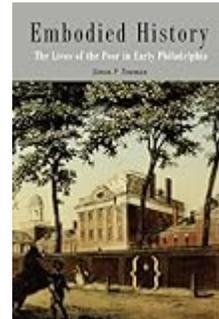


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Simon P. Newman.** *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. x + 211 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3731-3; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8122-1848-0.



**Reviewed by** Matthew Osborn (University of California, Davis)

**Published on** H-SHEAR (March, 2005)

## Shaping Bodies

In *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia*, Simon P. Newman charts the hard realities faced by Philadelphia's poorest residents in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Newman argues that in response to growing population density and the attendant increase in the visibility of poverty, Philadelphia's newly assertive "middling sort," defined as "merchants, lawyers, craftsmen, and professionals" (p. 5), sought to construct their own social distinctiveness by joining with the city's wealthiest to build institutions aimed at regulating, stigmatizing, and punishing the poor. Through the prison, almshouse, hospital, and church, "middling and elite Philadelphians set about imposing control over impoverished bodies" (p. 9), defending social hierarchy through classification, incarceration, and medicalization. Newman describes how these new technologies of power, along with the physical hardships of poverty, shaped the bodies of poor men and women, rendering them scarred, stooped, diseased, and mangled—a visually distinctive underclass that disgusted respectable Philadelphians, who were themselves cultivating new forms of bodily presentation expressed in genteel comportment, proper grooming, and fashionable

adornment. Despite these new forms of coercive power, Newman asserts that resistance was commonplace, arguing that "the resulting struggles were played out in and on the very bodies of the poor, for upon these bodies poverty was etched and power and discipline were enacted, and through these bodies agency and liberty were asserted" (p. 147).

While institutions worked to describe, categorize, and stigmatize poor bodies as a means of controlling them, Newman's study uses institutional records to recover something of the inmates' lived experience. He organizes each chapter around an analysis of a single, distinct set of records. In "Almshouse Bodies," Newman analyzes the Daily Occurrence Dockets of the Philadelphia Almshouse to demonstrate how incarceration and forced labor aimed to coerce deference and industry, while highlighting the poors' strategies to maintain their freedom, such as eloping after receiving needed medical care. In "Villainous Bodies," Newman takes a similar approach to the records of the Walnut Street Jail, illustrating "civic authorities' attempts to remake the bodies of vagrants" (p. 55). "The Walnut Street Jail provided one of the most

tangible reminders of the ever-widening gulf between rich and poor in early national Philadelphia, serving as it did to remove, seal off, and control the illegitimate and immoral bodies of any of the poor and lower sort who were not properly controlled” (p. 60). Like the almshouse and prison, the Pennsylvania Hospital acted as an instrument of power; in “Hospitalized Bodies,” Newman draws on medical records to illuminate both the illnesses and injuries experienced by the poor while emphasizing the “judgment and control of certain folk embodied in their hospitalization and treatment” (p. 61).

While the first three chapters chart the boundaries of institutional power, the final three emphasize the many ways the poor resisted. In “Runaway Bodies,” Newman surveys all the runaway advertisements that appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* between 1784 and 1800, describing both how the owners of slaves and servants represented servile bodies in the advertisements, and how runaways manipulated their appearance as an assertion of independence and as a means of winning bodily freedom. Seamans’ applications for “certificates of citizenship” (a type of passport) form the basis of “Seafaring Bodies.” Largely drawn from an article Newman published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 1998, this chapter demonstrates how the hardships of seafaring deformed sailors’ bodies, while interpreting their distinctive tattoos as an attempt to take control of bodily appearance—bravely asserting devotion to loving marriages, deep patriotism, and pride in the seafaring profession. The final chapter, “Dead Bodies,” analyzes the burial records of Philadelphia’s oldest church, Swedish Lutheran Gloria Dei. He finds evidence that despite disease, injury, and death being daily, haunting realities, “the lower sorts were able to confront harsh living conditions and imminent mortality with exuberant lives,” characterized by evangelical religion, festive celebration, and “a passion for riotous and alcoholic excess” (p. 141).

*Embodied History* is an eminently readable, concise (211 pages), and carefully researched study distinguished by the deep compassion the author demonstrates for his subject. Newman’s compassion permeates his central argument, which rests primarily on the portraits of impoverished urban residents that he draws from his sensitive readings of the documents. By focusing on descriptions of bodies, Newman vividly illustrates the severity of poverty and the bleakness of the choices faced by many urban residents. Reading stories of prostitutes deformed by syphilis, sailors with broken and missing limbs, and almshouse residents suffering from painful ulcers and sores, is often difficult, and certainly, taken together, they

make Newman’s point that “poverty and the condition of life and work marked and molded the bodies of the laboring poor” (p. 146).

Newman’s evidence is, however, necessarily anecdotal. His intent is not to give a general account of the material condition of the poor, relying instead on the work of Billy G. Smith, Susan Klepp, and other social historians. His evidence does not address, for instance, the extent that the poor in Philadelphia became a permanent and enduring underclass during these years, as it does not consider the possibilities for social or geographic mobility. Similarly, Newman’s account of Philadelphia’s elite and middling classes rests largely on the conceptual frameworks of Michel Foucault, and the work of John K. Alexander, Michael Meranze, David Rothman, among others, as he describes a unified, fearful, and vicious ruling class bent on exercising social control through coercive and punitive institutions. Newman does not shed new light on the formation or make-up of this new class, or its members’ motivation for constructing these institutions. That two chapters present detailed readings of descriptions kept by single individuals—Joseph Marsh Jr. at the Philadelphia almshouse and the Reverend Nicholas Colin at Gloria Dei—raises the question of whether these descriptions represent the views held by most elite and middling Philadelphians.

Newman seeks to demonstrate “the tension between the power of more affluent Americans to control the bodies of the lower sort and the ability of the poor to resist such control and retake possession of their own bodies” (p. 84). This emphasis works wonderfully well in the chapter on sailors, as Newman’s focus on the body succeeds both in illuminating hardships of seafaring while providing an account of the emotional, religious, and political lives of this marginalized group. In other chapters, Newman’s evidence addresses a more diverse group of individuals, and his findings on prostitutes, drunks, vagrants, slaves, servants, children, and immigrants, among others, are more diffuse. In his chapter on runaway servants and slaves, for instance, Newman casts slaves’ hairstyles as a “very visible means by which they might contest the hegemonic rule masters enjoyed over their bodies” (p. 102). But, with only a few descriptions of hair styles to discuss, his conclusion on this point remains tentative, as he says, “for all black Americans ... hair was as visible and tangible a measure of race and power as skin color, and especially for men and women who did not own their bodies, the styling of that hair might well assume no small significance” (p. 103). Newman’s definition of bodily agency also expands to include not only

hair style, clothing, earrings, and comportment, but also literacy, drunken carousing, and the act of a parent naming a child. In the later chapters especially, bodily resistance seems to encompass all forms of human action. That institutional records represented a new effort to describe and categorize bodies seems evident, but less so is the contention that the assertions of agency by the poor are most usefully understood as being primarily bodily in nature. Nevertheless, Newman's imaginative readings provide many valuable glimpses into the daily, lived experience of what is too often for historians an anonymous sector of urban society.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

**Citation:** Matthew Osborn. Review of Newman, Simon P., *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. March, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10373>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).