

# H-Net Reviews

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**Gerald V. O'Brien.** *Contagion and the National Body: The Organism Metaphor in American Thought.* New York: Routledge, 2018. 148 pp. \$145.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-138-30622-6.

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During the past two decades, the proliferation of academic publishing on philosophical perspectives of disability studies has influenced our understanding of human beings and the world in which disability is not only a reality, but also represents patterns of comprehension and perception. Guided by queer theory developed by pioneering feminists in the 1980s, disability theorists created crip theory to dissect our constructed view of human-embedded ableism. Parallel to the proliferation of scholarly discussion on emerging crip theory, sociologist Gerald O'Brien dissects the intersection between multiple historical issues of disability, immigrants, and race in *Contagion and the National Body: The Organism Metaphor in American Thought*.

The first three of the book's eight chapters primarily examine the philosophical background and historical development of the metaphor, which paves the way for the author's further analysis of its embodiment in the ramification of ableism, nativism, and racism in American society. Chapter 1 reviews the use of multiple forms of policies, while in chapter 2 O'Brien discusses the philosophical meanings of the metaphor and its evolution; the organism metaphor has a long history in the West and can be traced to ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. The third chapter reviews the "alarm periods" in which multiple social subgroups, including European and Asian immigrants, disabled people, Jews, and communists were targeted as threats to the purity and integrity of American society in different periods between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Originating in the enforcement of strict immigration policy in reaction to the inflow of new immigrants in the late nine-

teenth century, the policy of oppressing and expelling multiple subgroups, not limited to immigrants, has been implemented repeatedly in the US history. In O'Brien's words, the policy "was energized by the Yellow Peril, the Red Scare, eugenic fears, and anti-Semitism, along with more rational concerns such as the rise in immigrant numbers" (p. 47). As seen in the American government's stance on Mexican immigrants, this trend continues today.

Following introduction to the basic terms and theories employed in his analysis of the history of the organism metaphor, O'Brien employs the remainder of the volume by investigating the tensions between the subgroups—the metaphor of "disease-maker" to the metaphorized American national "social body." In chapter 4, O'Brien investigates procedures in categorizing subgroups as others in American society, noting that "it is important that threatening individuals or sub-groups not only be viewed as foreign to the existing population, but this alien nature also needs to be seen as permanent" (p. 62). On the basis of identifying those subgroups as unassimilable others, chapter 5 contends that federal and local authorities took a further step to label them with the tag of disease-maker. The policy, according to O'Brien, "provided the major way of describing target groups and highlighting public fear" (p. 71). Chapter 6 switches to examining the metaphorization of American society as an organism suffering from social diseases.

In his final two chapters, O'Brien substantiates the tension between the two metaphors in the oppression of those subgroups and metaphorization of the Ameri-

can government's policy of cleansing them. Chapter 7 mainly discusses how the existence of those subgroups was assumed to cause the decay of American society. For instance, for supporters of strict immigration restrictions in the late nineteenth century, intermarriage between disadvantaged social groups and white residents was blamed as the cause for decay of the social body because it was assumed these connections impaired purity and cleanliness. In chapter 8, O'Brien turns to the other side of the metaphor of the national body: metaphoric medicine. In tandem with the metaphor of immigrants and disabled people as a threat to the national body, various solutions, including registration, surveillance, segregation, ghettoization, and quarantine, were "often

viewed as a form of community medicine" (p. 116).

Through analyzing the pairing of "disease-maker," "social body," and other prevalent metaphors in the anti-immigrant, racial, and eugenic discourses in the twentieth century, O'Brien expands our knowledge of the interaction between the concepts of disability and nativism, and makes a noteworthy combination of the two fields for further research. O'Brien's book bridges several major social issues of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American society. Examining the use of various metaphors in oppression of subgroups, the author reveals the underlying discursive models in the reactions of US governments and the general public.

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