



**The Body in Society**  
An Introduction

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Heterosexual responses to HIV were largely symbolic, and their function was to reinforce social boundaries between what was considered clean and innocent (the bodies of haemophiliacs) and dirty (the bodies of gay men and drug users). The intention of such boundary-drawing was to reduce the perceived threat of physical contamination (the blood supply) and of symbolic contamination (e.g., the idea of homosexuality). Therefore, pollution beliefs about the body can be used to make social distinctions between categories of people, and in particular these distinctions represent power differences. Douglas puts it thus:

A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed over some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone. (1970: 4)

Pollution beliefs associated with sexual activity and the exchange of body fluids uphold a particular version of the moral order in which homosexuality was deemed polluted or dirty (Alcorn 1988). The way in which HIV was described and discussed (invasion, threat, alien attack) reflected not only knowledge about viruses and immune systems but also beliefs about certain practices and relationships. Therefore, analyses of the images and metaphors associated with HIV/AIDS demonstrate further that the body has a symbolic role in identifying and maintaining boundaries between different social groups and is used symbolically to express power relations. In the example of HIV in the UK, Australia and the USA, those with greater access to social power have monopolized the meanings associated with the body. Similarly, the beliefs that are embedded in contemporary views of menstruation reveal something about the social position of women in contemporary Western contexts.

### Menstrual metaphors and etiquette

A taboo of silence and etiquette conceals menstruation in the contemporary West (Laws 1990). Blood carries many meanings, such as pain, death and warfare, which in turn represent disorder (Douglas 1970), and blood on the surface of the body breaches its boundaries, be it through injury or in the controlled environment of surgery (Lupton 1994). Menstrual blood in particular, as the 'living matter that helps to sustain and bring forth life' (Grosz 1990: 92), is a meaningful and potentially anxiety-provoking fluid, and many cultures have established pollution beliefs and taboos associated with menstrual blood

(Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). Menstrual blood, therefore, is considered taboo in many cultures and historical eras and elicits feelings of shame and disgust when revealed or exposed (Thurren 1994). For instance, Pliny thought that menstruating women could ruin crops, kill bees and sour milk; in some contexts it is considered weakening to vitality if men have sexual relations with a menstruating woman; and in biblical terms menstruating women were physically isolated from others, since they were considered impure at this time (de Beauvoir [1949] 1972). Martin (1989) notes that in 1878 the *British Medical Journal* announced as scientific fact that meat spoils if it is touched by menstruating women. In many cultural and historical contexts women have been segregated physically and socially when menstruating.

Clearly women in the contemporary West are not forced into physical segregation. However, some scholars have observed that, even in the liberal and liberated West, there are beliefs and taboos associated with menstruation which tell us something about power relations between men and women. Anthropological research undertaken by Emily Martin (1989) examined what women in the USA thought and felt about reproduction, pregnancy and menstruation. She conducted interviews with a broad sample of women and asked them to talk in depth about their experiences. Once she had collected her data she began to examine the transcripts for the ways in which women described their experiences, and in particular she examined the language and metaphors they used. One of the things she found was that certain metaphors and images kept recurring as the women talked about experiences of menstruation and childbirth.

For many women in Martin's study, menstruation represented hassle. All the women recognized menstruation as something that they considered messy, gross, dirty, and all held a general awareness that anything that drew attention to menstruation was considered taboo. They acknowledged that to draw attention to menstruation was socially out of bounds, but this hidden nature of menstruation was a real, or material, problem for many women. For instance, in the context of heavily supervised paid employment or of the thoroughly timetabled education system, it often proved difficult to find space and time to change sanitary wear and was hard to point out the discomforts of menstruation. There was a tension for many women between not attracting notice when they are menstruating but being constrained by the demands of work or school in ways that made it difficult to hide the fact that they were menstruating.

Martin also examined medical and scientific texts on reproduction, pregnancy and menstruation, and her analysis suggests that the prevailing metaphor underpinning contemporary ideas about

menstruation is one of industrial production. According to Martin, twentieth-century medical texts have a tendency to describe menstruation as failed reproduction and is characteristic of industrialized societies in which production is paramount. Hence, not to be productive is to be deviant in industrialized societies, and women who are not (re)productive are considered an aberration. Moreover, because the male body is generally considered the norm in medical practice, menstruation, perceived as the failure to produce, represents decay and disorder. Martin makes the point that the language and metaphorical devices used to describe menstruation reveal something about its place in Western culture. For her, the reliance on metaphors of production suggests that menstruating women are viewed as not being productive, and menstruation is therefore seen as matter-out-of-place. She argues that, while menstruation in the contemporary West is not physically segregated, it is nonetheless concealed and not accommodated. This is especially marked in the context of paid employment. As women have increasingly moved into the workforce, often in contexts supervised by men, their embodied needs as women have been ignored because of the taboos that prevent open and specific discussion of these needs.

Another study on menstruation develops a distinct analysis that argues that it is not simply that menstruation in the contemporary West is not accommodated, it is culturally concealed. The approach taken by Sophie Laws (1990) differs from that taken by Martin. While still within an ethnographic tradition, Laws examined the content and imagery of medical texts and conducted interviews with men on their views and attitudes concerning menstruation. From them, she learned that menstruation was something that was talked about neither in the households in which her respondents grew up nor in their current households. Moreover, the men in her study had rarely been aware of their mothers' menstruation, and they reported that their current female partners rarely talked about menstruation, except in the context of discomfort. Indeed, women were perceived by many men as using menstruation to withdraw sexual participation, a point noted in studies of heterosexual intimacy (e.g., Duncombe and Marsden 1993). Finally, jokes and euphemisms were associated with menstruation, such as 'red flag', 'lady in red', 'jam' or 'the curse'. Therefore Laws argued that menstruation is associated with 'dirt'. It is forbidden as a subject of talk except in certain highly constrained contexts and it tends to be seen as a form of social contamination. While menstruation was clearly known about by men, they kept it at a distance and it was kept from them.

For Laws, talk about menstruation was governed by what she termed a menstrual etiquette that regulated who can say what to

whom and in what circumstances. The consequences of this etiquette are that women are meant to buy, store, use and dispose of sanitary wear without anyone knowing, especially the men with whom they live. In particular for Laws, this suggests that, for many women, the shame of menstruation stems from men's attitudes. However, though similar views have been identified in other studies of menstruation, it is not necessarily the case that all women and men share a commitment to the etiquette of concealment to which Laws refers. For instance, George and Murcott (1993) interviewed men and women and found that whether men were aware of or acknowledged the menstruation of their partners and friends depended on their exposure to and awareness of their mothers' menstruation. Moreover, you may wish to argue here that menstruation in the contemporary West is no longer kept hidden. For instance, advertising for feminine hygiene products in the UK has expanded in terms of both topic and timing. The first magazine advertising for sanitary wear or feminine hygiene products appeared in 1921, when Kotex promoted its first product (Laws 1990). By 1933, advertisements for sanitary wear were a staple feature of women's magazines. When the first television advert appeared in 1979, it was governed by very strict codes in terms of what words could be used and how feminine hygiene could be presented (Treneman 1988). For instance, blood was never to be mentioned (and still isn't); odour was never to be alluded to and any upfront naming of menstruation was to be avoided. Moreover, no reference could be made to anything that might undermine women's self-confidence in hygiene (Laws 1990).

This formula has largely been followed since, at least until new codes were introduced in the late 1990s which expanded the words which can be used. Dominant themes embedded in feminine hygiene advertising now include freedom, discretion, activity, although in the early twenty-first century these have been accompanied by the appearance of more openness. For instance, one visual format employed for the advertising of many feminine hygiene products in the UK and USA has women talking in a focus group about their experience of using the products. Another draws on vignettes in which women are seen doing unusual or daring things or wearing white clothes in ways which suggest that the products themselves are so good that women need not restrict what they are doing or the kind of clothes they wear. While menstrual blood itself is not talked about, allusions are knowingly and sometimes playfully made to it (think about the blue liquid poured onto fabric as an illustration of product absorption). So there have been some changes in advertising which emphasize the realities of women's experience and the possibilities of 'carrying on as usual'.

On the other hand, feminine hygiene advertising manages to imply freedom while at the same time laying stress on concealment and discretion (you can carry on as normal and no one need ever know – for instance, think about recent adverts that suggest feminine hygiene products can be mistaken for sweets or sugar). Hence, a boundary is drawn around menstruation. Drawing on Douglas, Laws refers to this as a *cordon sanitaire*, which allows the illusion of freedom on the one hand, but also contains the pollution threat. It does so by referring to menstruation in a discrete language which women are assumed to understand, so that men do not have to deal with the consequences of the leaky, messy female body.

The kind of analysis presented by Martin and Laws focuses on pollution beliefs and metaphors associated with menstruation and the ways in which it continues to be seen in the contemporary West as something which is shameful and must be concealed. For Martin, women internalize shame in ways that create tensions between the social requirement to conceal menstruation and the practical difficulties of doing so in environments which are often male-dominated (work) or tightly timetabled (education). For Laws, women internalize shame because pollution beliefs stem from male disgust, and hence they conceal menstruation in order to protect men from having to confront the female body. While Martin and Laws share the view that menstruation continues to be subject to concealment, they differ in their analysis of the origins of pollution beliefs. Whereas, for Laws, the symbolic segregation of menstruation is a deeply problematic indication of a patriarchal society, Martin sees some value in the *cordon sanitaire* placed around menstruation. In a society characterized by bodily regulation and industrial order, taboos have the potential for rebellion. If women have to confront menstruation secretly, they may also use this as an opportunity to discuss other hidden aspects of female experience. For instance, the spatially concealed toilet represents a back region in Goffman's terms in which women *can* take time out from industrial or capitalist time (work) or the scrutiny of men (Edwards and McKie 1996). Toilets are a space that can be used for skiving, talking about supervisors at work or relationships. So now you know why women always go to the toilet in twos.

### Body boundaries and cyborg culture

The American theorist Donna Haraway, who writes across disciplinary boundaries, has commented that we live in a cyborg culture, that indeed we are all cyborgs. This observation seems especially apt if we