

THE BODY AND THE POLIS

THE NON-PRESENTABLE CITIZENSHIP OF THE BODY

The reduction of the thinking body to a mere organism in a biological view of life is the way in which the human being has come to terms with its animal root and, hence, its mortality, as well as with a perturbing origin made possible by the exclusion of human beings' biological nature from history. The idea of a hidden beginning or foundation, destined to remain out of sight, is the imaginary effect of an abstract division, which has sadly become the materiality of relations, powers, cultural constructs, habits, and common sense. Certain enigmas, which call into question the contradictions between civilized life and human drives, and which revolve around the ordinary schism between love and death, hope and nihilism, remain unexplored. Coupled with the "enigma of dualism," to borrow an expression from Otto Weininger,¹ one finds the "enigma of sex"—the rejection of the feminine, the "bedrock" upon which Freud's psychoanalytic voyage was based—and the "enigma of history"—the delivery of oneself as a "thing," as "merchandise," into the hands of another, which Marx, in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, identified as the result of economic alienation.

"Man," writes Giorgio Agamben, "is a living being who, in language, separates from and opposes to itself its own bare life. The human being continues to be in relation with bare life in an inclusive exclusion. . . . In western politics, bare life has a unique privilege: it is that upon which exclusion

founds the city of human beings.”² The original schism, for Agamben, opposes thought to the body, transforming the inextricable concrete singularity of every being into a relation between sovereign power and a life bereft of humanity, between an idea and a thing. In Agamben’s lucid analysis of the birth of the polis (that is, how the abstract figure of the biological body is produced and deployed), we are struck by the fact that he did not see the vehement conviction with which the man-son believes himself to be different from the body that delivered him into the world—a body identified with a “lower” nature, with animality, and, consequently, a body understood as the very depository of its own material heritage is imbricated with and mistaken for the process of socialization.

“But it is in darkness, and as darkness itself, that the body was *conceived*. The body was conceived and shaped in Plato’s cave and as a cave, it is the prison or tomb of the soul.”³ From this prison or tomb, the anguish of suffering connected with all that is directly linked to bodily experience is born, including sexuality, old age, sickness, and death. The obsessive use of the body as meaning, metaphor, or discourse also arises here, as does the reduction of the body to a machine or a scientific phenomenon.

The endless aggression and exploitation exerted by the historical community of human beings on the world’s natural resources can be viewed as an evident but insufficiently explored analogy with forms of the male domination of the body from which one receives life, and with which one is completely unified at the origin of life. Politics and economy bear distinguishing signs. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, written in 1929, Freud observed:

The communists believe they have found the path to deliverance from our evils. According to them, man is wholly good and is well-disposed to his neighbor; but the institution of private property has corrupted his nature. The ownership of private wealth gives the individual power, and with it the temptation to ill-treat his neighbor, while the man who is excluded from possession is bound to rebel in hostility against his oppressor. If private property were abolished, all wealth held in common, and everyone allowed to share in the enjoyment of

it, ill-will and hostility would disappear among men. Since everyone's needs would be satisfied, no one would have any reason to regard another as his enemy; all would willingly undertake the work that was necessary. I have no concern with any economic criticisms of the communist system; I cannot inquire into whether the abolition of private property is expedient or advantageous. But I am able to recognize that the psychological premises on which the system is based are an untenable illusion. In abolishing private property, we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though certainly not the strongest; but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature. Aggressiveness was not created by property. It reigned almost before property had given up its primal, anal form; it forms the basis of every relation of affection and love among people (with the single exception, perhaps, of the mother's relation to her male child).⁴

The power of love and the coercion of work—the progenitors of human civilization—are more similar and intertwined than we tend to think. The same thing can be said of the tragic connection between love and hate, in personal relationships as well as in relations between groups, peoples, and cultures. The destruction of war is viewed as necessary in order to save what we love. Separating the idea of the biological body from human activity, from all the manifestations of physical acts and psychic energy, human beings have created a presupposition for every form of alienation: a condition of being in which the human being becomes “other than itself” and comes to regard itself as a foreign and hostile external power; the human being becomes property, a thing that can be subjugated, controlled, and manipulated by others. In his 1844 manuscripts, Marx argued:

Political economy starts with the fact of private property. It does not explain it. . . . Political economy throws no light on the cause of the division between labor and capital. . . . The *devaluation* of the world

of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*—and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general. . . .

. . . The worker puts his life into the object; but now it no longer belongs to him but to the object. . . . Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. . . .

. . . It is *forced labor*.⁵

How can we not see that “forced labor,” destructive and hateful, has been imposed on women as their destiny, demanding the sacrifice of their sexuality and their very being? Has this same destiny been imposed upon the sex that has framed itself as the protagonist of history? What can the “giving of oneself” (which is called for by patriarchal, secular, and religious ideology) be if not confirmation of the originary alienation of feminine being, reduced to a reproductive function or to the status of merchandise for exchange? Is the marriage-based family, which the Italian constitution defines as a “natural society,” not the locus of such an abstraction? By opposing male and female roles, has the family not rendered natural functions such as eating, drinking, procreating, clothing, and nurturing ourselves as our final and civilized ends?

Thought that removes the body is thought that renounces love, and with it the most important questions about suffering, death, and happiness.

It has been written: “Old age is not the extreme limit of the human condition; rather, it is the human condition in its most authentic state.” . . . I would add a question to this affirmation:

“This life, which is only life, nothing but the life that belongs to the old person as the human condition, has it the right to asylum in our world? What else is it but an entanglement of powers that cross through life itself, which often render life itself wholly insignificant?”⁶

But as Nancy observes,

But where are bodies? Bodies are primarily at work, . . . suffering at work. Bodies are primarily traveling toward work, returning to work, awaiting rest; bodies quickly take rest and then leave it behind; they stay at work. They also are working, incorporating themselves into commodities; they themselves become commodities. Bodies are forced labor . . . channeled by their own monetized force, moving toward that surplus capital that collects and concentrates *in them*.⁷

No culture other than western culture has succeeded so well at “inventing the body as bare,” thereby simultaneously establishing the premise for the artificial renaming and regeneration of the body, for a reconfigured body that now catastrophically aims to replace the bare body. “We have not laid the body bare,” says Jean-Luc Nancy; rather, “we have invented it, and the body is nudity, and there is no nudity other than its own, and this nudity is the *most foreign* of all foreign bodies.”⁸

From the original cave, in which the dream of eros, which is locked in the eternal immobility of a prehistoric desire to become more than oneself (for example, in a romantic couple, in a closed group based on identity, ethnicity, the nation, etc.), is unrepresentable or inexpressible, the body generally emerges as an unheard-of protagonist that has returned in order to take its revenge. Given that the body erupted onto the public stage as the effect of the dissolution of the border between home and city, individual and society, nature and artifice, it could do nothing but reconsider the phenomenology in which it had been constituted, folded one way or another into the “reign of the mind” that both exalted and subjected it, rendering it simultaneously insignificant and useful for bestowing sense to the collectivity. The word “body,” in its metaphorical usage, suggests that the body was able to

enter the polis as a citizen at the same time that real bodies were rejected from the city.

In the contemporary global scene, which is controlled by forceful powers that include the state, the church, the market, science, and technology—all of which have been revealed to be biopolitical powers—we find not only the “fabulous” bodies of technology that have transformed the human being into a kind of “prosthetic God,” but also the people of the world, many of whom have been reduced to a “wound . . . bodies of misery, of famine; beaten bodies, infected and bloated bodies, and overly fed bodies.” We find the “damned of the earth,” and their damnation touches us all when we lose power over that which surrounds us and over our own bodies. Thus damned, we “become like an abandoned house left to the care of others.” The relentlessness of getting our bodies in shape and the protection and extension of biological survival at any cost are but the other face of the human being’s ultimate and ineluctable anguish, born from its dependency upon a body that is not its own—a body that signifies the human being’s mortal destiny, its fall from grace and its need for salvation.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, Elvio Fachinelli has observed “a breakdown of the civic *superego*” as a result of “sexual and aggressive drives that were previously removed or sublimated: . . . on one hand, sexual permissiveness and, on the other hand, the reappropriation of aggression on the part of single individuals or groups.”⁹ Facing the dangers of desiccation or sterility, eros deployed a historical trick, a new barbarism, in order to secure its continuance. Newly formed constituencies during those years of estrangement looked upon a story that, even in its ideal goals of social justice, equality, and a “communism” of goods, continued to privilege the means of production, which only served to annihilate the individual in her or his irreducible complexity and confine him or her within the limits of social conditioning: these were the students of 1968, the “plural subjects” of nonauthoritarian movements, and the feminists.

As the dissident desire of the students of 1968 was rapidly eclipsed, as their place was ceded to the “pure revolutionaries” such as those in

Marxist-Leninist parties, who then reproduced the same conditions as those cultivated by the apparatus of domination (dependency, passivity, the delegation of tasks), it fell to the theory and practice of the women's movement to establish a process that was responsive to the crisis at the same time as it was able to undertake the redefinition of a politics—long fettered by patriarchy, the original alienation—increasingly subject to economization.

To narrate and write not *about* the body, but *the* body, as Nancy urges us to do, to launch a politics not only based *on* life, but *of* life, meant, for feminism, positioning personal stories as central. Feminists posited the thinking body as paramount. The thinking body—a body affected by the passions, a body that renders all human beings similar—reconfigures the female body, so long regarded as a “black hole,” as the sediment of a memory and culture yet to be explored, the precious archive of an “unpresentable” history from which we have for too long averted our eyes.

The West has constructed a mode of rational engagement, an unembodied thought, in which reason turns to reason. Feminism was the first movement of liberation to break with this sacred aspiration. . . . The problem of the task can be summarized in the following demand: the return to the body. . . . The path of emancipation passes here today: let us seize this fundamental experience, the contingent body.¹⁰

The predominant public discourse about what are inappropriately called “ethical questions,” which the media refer to as “real-life questions,” recast and foregrounded the body and its vicissitudes while, at the same time, confining it to the private sphere—a sphere that precludes collective reflection, which, in an earlier era, was known as consciousness-raising. A culture capable of rethinking the age-old enmity between life and politics, which could bring to light the enduring connections between society and the individual, between the ever-changing time of history and the “invariability” of interiority, no longer exists: here, one runs the risk of being wedged in by antipolitical attitudes, psychological misery, and the conformism of the masses, which are primarily worried about their peaceful existence. But even

more dangerous is the aggressive return of fundamentalist religion, which seeks to restore the privileged place of religion in the social and political fabric of a modernity that seems to have abandoned it.

THE AMBIGUOUS BORDER BETWEEN ETHICS AND POLITICS

Many interpretations of the recent religious revival that threatens what had seemed to be the West's consolidated process of secularization have been put forth, but they all agree that religion offers few certainties. The current religious revival of an archaic, fundamentalist Islam can be seen as analogous to various Roman Catholic campaigns for the revival of a religious culture in the recent past. Pope Benedict XVI lacked neither the violence of his ancient predecessors, now presented as Christian strength, nor their conviction, with which he continues to bind himself to his faithful followers. Confrontation, fear, and envy, which seem to motivate the antiabortion campaign, are legitimized by the cross and militate against the all-too-limited freedom of western women.

For others, clinging to the traditional values of religion espoused by charismatic leaders seemed to offer refuge from the dis-ease of a civilization that had lost its optimism in relation to its own technological, scientific ends. If, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the great "god-prosthesis," with all of its accessory organs, appeared to Freud as less happy than one might have imagined, today, our technological omnipotence is no longer able to eclipse the shadow of death that lingers behind it, even as its reach extends to experimentation on living matter, even as it continues its abuse of the environment and ruthless exploitation of natural resources, and even as it reconfigures relations between classes and peoples of the world. From extensive economic horror, from widespread feelings of insecurity, from the increasing loss of identity, comes the rebirth of a need for a spirituality that enthusiastically revives ancient rites and splendors in the form of New Age religion's simplistic ways.

But there is another aspect of our current situation that deserves our attention, even though it has links to this religious revival—namely, the

current political crisis that fails to recognize the separation between the quotidian and the real person, a separation inscribed in the founding act of politics: the expulsion of women from the public sphere, the scission between body and language, home and city, biology and history. Today, the fundamental questions of life that have arisen out of a centuries-long exile emerge in unforeseen places. The object of control, manipulation, and other interventions by the powers of the state, the church, the markets, the courts, science, and the media, these questions also suggest the possibility of cultural and political change. A biologically determined vision of life and the conception of the family as sacred, the concepts of the female body, the couple, birth and death, and the idea of a “divine order,” indisputably presupposed by morality, science, and law, all are deteriorating together. The consideration of all these aspects in relation to one another constitutes the freedom with which individuals believe they are able to make decisions about their own lives.

Confronted by this state of affairs, the political Left faces the greater difficulty, while the Right operates with an indifferent lack of scruples on historically familiar terrain that features antipolitical attitudes, populism, the rhetoric of traditional values, the manipulation of affect and of the collective imagination, all of which receive much attention from the contemporary media. As Agamben explained in an interview with the newspaper *Manifesto*, “life devours politics”:

Democracy has become synonymous with the rational management of human beings and things (*oikonomia*): wars become police operations, the popular will turns into public opinion polls, and political choices become a question of management—a management that privileges the home and business, not the city. The space of the political is disappearing.¹¹

Although the revenge of the body and all that was confined to the private sphere seems to be affirmed in the apparent “feminization” of work and politics, the body and the feminine have not, in fact, escaped their servitude to the “sovereign power” that seeks to reduce them to the

biological, to domestic functions, and servile and complementary attitudes. Conservative political forces, which share a broad and popular consensus around this construct of femininity, risk denying the very “power of life” that has stamped human history from its beginnings. The inadequacy of the Left, which has given rise to the impression of a great void opening before our very eyes, lies in its theoretical and ideological foundations in the Enlightenment: historical materialism, reason, and materiality are directed almost exclusively to matters of rights and the relations of production—matters that cannot address the root of the human, cannot give voice, through political engagement, to what Marx identified as the “passion of the human being,” the human need to self-actualize. Though no one any longer speaks of a “superstructure” that arises out of the economic base, the essential questions of life have become marginal, no more than generic and instrumental formulations. The inevitable void produced by a lack of analysis and the evisceration of political culture renders the latter ripe for occupation by forces such as the church and the fundamentalist right, now allies, who claim these matters as their prerogative.

The liberal, secular, and democratic left has, until now, met the Vatican’s invasion of the political domain with head-on confrontation, insisting on the opposition between church and state, between public ethics and religious morality—a voluntaristic and unproductive approach that has produced few, if any, results. It would be more useful to analyze the historical links between the two spheres of power, connections that, gaining strength today, are producing hybrid figures such as “faithful atheists.” Above all, we must ask how the idea of the secular has changed, how the borders between religion and politics, between ethics and politics, have changed at a time when neither sphere can be regarded as neutral from the perspective of sex. In other words, in addition to what distinguishes and sets these spheres in opposition to one another, we must examine what they hold in common: the history of male domination. The religious sphere aims at the private domain, toward personal life, while the political sphere aims at the public domain. But their complementarity reveals their shared parentage, the matrix in which the unique protagonist of history—the male sex—divides, opposes,

and hierarchizes aspects of the human being that are, in fact, inseparable: the biological body and the capacity for thought, economic survival and emotional survival, necessity and freedom.

The new awareness that arose during the women's movement in the 1970s, in which the relation between the sexes was examined through the lenses of the body, sexuality, and personal experience, modified both the border between religion and the secular, and, by demonstrating how morality served to obscure political relations of power, the more ambiguous relation between ethics and politics. The symmetry between the terms "religion" and "the secular" becomes clearer in the context of left-wing debates that declared the urgent need to construct a "public ethics." No one doubts that the Left in Italy has historically lacked values and moral principles; many have written and spoken about the need to fill this vacuum, especially in the context of the discussion of "ethically sensitive questions" such as abortion, artificial insemination, euthanasia, and stem cell research. Given the Left's failings, it was clear that the Left could not mount an effective challenge to the rise of Catholic fundamentalism.

The definition of a "secular ethics," like that of religious ethics, came about through dialogue between secular and religious representatives and aimed to achieve a balance between the secular and religious. This meant that, despite the diversity of forms of ethics, agreement about the meaning of bodily human experience was assumed, and was assumed to refer back to morality, as if human experience were simply a matter of individual conscience. Facts were obfuscated, including the fact that the "questions of life" raise, in a more or less direct way, the relation of power between the sexes as well as the fact that the questions themselves lie squarely at the heart of politics. All of this clearly exposed the crisis of politics and the need for its redefinition. These questions can either portend the abandonment of power—of markets, religion, science, and media—to antipolitical sentiments, or they can serve to launch a process of renewal.

For all these reasons, and in order to resolve any ambiguity as well as to admit the Left's indefensibility, it is important to speak of a "political culture" rather than a "public ethics." The contributions of nonauthoritarian

movements and the feminism of the 1970s to the “denaturalization” and “desacralization” of experiences such as birth and death, the relationships of couples, the roles of men and women cannot be forgotten. Together with other “unexpected subjects,” the appearance of young people and women on the public stage signaled the discontinuity with history, including that of the socialist revolution. Categories considered until then as “unpolitical”—desire, self-consciousness, the appropriation of one’s own body, and recognition of the unconscious—permeated public discourse. Words that had long been paramount in the Left’s political lexicon—democracy, liberty, equality—were revisited and reformulated. The abstract figure of the citizen or class was replaced by the whole individual; the thinking body of each sex, embedded in family and social relations, came to the fore.

In the radio conversations between Rossana Rossanda and feminists,¹² the meaning of the word “liberty,” for example, changed when the discussion expanded to include the many “non-liberties” that we embody and carry within ourselves. For women, long considered to be neither moral nor spiritual subjects, “liberty” must be, above all, “the freedom to be.” There can be no freedom for those who are profoundly alienated from existence. Even the idea of a “party”—its formal framework, hierarchies, bureaucracies, rituals, and myths—substantially changes at the moment the importance of personal relations, of the modification of oneself, comes into view. This modification of the self must be understood as the presupposition for the modification of the world.

The whole of life, and not only labor, viewed from the perspective of the sexes, was thus inserted into the middle of politics, although the insertion of greater numbers of women into the labor force had certainly changed the definition of work. As Pietro Ingrao remarked to Rossanda:

To face the question of women’s liberation is to confront the deep organizational structure of society in general. Let me give an example: If you really wish to deal with the problem of women and work, one must take into account the various dimensions of human development, the occupations themselves, the quality and organization of

labor in work itself. At the same time—this is where things become different—one must deal with the forms of reproduction of society, the ways we conceive of sexuality, couple relationships, the relationships between parents and children, the relation between past and present, the forms and nature of social assistance. This is a historical conception, a secular conception of the private—this is all the conception of the state, the relation between the state and the private.¹³

Following Roberto Esposito's definition of biopolitics¹⁴ as the "immunization" of life and society against pathogenic factors—an immunization that runs the risk of destroying life and society as a result of excessive defense—we maintain that nonauthoritarian movements have represented, on the contrary, an "affirmative biopolitics" capable of producing an undetermined subjectivity and a politics not only *based on* life but *of* life.

In a document written in opposition to the courses offered at the University of Milan in the fall of 1968, the group behind the self-managing children's daycare center, Porta Ticinese, affirmed:

It is necessary to bring back into the political struggle the relations with the body, with the biological dimension of individuals, even if it contrasts with the long ascetic tradition of the revolutionary movement. . . . In capitalist society, the biological aspects and realities of human beings—sexual life, labor, birth, the education and nurturing of children—all of these things are frustrated realities, all of them are subject to the radical negation of their value.¹⁵

Consigning the "questions of life" to the margins of politics, the Left, which believes itself to be "radical," seems incapable of distancing itself from capitalism's prioritization of the economic dimension; it seems to accept the notion that the life of a human being is reducible to production, it behaves as if the crucial moments of life—love, maternity, birth, aging, death—are not subject to institutional pressures, whether those of repressive control or those producing dehumanizing experiences that are no less severe than those caused by the exploitation of labor.

In order to create a political culture that considers the whole of life, one's own body needs to be "put into play"; we need to interrogate our own experience, to see subjectivity as belonging to a thinking body that is sexed, plural, capable of being recognized in its singularity while simultaneously recognizing what it shares in common with others. It is only by advancing into deeper levels of awareness of our own selves that we become capable of accessing a broader horizon. We have to abandon the disastrous dichotomies between particular and universal, between necessity and liberty, dependency and autonomy, individual and collective—often seen as the complementary poles of a relation—that threaten to lead us to the antipolitical positions we see today.

THE BODY AND THE LAW

What sense does it make to speak of the body in terms of "property," to say "we *have* a body" or that one must "appropriate one's body" when, in reality, *we are bodies*, we are *thinking bodies*? What changes at the moment one becomes conscious that the body is not neutral, but sexed? What changes if we recognize that it is upon both the masculine and the feminine that history, which presents itself as the history of a community of men alone, has constructed the most enduring relations of power: the roles of the sexes, the exclusion of women from the polis, the identification of woman with the nonthinking body, with nature? Above all, what changes when the attention accorded to the body shifts from the public sphere, in which it is seen as an object of rights, laws, ethics, religion, to the private, a zone traditionally considered as nonpolitical? What changes when the body is considered in terms of the particular lived experience of each individual?

When feminism spoke of the "body politic," it was not referring to laws or ethical questions, even though battles of these kinds took place (around, for example, divorce, abortion, and family rights); rather, it sought to bring the whole person, including sex, affective life, and family ties into history, culture, and politics, where they have, in fact, always been, despite their invisibility there. At the same time that feminism constituted a radical

rethinking of politics, it served as a symptom of the crisis of politics—politics understood as separate from life, itself mutilated by the disavowal of an essential part of the human, even when it claimed revolution or the creation of an alternative society as its aim. This crisis continues today, but rather than founding a politics of life that reinvented public space, as many of us hoped, feminism has now become antipolitical.

When we speak of the body in terms of “property,” “rights,” and “public ethics,” we risk effacing one term with another. Let us look, for example, at the word “property.” How has the objectivation of the term to refer to the person as an owner of his or her body shaped the original split between body and language, between male and female? In *La perdita*, Rossana Rossanda, in conversation with Manuela Fraire, remarked:

We know that “we are” our bodies, but we think that we “possess” them, as if consciousness has another order of existence, as if we are laid out in a house like a snail in its shell. To say “The body is the first thing that I have” and “this body is me” are not the same thing. Being and having are not identical.¹⁶

Of all of the irreconcilable oppositions, the most resistant to our pacifying efforts is surely that of an I that is constrained to recognize itself as a stranger in its own body, an I that must exclude the biological cycle from its understanding of itself and that, at the same time, is accorded a “special nature” that is reducible to the material from which other living beings are made. If we accept the split between an I, which imagines itself as eternal and omnipotent, and the material from which it is made (identified with the female body, itself deprived of an I), then the alienation of women is even deeper than one might expect. In *Le altre*, Rossanda emphatically reminds us of the change in the idea of history that was brought about by female consciousness:

Liberty for her, therefore, is first to find an identity, to be. This is not simply a theme to be investigated, nor has it been resolved by the legal disputes of our democracies: the question of the inalienability of the

person. . . . For women, this question is as large as the very negation to which they have been subjected; it is immense. Women know that the person remains violated beyond the declarations of law: by misery, orders, ideology, by those projections of the oppression that continue to constrain us from within. This is the deep sense of alienation of the I, which expresses itself in the need to ask oneself: "Who am I?" One also continues to hear the question in feminist slogans such as "I am my own." . . . This is the most decisive message that the women's movement has given us.¹⁷

The reappropriation of the body in all of its dimensions, including its biological, psychological, and intellectual aspects, meant, for feminists of the 1970s, beginning from one's personal story, from lived experience, from one's *narrative account of oneself*, in order to explore what had been subordinated by male domination, what had been suppressed in men's vision of the world. By internalizing a male model of the world, women disregarded their own feelings. The critique of institutions of public life was also required, for they, too, by obscuring the body, constructed knowledge and power. As the women of the Center for the Health of Women, founded at Padova in 1974, noted:

Our struggle is not with Medicine, but with the State, which, through medicine and the health-care system, will continue to expropriate our bodies from us—a body that has been transformed into an instrument of domestic labor, of material reproduction, that is, a body that provides physical, affective, and sexual work for the husband. We are biological and affective reproducers of children.¹⁸

As self-managing consultants, women sought to reappropriate the body, medicine, and the right to health, and to expand the possibility of living out their experiences within public structures. Consciousness-raising, self-help, self-examination, all of these were radical attempts to reposition the self in terms of one's own physical, psychic, and intellectual being by means of a practice set within *relations among women*—relations dismissed and excluded

by institutional forms of knowledge. In this way, women sought to reclaim from the doctor, the psychoanalyst, and the expert knowledge of themselves and the power to change and direct their own lives.

The questions of law, rights, and organized politics, with all of their contradictions, were foregrounded by the problem of abortion. In a meeting of the Circolo De Amicis at Milan in February 1975, a number of voices were raised against positioning the abortion issue as a battle for rights, and various other political organizations echoed this resistance.

The question of abortion came to the fore for reasons, in part, that were not clear. In a sort of traditional politics, espoused by people whose courage I do not doubt, a logic unfolded in which we became involved. This was done by force and because it involved us in the first person. Everyone wanted us to become involved; priests, . . . various parties, opinion groups, the extra-parliamentary left. This could have been viewed as dangerous because it gave us a sense of importance and euphoria, but the fact remains that this push to be involved was imposed upon us from the outside, from above our heads. In my view, we had to find ourselves means with which to confront the question of abortion in nontraditional, political ways. We had to draw upon our own experiences, including positions that may not have been perfectly coherent, but nevertheless we reflected on our own thinking and desire. . . . It was not in our interest to treat the problem of abortion in itself. Our effort was to link, it seems to me, the problem to our condition and to a particular question, which was that of our sexuality and our body.¹⁹

Demonstrating just how far removed the analysis of abortion was from the discussion of law and rights was the fact that the principal themes of the meeting were sexuality, frigidity, homosexuality, relations with the mother, vaginal and clitoral sexuality. As the voice for abortion, *Lessico politico delle donne: Donne e medicina* [Women's Political Lexicon: Women and Medicine] summarized the divergent and contested attitudes of women on abortion:

Whereas secularized persons and Catholics continued to battle against abortion at the parliamentary level, the women's movement continued to debate the issue. Roughly sketching the content of the debate, two central positions can be delineated. One view held that the formalization of laws that would permit, assist, and fund abortion was to be seen as the securing of civic rights and the social reconfiguration of the rights and power of women. The other position saw social reform as useless for women, because the issue of abortion does not in itself address a system that fails to understand women and in which women lack the right to express themselves. One did not wish, above all, to claim "civil rights" in order to undergo the violence of abortion. To be pregnant without wanting to be so or to be constrained to abort even though one wanted a child provoked conflicts in women and produced situations that no law could regulate, systematize, or resolve. This is why the simple abolishment of the criminal status of abortion, its *decriminalization*, was asked for. . . . One's relation to maternity and reproduction and, therefore, negatively, one's relation to abortion, could be clarified only by investigating a sexuality that had not been defined by men, by analyzing the man-woman relationship, including the motives and dynamics underlying a woman's choice to remain pregnant despite her desire to abort.²⁰

It is interesting to note the return of the cultural position on the abortion law today, some thirty years after its initial approval (May 25, 1978), in the comments of a younger generation of feminists, namely, the women of the group A/Matrix Roma.

The majority of women were not fighting for a law, but for the decriminalization of abortion. The reasoning was clear: a law would have meant that the state controlled women's bodies. And this is the way it is, because certain articles of the legal text leave room for conscientious objectors, on one hand, and for various interpretations of when and how life begins, on the other hand. This balancing act leads us

directly back to the 1970s, when women fought not for rights authorized by men, but for freedom. Today, the personal sphere has once again become the object of focus. . . . The Right wishes to submit women's personal freedom to the will of God, whereas the Left reduces it to a matter of rights.

Self-determination cannot exist if it is subordinated to the interests of political parties and parliamentary logic, if the law itself, once established, demands the energy of an ongoing defensive struggle whose rules are furnished by health, legal, and administrative institutions. Recent history testifies to these limitations. The aforementioned text of the law, with all of its ambiguities, is today attacked and deprived of all meaning.

The fight against abortion was a full-out war, which could not be defeated by the idea of claiming and obtaining a "right." To speak publicly about abortion carries with it a radical meaning that invites discussion about sexuality and the relationship between men and women. It means becoming conscious and reappropriating one's own body through different relations and structures, such as women's health centers. Openly discussing abortion reinvented the public and necessitated the construction of new primary institutions such as self-directed consultation offices and medical centers for women.²¹

To recognize the originality and radical nature of 1970s feminism—and its most enduring lessons, evident in today's feminist and lesbian collectives—is to recall its anomalous practices of self-help, consciousness-raising, and the exploration of the unconscious, all of which focus on a body that is investigated and narrated as the essential locus of the construction of female individuality, a body and an identity that have been shaped and dominated by the fears and desires of men, a body violated, exploited, and controlled by men, a body reduced to its sexual and reproductive functions.

At that time, female "difference" had not yet been introduced into feminist discourse; rather, women were virtually "inexistent" as a result of the effects of the "symbolic violence" perpetrated against them—a violence

that led them to embody a male vision of the world, to speak the language of men, to confuse love with violence, to adapt and assimilate, as well as to painfully resist. In a passage from *Smarrirsi in pensieri lunari*, Agnese Seranis acutely summarized the “voyage” of the women’s movement, undertaken at the time as a process of discovery, a project aimed at the re-appropriation of a self abstracted from nature but also confined to a “genus” or “kind”:

In every place, I found myself as inexistent; I was but a shade of their desires and needs. But I wanted to be me, I wanted to know, I wanted to hold in my hands that which I was so as to perhaps offer or exchange it. This is what I desired to give to my equals, namely, that which I was. Yet, I felt until that point only able to give my body, with which men were preoccupied and upon which they projected an image of their own desires. I understood that they only wanted to dialogue with themselves or with someone they themselves invented, someone who did not challenge their conception of life or their role in the construction of women’s identity.²²

Certain polarizations appeared in historians’ reconstructions of the women’s movement, such as the struggle for rights versus the struggle for full liberation. In the slogan “Change oneself and change the world,” a search for connections replaced the attachment to dualisms. Participation in protests over divorce, abortion, and sexual violence was based on critical reflection and collective labor, and it was intended to ensure that the movement was not reduced to “a matter of reform,” isolated from the broader discussion of sexuality and the dominance of male culture.

Feminism, precisely because it was a symptom of the shifting of the boundaries between private life and political life, between the home and the polis, found itself in what Agamben calls the “aporia” of modern democracy, that is, subject to democracy’s ambiguities and contradictions.

With *habeas corpus* (1679), the new subject of politics is no longer the human being (*homo*), but the body (*corpus*). Modern democracy is born as the vindication and exposition of this “body”: one must