The Human Body in the Age of Catastrophe: Brittleness, Integration, Science, and the Great War by Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers (review)

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Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers. *The Human Body in the Age of Catastrophe: Brittleness, Integration, Science, and the Great War.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xii + 419 pp. Ill. $35.00 (978-0-226-55659-8).

The Great War found novel ways to physically and mentally disrupt or disintegrate the human organism. As the authors of *The Human Body in the Age of Catastrophe* argue, "Bodily integrity came under threat by forces seen and unseen, and the human organism struggled to regulate itself and to survive under the threat" (p. 31). How medical thinking and practice responded to this challenge and what longer term reconceptualizations—organizational, clinical and intellectual—followed are questions that have long occupied historians. One early suggestion was that psychoanalytic thinking and practice were boosted by exposure to a new scale and variety of disorders; another that wartime innovations in medical practice as well as large-scale human resource management helped develop industrial psychology.

Neither thought was entirely wide of the mark, but Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers give a far more wide-ranging and nuanced answer. In doing so, the authors provide a compact intellectual history of medical and social thinking in the first half of the twentieth century, related especially to unified concepts of the body. Their account opens with the critical wartime question of bodily collapse connected to both physical and environmental stress, and the unpredictable, highly individualized ways in which different bodies responded to common conditions. The first three chapters document the entry of physiology into the war: the emergence of whole-body conditions and the use of the "wound shock" diagnosis in response; the new definition of individuality and the related notion of the case study; the "operationalisation" of the case study approach through the war.

The second, most substantial section explores the theoretical and experimental developments in integration theory between 1905 and 1930. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss brain injury (an elaboration on Charles Sherrington, Kurt Goldstein, and Henry Head) and explore Walter Cannon's work from the late nineteenth century until the early 1930s. Chapter 5 presents Cannon's theory of homeostasis as physiology increasingly incorporated the psyche. Chapter 6 considers the model of the body that evolved in the major debates of post–World War I physiology, which led to Cannon's fully developed presentation of homeostasis in *The Wisdom of the Body* (1932). Chapter 7 compares the early postwar concepts of "the endangered self" and the "death drive" formulated by Freud and Rivers to show how the Great War shaped psychoanalytic thinking.

The third part of the study goes beyond the medico-biological domain to consider in engaging detail how social theorists took up notions of integration and disintegration. Chapter 8, on the political economy in bodily metaphor, for example, analyzes the influence of integration and disintegration theory on ideas of communication and language as well as on symbolization in anthropology, cybernetics, and philosophy. This analysis discusses selected aspects of Cannon's political and anthropological thinking during the 1930s, Norbert Wiener's cybernetics and Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology. Chapter 9 turns to the fragmentation of medical humanism: the implications and contradictions of medical individualism as embodied in doctor-patient relations.

The Human Body in the Age of Catastrophe is a tightly wound, densely constructed account that will doubtless stimulate further thinking among historians of medicine as well as the social and psychological sciences. Geroulanos and Meyers skillfully demonstrate how the First World War was unique in the means and extent to which it precipitated a transformation of the popular and scientific understandings of the human body and its selfhood. The imaginative leap the authors take from medical to social sciences is especially noteworthy and persuasive as a model of interdisciplinary work. Tracing their new genealogies of medical and social thought, they connect, among others, William Rivers, Kurt Goldstein, and Henry Head, the major innovation of homeostasis theory, and Hans Selye's post–World War II work on stress. Contextualizing these and other thinkers within the medical, intellectual, and political milieu of the early twentieth century creates a broad framework within which to situate these advances. Identifying a formative line of medical investigation in relation to the Great War, the authors successfully elaborate a new genealogy of early and mid-twentieth-century medical research and related social thought.

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Michael Dwyer. *Strangling Angel: Diphtheria and Childhood Immunization in Ireland.* Reappraisals in Irish History. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. x + 212 pp. $120.00 (978-78694-046-9).

The development of vaccines protective against the infectious diseases of childhood has given human populations since the mid-twentieth century a protection against these infections unprecedented in human history. Historical scholarship in this area has, however, been limited, except on the subject of smallpox, a vicious killer at all ages, a vaccine against which was developed by Edward Jenner in 1796, and which was eradicated after concerted global effort in 1977. The historiography of immunization has focused largely on Jenner and on the antivaccination movements that rapidly developed to fight the compulsory vaccination of human populations. Vaccines developed to control measles, rubella, diphtheria, and polio have aroused less controversy and historical interest, but their application continues to be contested by antivaccinationists, and they continue to pose a threat to human populations. Against this background, Michael Dwyer's study of the attempts to free the Irish cities of Cork and Dublin from diphtheria between ca. 1930 and 1965 usefully refreshes and broadens the historiography of immunization.

Dwyer begins with a historical perspective on diphtheria, its appearance in Ireland in the 1740s, the difficulties in diagnosis, and the fragility of available death records. Early twentieth-century hospital records, he notes, show that the disease was very familiar to staff, suggesting that it was much more common than