar character of the mundane, the orderly introduction into play of the body has an essential role. The succession of rituals throughout the day owes its efficiency to an architecture of gestures, sensations, perceptions that give force to the actor and free him from having to be too vigilant in going through the various sequences of his life. Underpinning the rituals is a precise organisation of the body." (Le Breton, 2002, p.90)

This routine of showcasing the body, together with other daily rituals, has been exploited by the Western culture in order to erase the body, to make it invisible. However, the body becomes apparent and present in extreme moments, during crises. *One such moment would be that in which an individual is trafficked and loses his or her freedom*. Limited freedom of movement, cohabitation with unfamiliar individuals, in obscure places lacking minimum hygiene standards, obeying the demands imposed by the trafficker, forced labour, sexual exploitation etc. are as many ways in which the trafficked individual *experiences the condition of falling within one's body*.

To a certain extent, the trafficked person's experience is similar to that of a prisoner. Georges Hyvernaud (Hyvernaud, 1999, pp. 53-63), discussing the experience of his own imprisonment in a Nazi camp, pointed out that in those circumstances the life of one's body becomes alive, perceptible. From a Platonic perspective, this is equivalent to an *ensomatose*, a fall into the sensible world, experienced dramatically by the trafficked victim. The body does not only makes its presence felt, it also hurts, it gets tired, it is used, abused and controlled. The body becomes a commodity, or even a burden. In such a context, it may (apparently) lose any meaning that would call to mind its connection to the sacred.

Human trafficking pulls the body out of oblivion and makes its presence felt in its rawest, most dissolute, absolutely humiliating forms. Helplessness in front of a body that is abused, humiliated, subject to all kinds of torture engenders fear, submission and compliance with the trafficker's authority. Practically, the trafficker's authority and power are built on the destabilisation of the victim's relationship with its own body. The strategy is significant, given the intimacy and the subtle relationships we have with our bodies. Therefore, the body is a "configuration of power" (Nietzsche in Bondor, 2011) with profound echoes in the society. "Since [the body] is a plurality of instincts (emotions, impulses etc.) at war, but also in a relative equilibrium, then the weakening of instincts and their anarchy are a state of decadence." (Bondor, 2011, p. 151) Maybe it is precisely this state of decadence, observed by Nietzsche in his writings and experienced by the victim, that translates ultimately into bondage behaviours. Such types of reasoning place the body in a central position in the construction of power relations between the trafficker and the victim. The body turns thus into an instrument of domination, into a commodity, but also into a lucrative means of production.

At stake is also a certain complicity in the expansion or the contamination of all the relationships the victims have with the criminal network members. The victims soon learn an entire arsenal of corporal manifestations, which allows them to survive, to cope with the new environment, but also to develop avoidance and evasion techniques.

Moreover, the subtle, often culpable complicity between the trafficked persons and their own bodies is accompanied by another, at inter-group level. In this context the body is the only palpable reality through which codes, practices and routines of deviant behaviour are constructed. The traffickers communicate between themselves and with the victims through gestures, signs and behaviours. Body language in the case of delinquent groups definitely has many symbolic valences.

An obvious mark of the discovery and effective experience of the condition of victim and serf, the body may be, to an equal extent, a true repository of deviant and delinquent behaviours. In the trafficking phenomenon, the body's manifestations may be labelled according to Mauss' theories as genuine *total social phenomena* (Gavriliuță, 1998, p.111-165). The accurate reading of the body in such situations may yield information and unexpected solutions for managing and controlling the phenomenon.

4. BODY MANIPULATION: BETWEEN THE SACRED, THE PROFANE AND THE DYNAMICS OF POWER GAMES

The analysis undertaken in this work has an obvious anthropological and cultural angle. This was in fact our deliberate aim. In essence, we have tried to place the human trafficking phenomenon in the broader context of social paradigms in which the sacred, the profane and the power games may become the ingredients for a different interpretation of the phenomenon. In this generous direction of approach, the body remains a constant presence. The duality, the transparency, as well as the diversity of its concrete manifestations make it a veritable indicator in researching human trafficking. From the analysis perspective we are proposing, the human trafficking phenomenon proves to be an extremely complex one and a problem difficult to control by the authorities.

For these reasons (and for many others as well), modern societies have developed an entire social and ideological mechanism that condemns human trafficking as one of the most serious forms of social pathology of the moment. The results recorded by specialists show that the phenomenon is far from being under control. Its clandestine character, the existence of broad and subtle social networks, an entire host of complicities, as well as the formidable capacity this type of criminal activity has to reproduce and adapt to the circumstances of the moment may explain to a certain extent the difficulties faced by the activity of combating human trafficking.

This fact may appear to be paradoxical. Despite the increased degree of civilisation in contemporary societies, despite the development of social control strategies and techniques, we see an increase in human trafficking, as well as a growth in connected criminal activities. To the great number of sociological, legal or political explanations, discussed by researchers, we would like to add two more.

Firstly, in the opening of this chapter we have underlined the importance of the symbolic and ritualistic valorisation of extreme behaviours related to the human body. In religious societies, this had a very special outcome. The evils of the society the body was directly involved in were exorcised through rituals. Granted, not all delinquent phenomena could be destroyed in this manner. However, the assumption of evil in a ritualistic framework managed to ensure a certain social normality. We believe that, in fact, the issue here is the sacred and symbolic effectiveness of social control strategies.

Secondly, we can assemble an explanation concerning human trafficking by reflecting on a number of gaps between our biological development, our cultural development and our social one. While from a biological and psycho-affective point of view man has not seen spectacular changes over time (people have always cried, hated, loved, developed all sorts of aggressive behaviours), from a cultural perspective things are much more nuanced. The criteria here are axiological. Thus, our behaviours and acts may be good or evil, desirable or undesirable, depending on the dominant values in society.

History shows that the gap between the two coordinates mentioned above is closed through the assumption of crime, of the undesirable at social and cultural level. They are assigned meanings and values that oftentimes go beyond contingency. Archaic and traditional societies have managed to do that. Numerous anthropology and ethnology works record not only purifying rituals, but also genuine strategies of traditional justice with an effectiveness

that is difficult to dispute. Some of them are rediscovered today through restorative justice practices.

In the modern world, things change even further. The unprecedented development of technology and communication manages to make available to the same person a multitude of options for manifesting the same feelings, emotions and states of mind. Today's human trafficking is in no way similar to the slave trade of the past. The gap between our natural data and the civilisation of the modern world is quite large to be coverable from a cultural point of view. Cultural data have quite a slow dynamic, compared to the speed at which civilisation moves. The impossibility of maintaining an effective control could be ascribed in this case to modern man's impossibility of "finding in his cultural baggage enough data to allow him to adequately assume and manage" (Gavriliuță, 2008, pp.107-207) the various forms of criminal activity, including that of human trafficking.

Based on these interpretative and argumentative constructions, our undertaking has chiefly a long-term aim. It concerns the attempt to rediscover the sacrality of social practices and to invest social life with current symbolic meanings, capable of making possible a more in-depth knowledge and a mitigation of the negative effects of human trafficking.

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