

# Introduction

This volume gathers conversations with Lea Melandri, Luisa Muraro, and Adriana Cavarero, and essays by Rossana Rossanda—Italian women thinkers and authors whose words give shape to the social, political, and philosophical discussions that arose out of the women’s movement of the late 1960s and 1970s in Italy.

The impetus for this project came, in part, from the desire to speak with women whose lives and work have played—and continue to play—an important part in the women’s movement and feminist thought in Italy. As a philosophy student at the State University of Milan—*la statale*, as it is commonly known—in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I discovered feminism in and through my friendship with other philosophy students—young women like me—not through the program of studies. The only course I took that focused on a woman thinker was on Hannah Arendt, and that was the exception. When I went to look for books by Arendt at the philosophy library, I could not find any. Hannah Arendt had lived and thought, but none of her books could be found at the State University of Milan in the early 1990s. Things have changed since then and, I have no doubt, many books by Arendt and on Arendt can be found at the Milan University library today. Still, the question of what constitutes knowledge, which books and thinkers become part of the program of studies, and which do not, remains a central question for everyone, especially for anyone involved in teaching and learning. At the time I understood that if I wanted to learn what women philosophers had thought and written, I had to go and look for them myself, and beyond those institutional, academic walls.

When I currently think of my university years in Milan, I think of my friends, the time we spent together, and the intensity of the personal, philosophical, and political discoveries we experienced while together. The courses I took, the books we had to read, the examinations, and everything

else that happened in those years fades in the background. I only have flashes of memory of the place, the overly packed classrooms, the courtyards, the philosophy library where I often studied, the coffee shops just outside the university building, the bookstore with its walls and floor stacked with books, and their friendly staff.

I moved away from Italy and the University of Milan, but the scarcity of women thinkers in the main programs of studies in philosophy—unless designated as a specific area of studies such as “gender,” “race,” and so on—accompanied me wherever I went. As had been the case at *la statale*, what happened outside the classroom—discussion groups and informal reading sessions on books and thinkers not in the program of studies—was as formative as what was learned inside, and perhaps even more so.

The conversations presented in this volume are like the many conversations I have had over the years with friends, colleagues, students in my courses and, in my mind, also with the authors themselves. They are, in many respects, a way of stringing a thread between different times and places, among singular experiences and patterns that seem to return. Even though I am now far away from the time and place of the late 1980s and early 1990s, in other ways it is as if I never left: the desire to engage in conversations inside and outside institutional knowledge continues to animate my desire to understand.

Lea Melandri, Luisa Muraro, and Adriana Cavarero are central figures in Italian feminism and Italian thought. As their lifelong work attests, they have persisted in naming, elaborating, making visible, and detailing women’s experience—sexual difference, Muraro prefers to call it—its value, its meaning, and its contradictions. These thinkers belong to a generation of women who “were there” at a time when the women’s movement and students’ revolt radically questioned the status quo at all levels of Italian society and sought to change it. The extent to which each of them was involved, and the impact that their direct participation had on each of them, on their choices, and on their subsequent work, becomes clear through these conversations and through their own words. In answering the questions that are posed to them, they draw out the main points clearly and directly, thus opening a window onto key aspects of their thought and providing an entry into their way of thinking. They tell us about themselves and their work, or better, they tell us how their work and their thought stem out of concrete events and their own relationships with other women and men.

These conversations are intended to be explorations of Melandri’s, Muraro’s, and Cavarero’s thought where previous familiarity with their respec-

tive work is helpful, though not indispensable for appreciating the originality of each. Their words will speak differently to different readers. Still, there is much that they leave for us to think about if only we consider some of the questions they raise: they ask about subjectivity, feminine subjectivity in particular, about the relationship between theory and practice, about the political and what it entails, about change, about knowledge, about naming experience in its manifoldness and finding the right words to say it. These are questions for which I have no clear or definitive answer; but precisely because of that, the questions draw me in and draw me to others.

While the work of Melandri, Muraro, and Cavarero originates in a specific time and place—Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s—it is also true that it is not confined to that time and place, and many will find echoes of these women’s words in their own experience and in how they think about it. Perhaps in this lies the urgency of this book: we need to hear from those whose political struggle has given rise to practices and words that have brought about change, even when the cultural context and the time are somewhat distant. Mechanisms of domination are, not surprisingly, monotonous and repetitive; it is on the side of those who struggle to subvert them that political creativity lies. In hearing and learning about these struggles it becomes possible to establish points of contact and even draw a map across time and space that tells us about political struggles in their concrete situations.

In speaking about their work, the three authors speak about their life at the crossroads of events happening in Italy that impacted them directly. The Italian social and political context in the late 1960s and 1970s is not usually well known among English-speaking readers, but it is crucial for understanding the originality—in the double sense of origins and distinctness—of the women’s movement and feminism in Italy. Within the limits of this introduction, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive picture of those years.<sup>1</sup> Yet each conversation lets their significance transpire: Melandri, Muraro, and Cavarero refer to the period between the late 1960s and 1970s as a time of profound change. These are tumultuous years in Italy, as they are years of widespread social and political unrest that shook the establishment at its foundations, leaving no state institutions, no main social player untouched: from students’ protests in the universities, to workers’ strikes in the factories, to teachers’ mobilization at all school levels. As workers, as teachers, and as students, women were involved in all of these social and political struggles, but they soon came to realize that their being women did not appear to have any significance, except as something to be “dealt

with” from within the overall workers’ or students’ demands. Historically, however—a history that goes back a long way—being women had had a significant impact on their lives: it had penalized them to a subordinate condition, deprived them of the power to decide for themselves, excluded them from all decision-making powers that regulate living together, reduced them to a condition of total dependence. As it became clear that the specificity of being woman was not central to these rebellious movements, women left them and became a political movement of their own, with their own political goals and their own claims, separate from the other social movements of this period. From their separate position, they began to produce knowledge about their condition as women in a patriarchal culture, and the blow their departure inflicted on “man” was aptly depicted by Carla Lonzi:

Man no longer knows who woman is when she comes out of her colonization and from her roles through which he was preparing himself for an experience already done and repeated over the millennia: the mother, the virgin, the wife, the lover, the daughter, the sister, the sister-in-law, the female friend, the prostitute. Woman was a product prepackaged in such a way that he had nothing to discover in that human being. Every role presented itself as his guarantee for him himself; to come out of that guarantee was like falling off from man’s consideration, it was the end. Every woman who “differs” today knows that every man in his heart decrees her as the end, since, by not being able to catalog her, he feels irritated and powerless having to confront the fact that the understanding between the sexes is no longer so clear.<sup>2</sup>

Carla Lonzi refers to the condition of woman as one of “colonization” and not by accident. A colonized nation is overtaken by the colonizing power and controlled through the imposition of laws, customs, and a language that are not its own. Ultimately, the colonized power is one that takes hold of people and controls them from within. Similarly, a woman in a patriarchal society is the product of a law and of customs that take hold of her from within; she speaks a language that is not her own. To free oneself from any form of colonization entails sorting through the ambiguity and contradictions that permeate one’s condition, and it requires a conscientious effort in taking a good look at everything one says and does, trying to find

a way to disentangle oneself from what is foreign and what is one's own. Muraro acknowledges the Eurocentric imprint of her educational formation, a given in the sociocultural context of her upbringing, but as a woman, she has to find her way to relate to it, by cultivating "a sense of partiality," looking for the way of symbolic independence from the dominant culture and affirm her subjective truth. Similarly, Melandri wrestles with a "feminine" as "the specter of man's desires and fears," caught in a dualism where woman is the source both of sin and of moral elevation, man's damnation and his salvation. She looks instead for the links between these conceptual oppositions that continue to plague the Western way of thinking even after they have fallen in disrepute.

There is a recurring insistence on a partiality that cannot be subsumed into a universality and that cannot be done away with. It attests to the limits of language and of theory while speaking of the need to transform both language and theory in and through the practices that arise out of the feminist political struggle, knowing all too well that some "betraying" occurs in translating such practices into theory.

In talking about themselves and their work, Melandri, Muraro, and Cavarero all refer to those years as the context wherein each of them experienced a turning point, leading them to a conscious awareness that transformed their respective lives radically. Melandri fled the constraints of a life—a job, a husband—that had already closed her in at the age of twenty-five and found herself in the midst of the anti-authoritarian school movement and the women's movement. Muraro grasped the full import of being a woman when questioned directly by her professor about doing philosophy and about "turning to the feminists." Cavarero realized the power of the imagination in subverting domination through the 1968 students' revolt.

Even though such a turning point takes a slightly different form for each of them, it is evident for all of them that there is a clear sense of "before" and "after," as if a metamorphosis has taken place: she is the same woman, but also no longer the woman she was before. This hiatus becomes an opening for discovering and naming her experience, with her own words and together with the words of other women. It is not surprising that the *pratica di autocoscienza* (consciousness raising)—the practice of gathering and telling one another of their lives as women—was a powerful political tool in the women's movement in Italy. Women, whose existence was not their own, were discovering ways of saying and speaking for themselves, each by herself, in her own words, aided by the words of other women,

expressing what had been negated, buried, censored, and discarded. In the words of Melandri: never had women appeared more threatening to the patriarchal order than when they came together and found their own words with which to speak.

Adherence to material experience is one of the threads that runs through their work and something that is found in feminist theory at large, inside and outside Italy. What is less known, however, is that the 1970s women's movement in Italy, although part of a global phenomenon, had its own peculiarities. It was heterogeneous, fairly widespread all over Italy, particularly combative in urban centers, rooted in the practice of *autocoscienza*, and operating through many autonomously self-regulated collectives. The writings produced by these collectives gave rise to animated debates across Italy and would influence the discussions on divorce, on abortion, and on a reform of family law.<sup>3</sup>

Within a substantially similar orientation—adhering to material experience and, from within it, giving words to feminine specificity—Melandri, Muraro, and Cavarero exhibit different ways of proceeding, employing different strategies wherein we get a taste of what could be referred to as “variations on a theme,” provided that we understand that “the theme” is not something external but, rather, a fundamental orientation that has come about through a deeply transformative experience. It may be interesting to know that their lives intersect, something that has, no doubt, contributed to this shared orientation. Muraro and Melandri were involved in the anti-authoritarian school movement and in the women's movement in the 1970s, and they both participated in early feminist collectives. Cavarero and Muraro are among the founders of the philosophical community *Diotima* at the University of Verona in the 1980s. Although they are not working with one another at present, they are nonetheless working closely, or to put it differently, their work is closely related.

The similar orientation notwithstanding, it is important not to lose the specificity of the work of each and the underlining questions that animate it. Melandri focuses on excavating the memory of our bodies and plumbs the region at the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious. Cavarero explores philosophical and literary stereotypes and figures of the past to free them from the patriarchal system of values, thereby making new compositions of value and meaning possible. Muraro finds in sexual difference and in the practice of relationships with other women the path to a symbolic order that empowers women—an order that is centered on the figure of the mother, the source of feminine authority.

Sexual difference is how Muraro and Cavarero talk about feminine specificity, and this cannot be understood as a mere biological category—although this is how it is often mistakenly interpreted—insofar as it has to do with the symbolic: the culturally, conceptually, philosophically, and theologically complex, yet invisible “apparatus” at work in every context through which one seeks to make sense of one’s experience in the world. This apparatus is fundamentally patriarchal, rooted in a conception of the relationship between the sexes in which man holds control through codified laws, and where the living together is primarily organized through the division of productive and reproductive labor. As such, rather than furnishing the tools for understanding and making sense of herself as a woman, this order further entrenches woman in a condition of subordination and dependence. The questions she may have about her role and place in society are silenced by what is legitimized as “natural destiny.” Cavarero’s work exhibits the “fiction” or the “lie” of the patriarchal symbolic and, in dismantling it, she recovers meanings and values that are not reducible to the prevailing symbolic order but belong to another order. Cavarero finds in the narrative style and in literature a wealth of resources that nourish her imaginary, enabling her to undo stereotypes and unearth what lies beneath them. Muraro turns to the relationships with other women of the Milan Women’s Bookstore as the source of inspiration and of a knowledge beyond the prevailing and pervasive male order. It is in the context of these practices that the authority of the mother is rediscovered as a way of empowering women and their desires; it also subverts the preordained dependence of women on men. Relying on the authority of the mother means to entrust oneself to another woman for the realization of one’s desire, a desire that, in a patriarchal order, would hardly even arise.

Women’s relationships are central to the work of Muraro and the Milan Women’s Bookstore as well as the philosophical community *Diotima* in Verona. It is not difficult to see how both of these places and practices have their roots in the collectives of the women’s movement in the 1970s. It does not follow, however, that they are the only practices that have evolved out of the women’s movement in Italy.

Lea Melandri tells us of her experience of the women’s collectives and how this same experience, passing through the “150-hour courses,”<sup>4</sup> led her and other women to the creation of the *Libera Università delle Donne* (Free University of Women). The practice of learning from one another is at work here too, but the emphasis is on enabling the expression of the many ways of knowing rather than channeling it through

technical and specialized languages. It is a knowing that comes about through “experiential writing,” by disinhibiting what has remained mute and has sedimented in the memory of our bodies. Only in interrogating the preestablished notion of being male and being female, in searching for the relations that exist in what appears artificially opposed, does the pervasiveness of male domination come to the fore, and only then does the possibility of change arise. What is needed, according to Melandri, is the ruthless capacity to look at the relationship between the sexes and, particularly, at the most intimate of them all, love, as the locus of the most pervasive form of domination, which has enslaved woman, but which has gravely mutilated man as well.

Melandri, Muraro, and Cavarero “were there,” I said earlier, but not in the sense that they had a “privileged” position regarding the women’s movement or the students’ movement, as if by being involved in those events, they might hold the key to their meaning. On the contrary, it is not possible for any one of them to provide us with the overarching view of that period in a comprehensive way. While they were directly involved, they were not alone. Instead, by saying that they “were there,” I simply emphasize what each of them, in her own way, has said: that they were profoundly changed by their experience of those events. Muraro speaks of a correspondence between events and herself, a “happy coincidence,” she calls it. In talking about “public happiness,” Cavarero seems to refer to something similar: the coming together of people at a particular moment expresses a shared impetus that is not there when individuals are isolated. For Melandri, such a correspondence has come “through another person” (*per interposta persona*) through the words of another woman naming what she, Melandri, could not find words for, at least not until then, at which moment, the correspondence does open up and provides words she did not previously have. They each know most intimately what changing and transforming oneself is about, something that by now must feel almost like an impervious presence within.

It might be more difficult to assess to what extent this profound personal transformation has in fact transmuted into the world around them as well, transforming it, if not radically, at least in visible and significant ways. Melandri refers to the well-known slogan “change yourself and change the world,” used by feminists and not only by them, emphasizing that slogans such as these and feminism too, risk becoming devoid of meaning if reduced to a mere formula. To be sure, there is something to be said for such a correspondence, some unexplainable turning of events that impacts one’s life deeply, something that could not be foreseen and that is not directly



retraceable to some personal traits, at least not entirely. The gratitude that Melandri, Muraro, and Cavarero genuinely express regarding how life has opened up to them attests to their humbleness. They acknowledge that while their personal choices matter—and they matter a lot—there is still something else that is difficult to name or pin down—it is like “wonders,” Muraro says—and yet there, nonetheless.

Where does Rossana Rossanda fit into this? She was a well-known and influential figure in Italy, a highly respected journalist, a leading thinker in the Italian Communist Party, from which she was expelled in 1969 together with a few others of *Il Manifesto*,<sup>5</sup> a newspaper she cofounded with others. She died in the fall of 2020 and, with her passing, a world has come to an end too: the world of post-WWII Italy, about which she writes in her memoir *La ragazza del secolo scorso* (The girl from the last century).

Rossanda “was there too” during the late 1960s and 1970s, though not as a direct participant in the women’s movement, the students’ movement, or the workers’ movement. Nonetheless, she was involved as a very close, astute, and sympathetic observer. Just to get a sense of her enthusiasm for the events of the time, in May 1968 Rossanda drove to Paris with some friends, on the spur of the moment, to see with her own eyes the “revolution” as it was unfolding. In light of her political experience and acumen, she knew that something of political magnitude was taking place and wrote that these events constituted “a break in history” (*una cesura storica*),<sup>6</sup> and also that “in Italy, 1968 stretched out more than anywhere else and it did not last just for the month of May” (*e in Italia il 1968 si estese più che altrove e non durò un solo maggio*).<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the women’s movement, Rossanda always maintained a critical distance while continually engaging in a dialogue with feminists, many of whom were or became her close friends. She belonged to an older generation who came of age during WWII, in a world where affirming oneself as woman meant to take the road of emancipation. When the new feminism made its appearance, she was moved by it and never grew tired of engaging in its quest, sometimes with the indulgence of a mother who knows what is coming, and always with the fervor that incites pressing forward, while forewarning of what lies hidden.

She too talks about a turning point in her life: it was when she became a communist. It was 1943, and most of Italy was under the occupation of the German troops aided by the Fascists of the Salò regime,<sup>8</sup> a difficult and confusing time. As a student of philosophy at the University of Milan, she turned to her highly respected teacher Antonio Banfi. She had just learned

he was a communist. She was looking for some way to orient herself, in a world and at a time where everything she had known had collapsed. He gave her a list of books to read, writings by Marx, Lenin, and Laski. She read every one of them and could not put them down. But it was a vision that opened her eyes to the world around her and moved her to take a stand.

As she wrote in *La ragazza del secolo scorso*, on her way home on a tram, one day, she saw three workers: “Worn out with fatigue and, it seemed to me, with wine, disheveled, with rough hands, black nails, their heads dangling on their chest. I had never looked at them, my world was elsewhere, they were other, and what were they? They were fatigue without light, the things of the world I avoided, about which nothing could be done. . . . It was with them that I had to go.” (*Sfiniti di fatica e mi parve di vino, malmessi, le mani ruvide, le unghie nere, le teste penzolanti sul petto. Non li avevo mai guardati, il mio mondo era altrove, loro erano altro, che cosa? Erano la fatica senza luce, le cose del mondo che evitavo, sulle quali nulla si poteva. . . . Era con loro che dovevo andare.*) She continues: “In truth it was not a discovery, it was an acknowledgment without further delay.” (*In verità non era un scoperta, era una presa d’atto senza più rinvii possibili.*)<sup>9</sup> It was this vision that made her realize she needed to take a stand and shortly thereafter she joined the Resistance against the German troops and the Fascists. This is the moment of “correspondence” between events and her personal life: she became fully conscious of the situation and immediately she took action; she could no longer remain a bystander. Does she also find herself at this very moment? Her answer is unequivocal: “Nor could I have screamed, one day, ‘I was there.’ I found myself in it.” (*Né avrei potuto gridare un giorno ‘io c’ero.’ Io mi ci sono trovata.*)<sup>10</sup>

It is a remarkable statement that draws out a subtle distinction between “being there” and “finding herself in the midst of it,” where in the latter, the accent is placed first and foremost on the events, on what was happening, and less on her own person. Not to undermine the transformative experience of the resistance, but the urgency, as she put it, came from the situation, from what was happening. This gives rise to some key questions that every social and political movement seeking change—including the women’s movement—has had to face, and continues to face: If the political movement expresses a correspondence between events and the people involved in it about something that is perceived as needing to change, how is such an inexplicable “correspondence” maintained over time? If the situation—the events, what is happening—plays such a crucial part in

getting a political movement going, how can one maintain such a vital connection while situation and events change? In short: How to hold on to the momentum, while everything passes? It is true that a strong political movement for change does not, and probably cannot, last for a long time—either the political goals are achieved and there is no need for it to continue to exist, or if they are only partially achieved or not at all (depending on the kind of institutional opposition they face), they may subside for a time and then resurge. It is both remarkable and perhaps disheartening that the women's movement, the feminist struggle, keeps on. On the one hand, this speaks of the inspiring, persistent determination animating the struggle, the desire to change the structurally unjust ways in which the relationships between the sexes have been conceived and shaped, relationships still rooted in power unbalance and violence; on the other hand, that it should keep on speaks of how deeply entrenched this way of structuring the relationships between the sexes is, and how hard it is to change them because of that.

The women's movement in Italy has morphed since the 1960s and 1970s. Yet it has not subsided, unlike other movements of the same period. It attests both to the need for more change and for the persistence of the women who bring it forth. It seems to me that, beyond the marked differences in their approaches—not to be underestimated—what stands out is that they responded to the challenge. For as simple and perhaps even obvious this may seem, it should not be taken for granted. For there to be any change at all, the challenge must be taken up. Again, and again.



I wish to say a few words about the modality of these interviews/conversations. Each was carried out separately and independently. I prepared the questions in advance to reflect the specificity of the work of each of the authors. Melandri, Muraro, and Cavarero were asked to respond to the questions in writing. Given travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, my planned meeting with each of them happened online, and during our “virtual encounters” we had the opportunity to talk about these questions more in-depth, clarifying key points. I was also able to ask more pointed questions based on their initial responses, and the changes that emerged from the “live” conversations were integrated into a final written text. Once I completed the translation from Italian into English, additional revisions were made in concert with each of the interviewees. Through

the many back-and-forth exchanges, I came to realize that my way of looking at these texts had changed: I could no longer see them merely as “interviews”; they felt more like conversations, happening across time zones and across space, but conversations nonetheless, where we sought points of contact and through which much of what is not immediately apparent in their work came through.

My “closeness” to them is undeniable; it lies primarily in my genuine curiosity for the work of women—thinkers, authors, writers—and in being moved by the unending quest for finding sense and making sense of our experience as women. This, however, does not entail sameness in thinking; nor does it turn into an uncritical attitude. The conversations show that it is not possible to reduce the work of one to the work of the other, not even of those within a similar orientation; the specificity of each is undeniable. Feminism itself, as a movement and as thought, is not univocal, and even when we look for its defining characteristics within a particular social and cultural context, such as Italy for instance, it remains difficult to find a formula that adequately encapsulates it. Thinking and acting politically always entails many sides.

Rossana Rossanda is part of this, and yet she is apart. As a woman, and a feminist, a reluctant feminist perhaps, she fiercely defended her independence of thought while constantly challenging what she saw as “questionable” or “unconvincing.” In the initial stage of this project, I had hoped to be able to interview her as well, but this plan did not materialize, unfortunately. I am delighted to be able to include three of her essays in this volume. They attest to her genuine engagement with feminism, to another voice within the same struggle, and help recreate the atmosphere of intense and lively debate of the time.

The order in which the conversations appear in this volume was not decided in advance. It became manifest in light of the content each thinker brought to light. Lea Melandri tells us a lot about the social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Italy, furnishing a detailed picture of those restless years and of the historical and cultural context. Luisa Muraro speaks of the political practices of the women’s movement collectives that coalesced around the Milan Women’s Bookstore and that elaborated the thought of sexual difference. Adriana Cavarero’s work exemplifies the philosophical elaboration, from within the academy, of key issues and experiences that the women’s movement and the thought of sexual difference have brought to the fore. Rossana Rossanda is the voice speaking

from without, but participating in thinking about the woman condition, nonetheless. Although she may be viewed as representing a world that was radically put into question at the time of the women's movement, she is, as she puts it, "in the middle of the ford," but precisely for that looking to all sides and calling for an open and sincere dialogue, an invitation to listen to each other "free" from respective affiliations, a conciliatory gesture that inspires new beginnings.

As these conversations took place while the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading, it was impossible not to talk about its impact. The pandemic has made existing inequities all the more visible and when it comes to relationship between the sexes, it has revealed that there is still a lot of work to be done. With regard to political power, women's representation in government and in key decision-making positions still remains low, as Cavarero points out; with the burden of domestic labor and child rearing (still!) falling predominantly on women's backs—and not only in Italy—many women have had to make the difficult decision of leaving their jobs, even when they are very well-paying jobs. In a strange sort of way, what feminists of the 1970s fought for—a more inclusive work environment, the reconceptualization and restructuring of family-work balance, equal pay, parental leave, qualitative and affordable childcare, just to name a few—is facing us today again, under different circumstances, but with no less urgency. Why are these pressing issues yet to be addressed adequately? Even more disconcerting has been the rise of male violence against women, as the pandemic soars, a violence that often happens behind closed doors at the hands of partners and close family members. In short, despite the progress made, crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic reveal how fragile and volatile the presumed progress actually is. Is this progress real? Such a question arises spontaneously. If women still bear the greater burden of work associated with reproductive life, then it means that women—and men—are not done with their struggle.

Is this not what institutions of power are? The sedimentation of relations of domination into living spaces that leave little or no room for thinking or doing otherwise. Yet thinking and doing otherwise is the only way to regenerate possibilities, even when this appears to threaten its very foundations. Feminism, or women's movements, may be seen as threatening the foundations of existing power structures, but it may well be that new foundations are indeed needed.

In 1970 Carla Lonzi wrote:

For a girl, the university is not the place where she will achieve her liberation by means of culture, but the place where, after having been carefully prepared by the family, her repression will be completed. Her education is a process of slow poisoning which paralyses her just as she is about to embark on more responsible gestures and enjoy experiences that will enlarge her conception of herself.<sup>11</sup>

Lonzi is speaking of the university as an institution of power that has been shaped and built on the premise of the exclusion of women as women. The question then becomes, how can that same institution transform itself from a place of exclusion and oppression to one where the young woman can affirm and express herself, “enlarge her conception of herself” without intimidation, without fear of being harassed or assaulted, without fear of being demoted, without fear of being silenced? And the same questions can be asked of other places, where she works, where she engages in politics, where she goes for entertainment, and even in her own home where she lives.

I began this introduction by saying that the impetus for this project came, in part, from the desire to reconnect with the experience of discovering feminism in and through my friendship with other female philosophy students—Laura, Gemma, Sara, Cristina—when studying at the University of Milan, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It gives me pause to think that when I studied there, scarcely twenty years had passed since the early 1970s, when the women’s movement exploded. Yet for as much as it did bring about change, where were the signs of women’s revolt—the revolt within the revolt—in those buildings? How much had the university been changed by the women’s movement in those twenty years? Some reforms following the 1968 student revolt had changed some key institutional rules but, as far as women were concerned, it was hard to say what actually had changed. At that particular time, when I discovered feminism, it felt as if it was starting then, at the moment when I happened to encounter it, oblivious to all that had already taken place. Perhaps, there is something to be said for “discovering” something through our own experience as if the world were actually opening up to us at that very moment, as if new. Unfortunately, the more common experience is that the world is felt as set in its ways, given as it is, closed. These women tell us clearly otherwise.

In these conversations, as I reflect on the words of Melandri, Muraro, and Cavarero and their invaluable work, the thread that connects different experiences of women at different moments becomes visible. In particular,

their commitment to women's experience, and to the desire to name it, the friendship with women as a political practice, the ability to imagine a more just world, and the ability to listen to the recesses of our bodies, just to name a few, stand out as fruitful insights and concrete teachings. Carla Lonzi captures the message of their respective lifelong work fairly well, I think, and so it seems appropriate to close with her words:

Our message to man, to the genius, to the rational visionary is this: the future of the world does not lie in moving continually forwards along a path mapped out by man's desire for overcoming difficulties. *The future of the world is open*: it lies in starting along the path from the beginning again with woman as a subject.<sup>12</sup>