

/53 Chapter Two

Loving Mothers

Prisoners of a Dream

In love-passion there is the “primordial breath of life” that pushes the couple of lovers to be sufficient for one another: an undeniable claustrophilic component. No one would be horrified if the “desire to possess or be possessed” seeks its images in the hidden innards of the organism that squeezed together the mother and child in the time that preceded birth. “The son—writes Paolo Mantegazza—is a living member of the mother, it is flesh of the mother’s flesh, blood of its blood; but even when the fruit has fallen from the branch that nourished it, it does not cease being a member of the maternal member. The ovary no longer embraces the child, but the child of the loving mother now embraces the child, warming it with kisses and caresses.”¹

The closed horizon of the first dwelling of human beings, the absence of the word, the intrauterine quiet that does not yet know tears and separations, these are all the bodily symbols that the originary couple, in the partial non-distinguishability of its members, has given to adult loves; these symbols are a prison in which one feels pain only when it is lacking. Love is the barrier that human beings obsessively and unreasonably raise in /54 defence of a freedom—from death, pain, loss—that, on the contrary, ends with one’s distancing of oneself from the world and others.

The “discomfort” that holds civility before the chasm of its own origins, before those “basic impulses” that constrain civility, despite itself, to keep a step always behind, is no different than the temptation to draw near to and superimpose on the two mouths of the volcano that one finds at the beginning and end of every existence, namely, the uterus and the tomb. There where the full revelation

¹ Paolo Mantegazza, *L'estasi umana* (Milano: Mantegazza, 1887), 158.

of its full being, the rejoining of parts that have long been at war, returns the “superhuman silence” of the inorganic and death. Alberto Asor Rosa writes,

The only moment at which two destinies seriously arrive at penetrating one another is the very same moment in which every communication fails: Great Communication requires that no communication exist. There was once two, now there is one: It seems that we have achieved the maximum identification, the maximum knowledge—but we cannot *speak* of it.²

As long as love remains chained to the dream of melting two beings into one, as if they were two halves of one whole, love cannot be lived except as a terrible necessity: the condition for survival for women, who are constrained to alter their very own reason to live such that it is different than that of men, who are the only protagonists of the fate of the world. The doubt with which Pierre Bourdieu concludes his meticulous analysis of “male dominance” is less paradoxical than at first glance and it confirms the doubled face that love has borne throughout the centuries: cross and delight, cold and ecstasy, fullness and annihilation. “Is love an exception, the only one perhaps, even though greatly esteemed, to the laws of male domination or to being put within the parentheses of symbolic violence or its highest form, because love is the subtlest, invisible form of violence?”³

/55 Is love, therefore, “harmony,” reciprocity, regeneration, even confusion, sacrifice of oneself, “the sacrilegious act” vis-à-vis one’s own individuality and the other, as Sibilla Aleramo claims? The absoluteness from which these questions issue is already the sign of an oppositional logic married to the shadows of the night, an absoluteness that is incapable of subtracting itself from the allure of the ancient tale that wants the two divided branches of humanity to now be confused and superimposed on one another, to be so immediately splayed open to one another. Where the encounter is enacted under

² Alberto Asor Rosa, *L’ultimo paradosso*, 149.

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Il dominio maschile*, 126.

the pressure from a lethal rejoining, there can be no freedom. It is this very tyrannical aspect that always throws slaves to love toward the desperate search for the lost I.

Love of oneself and the other are born together, unaware of the distance that allows them to draw borders around one another. Placed on a line of continuity and unlimited reciprocal permeability, the bodies of child and mother become, on account of the long story of separation that has grown up around the two, the “model of every happiness” (Freud), the best psychic happiness ever known, the narcissistic temptation that modernity rediscovers when it claims that the individual is the primary social bond.

It is difficult to say how much the nostalgia of the son wanting the woman to essentially remain mother, the place of departure and return, the first and last refuge for the world traveller, matters. Perhaps, in part, this wanting to remain mother comes from women themselves on account of certain biological properties. It could also be a temporary part of women’s being to make up for the loss of society’s expropriation. Relegated to the opposing sides of history and the origin, the two sexes do not seem to know anything except the timeless conflict that is captured by the illusion of falling in love, the frozen and fabricated dream of an impossible union.

Not even the indifference of productive logic and the market seem to have scratched the shared house of both male and female. The obsessive search of the couple becomes play, scientific experimentation, spectacle, an online /56 wager, and only insofar as it pleases the public, when it persistently views the female body first and foremost as an object that can never be substituted by the desire for her originary double nature, self-sufficient, and satisfied, a virgin that sheds tears of society.

The Irritating Factor of Civilization

The work of Freud, which originally bore the title *The Unhappiness of Society*—known to us as *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929)—opens with a discussion of the theme of the “oceanic feeling,” which was suggested by his friend Romain Rolland to be the “authentic source of religiosity”: the sense of an unlimited being, incapable of being surpassed. Freud says that he does not succeed in finding such a feeling in himself, but he is aware that the I, despite appearing to us as “autonomous, unified, and as standing against every other being, knows various forms of trespassing. Within the I one finds its very own continuity in an “unconscious psychic entity,” the *Es* (Id), /56 which “functions, so to speak, as a front; externally, though the borders tidily present themselves, and one finds an “unusual state” in which things unfold in a different manner:

At the height of falling in love, the border between the I and the object threatens to disappear. Against all the evidence of the senses, falling in love affirms that I and You are only one thing, and it is ready to comport itself as if things were to remain this way.⁴

Here, one recalls the initial experience of life where the I is not yet able to distinguish between itself and the other. The image of falling in love is, hence, associated with that of the newborn. The mother-child couple is profiled, therefore, behind the image of lovers while being charged with a sexual valence: The newborn attached to the mother’s breast “has /57 become the model of all love relations,” “the mother reserves for the child feelings that stem from her sexual life, including caresses, kisses, cradling, ultimately and clearly holding the child as a substitute for a sexual object.”

Elvio Frachinelli speaks of this originary experience, which is destined to have a prolonged effect on the future development of the individual.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Il disagio della civiltà* (*Civilization and Its Discontents*), 201 of Italian version.

Let us take the example of the relation between the small child and its mother [...] The world that shapes the relation (the world of the mother—the world as mother) is a body-world (*mondo-corpo*) that is continuous with the relation and communicates with it; the body touches the child, caresses it, nourishes it. The mother can (and sometimes does not) treat the child delicately, she can and cannot be hesitant with the child. The mother's body-world communicates heat, cold, balance, imbalance, pressure, contact, smells, rhythms, sounds [...] This experience traces out for the child certain *basic* lines, understood as the desiring and communicating body, lines in which the universe of language becomes enmeshed. And this experience, which models the child, presupposes prior experience, that is, the symbolic presupposes those private bodily symbols.⁵

In psychic life, Freud concludes, “nothing perishes”; the “anterior stages” are conserved alongside the final structuration. At this point, having left behind the premise attached to religion in his earlier essay, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud begins to focus on the following question:

Only religion knows how to respond to the question concerning the aim of life [...] We will ask ourselves, therefore, a less ambitious question: what things do human beings, through their behaviour, allow us to recognize as the aim and intention of their lives, what do they seek from life, what do they wish to obtain from life. To give an incorrect response to this question is almost impossible: they tend toward happiness, they wish to become and remain happy.⁶

Suffering, however, threatens human beings from all sides: from the body that is destined to perish, from the external world /58 that rages against us with spiteful and destructive forces, and, finally, from our relations with other human beings. In the impossibility of satisfying all our own needs, human beings often seek, therefore, ways to avoid their dislikes, including voluntary solitude, the use of technology to dominate nature, sublimation of drives, the joy experienced by the artist in creating, to give materiality to the image of our fantasies, or the seeker who resolves problems or discovers truth.

One could say that this last way mentioned above of extinguishing one's suffering is the “finest and most elevated,” but Freud notes, if confront this way with the satisfaction of our most basic impulses, the intensity of this way will appear muffled. “The existence of our bodies will not burn.” Even

⁵ Elvio Frachinelli, *Il bambino dalle uova d'oro*, op. cit., 234.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Il disagio della civiltà*, p. 211 (*Civilization and Its Discontents*).

work freely chosen that could “displace a quantity of libidinal, narcissistic, aggressive and even erotic components,” work “understood “as the path to happiness and as being hardly valued by human beings,” fundamentally remains linked to “necessity.”

There is another “way to proceed” that is not satisfied with avoiding one’s displeasure:

It brushes up against it without care for it and one attains it in the breath of life; it is passionate and moves toward a positive happiness [...] Naturally, I am speaking about that direction of life that makes love the centre of all living; one expects complete satisfaction from loving and being loved. A psychic attainment of this type is quite familiar to everyone. One of the forms in which love manifests itself, that is, sexual love, has procured for us the most intense experience of an overwhelming feeling of pleasure and has given us the model for chasing after happiness. What could be more natural than persisting in chasing after happiness on the very same path that we first encountered it? [...] The weak side of this technique of life is evident. When we love, we suffer like never before, we suffer like never before the loss of the loved object or love for the object; and so we find ourselves desperately unhappy.⁷

The most difficult kind of suffering to quell is that caused by social institutions that regulate the reciprocal relations /59 of human beings in the family, in the state, and in society. The heaviest weight to bear comes from the restrictions that society imposes upon individuals in the name of society’s ideals.

It is civilization, then, that is interrogated on that which makes it appear so unfriendly to happiness.

Human beings have made great progress, fulfilling their “fabulous desires” through technology and science, and becoming almost god-like.

Human beings have become, so to speak, a sort of god-prosthesis, truly magnificent and equipped with all sorts of accessory organs. But these accessories do not form a whole with the human being. In fact, they give to human beings more wire that needs to be wound up [...] Also, within the context of the investigation here, we cannot forget that today human beings, though similar to God, still do not feel themselves happy [...] Our houses are

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Il disagio della civiltà*, 217–218.

substitutes for the mother's womb, the first abode that human beings probably do not cease to desire, a place where we feel at home and at ease.⁸

The distinctive characteristic of civilization, besides that of surpassing the valorization of the highest psychic, intellectual, scientific, and artistic qualities, is the "way in which reciprocal relations between human beings are regulated—relations that view human beings as neighbours, the generous helper, the other's sexual object, the member of a family and a State."

Following our first impression, we are tempted to say that sublimation is a destiny forcibly imposed upon our drives by society [...] This "societal frustration" dominates the vast field of social relations between human beings.⁹

Freud's attempts to understand which influences gave rise to the evolution of society and which reasons justify the conflict between the civilizing process of society and the primordial desires of human beings, then, make sense.

/60 Presumably, the founding of the family is connected to the fact that the need for genital satisfaction ceased functioning like a guest that suddenly appears unannounced and, after leaving, is no longer heard from for a long while; rather, the need for sexual satisfaction has now become a permanent tenant.¹⁰

The family, therefore, structures itself along two couples: the man (the male) that appropriates for himself the sexual object (woman), and the mother that appropriates for herself the child. The foundation that underlies our life in common is twofold: love and work.

Hence, human's life in common had a double foundation: communal labour created by external necessity and the potential of love, which provoked in males the desire for not being deprived of the sexual object, that is, the female, whereas in females it provoked the desire for not being deprived of that part which is separate from her, namely, the child.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 227–228.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Il disagio della civiltà*, op. cit., 235.

Eros [sexual desire/love] and *ananke* [necessity] became the equal progenitors of human society.¹¹

Sexual love, having procured for human beings maximum satisfaction, becomes the “model of all happiness”: genital erotism becomes central for life itself. This, however, renders human beings psychologically dependent upon the external world, that is, on the preselected love object. Some individuals defend themselves by renouncing all sexual satisfaction, ultimately depending upon a sublimated love that embraces everyone. But Freud says that a love that does not choose loses part of its value.

The love that founded the family continues to operate in society in its originary form in which this love does not renounce direct sexual satisfaction and, in its modified form, in which it becomes a tenderness blocked from reaching its goal. In both cases, the forms fulfill their function of bonding one to the /61 other in a considerable number of persons, and more intensely so than communal labour could do [...] Both fully sexual love and the love that is inhibited from achieving its goal overcome the circle of the family and produce new bonds with persons, even strangers. Genital love leads to the formation of new families, whereas inhibited love leads to “friendships.”¹²

Love is seen as one of foundational elements of society. But Freud quickly pauses to reflect on the fact that the aforementioned correlation between love and civilized society, during the course of evolution, is univocal:

On one hand, love is opposed to the interests of society. On the other hand, society threatens love with severe restrictions. This discord seems inevitable; its cause is not immediately recognizable. It manifests itself first in the conflict between family and the larger community to which the individual belongs. We have already seen that one of the primary intentions of society is to gather human beings in large unities. The family, however, does not wish to liberate itself from the individual. The greater the cohesion of the family’s members the greater the tendency to segregate themselves from others, thereby making it more difficult for them to enter into larger circles of life [...] Detaching oneself from the family has become the task that awaits every young person [...] Soon, women also enter into opposition with society and they exercise an influence on and delay and hold back what is customary—the very same women, who with the demands of their love first laid the foundation for society. Women represent the interests of the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹² *Ibid.*, 238.

family and sexual life. Society's work has become more and more the domain of men, and the more difficult task that forces the sublimation of impulses, in which women are unequal. Given that males do not possess unlimited quantities of psychic energy, they have to fulfill their duties with the appropriate repartitioning of their libido. What works at the civic level is largely taken away from women and sexual life. Females' association with males continues along with their dependency upon these relations and they estrange women from the duties of men as fathers and husbands. Hence, women occupy a secondary place in society and find themselves in a hostile relation with it. [...] In this respect, then, society comports itself to sexuality in terms of ancestry/lineage or a segment of the population that has subjected another part of the population in order to exploit it. The fear of insurrection of that which was repressed forces severe precautionary measures [...] that which was not put into play, namely, /62 heterosexual sexual love becomes further circumscribed by barriers of legitimacy and monogamy. There is no doubt that today's society allows sexual relations only on the basis of a unique and indissoluble bond between men and women. Society does not accept sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right; rather, it is prepared to tolerate sexual love as the only irreplaceable means for the propagation of the species.¹³

The conflict between eros and civilized society, as will be clarified in the following pages, does not only depend on the restrictions that behaving in an uncivilized manner imposes upon basic impulses, but also on the fact that the demand of society to unite the largest number of persons, to enlarge "the circle of life," clashes with the "essence" prior to Eros—its originary form—which aims to "make one more than one alone." Once this aim is achieved, eros no longer wishes to go further: the love-couple is sufficient unto itself.

But society demands other sacrifices other than those connected to sexual satisfaction. We have interpreted the difficulty of the development of society as a general evolutionary difficulty, ultimately leading it back to the inertia of the libido, its reluctance to abandon an old position for a new one. We are not saying anything new when we affirm that the contrast between sexuality and society derives from the fact that sexual love is a relation between two persons in which a third becomes superfluous or inconvenient, whereas society bases itself on the relations between the greatest number of persons. At the culmination point of a love relation no interest for the surrounding world remains. The couple is sufficient unto themselves, they have no need of the child they share in order to be happy. In no other case does eros so clearly reveal the core of its essence, the intent to make one more than one. But when eros achieves its goal in proverbial fashion of making

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Il disagio della civiltà*, 239–240.

two human beings fall in love with one another, It does not wish to go any further. We can now imagine a societal community consisting of such doubled individuals who, libidinally satisfied in themselves, are connected to one another by virtue of their commonly shared work and interests.¹⁴

/63 In Freud's *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914), the aforementioned infantile or prehistoric component of love emerges even more clearly.

Concerning the child's object choice (or the growing individual's choice), we see how the child is drawn to the first sexual objects of its experiences of satisfaction. The first sexual satisfactions of an autoerotic nature are experienced in relation to vital functions aimed at survival. Sexual impulses first rest upon the satisfaction of I impulses, and only later do they become independent. This "resting upon" continues to be evidenced by the fact that the first sexual objects are persons that are occupied with nourishing, caring for, protecting, the baby, namely, the mother or the person who carries out the aforementioned acts.

In a love life, not being loved diminishes the feeling of self, whereas being loved increases the feelings of a self. [...] The person that has fallen in love is humble. One who loves has lost, so to speak, a part of their own narcissism and can only re-acquire it if s/he is loved in turn. It seems that in each of these relations, the feeling of self is maintained in relation with the narcissistic component of a love life.

Love itself, like the breath of life and privation, suppresses the feeling of self; to be loved, to have one's love returned, to possess the love object, is to be raised up [...] The return to the I of the objectivated libido and its transmutation into narcissism represent in a certain way the restoration of a happy love. Also, a true and proper happy love corresponds to the originary situation in which it is not possible to distinguish between the libido for the object and the libido of the I.¹⁵

Narcissism, Freud concludes, is the originary abode of the libido, "its general neighbourhood."

At this point of his essay, Freud could have deepened his analysis of the "disturbing" element that lies behind eros, that "originary breath of life" that should have remained "hidden," dismissed, and, reappearing in adult sexuality, becomes a threat for the individuality of the male and his social bonds.

Already in his essay /64 "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud intuited that the "uncanny" (*unheimlich*) refers to

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Introduzione al narcisismo* (Torino: Boringhieri, 1976), 37, 54–55, 57.

something that nests itself in something that is “known,” “familiar” (*heimisch*), the face that must remain hidden. Therefore, the distant, prehistoric antecedent of eros, is love in its primary form of narcissism that, reappearing in adult relationships, becomes a danger: it is a violation of individuality and threatens to overtake it.

The dyad of love, the unity of two, the fusional couple, contains within itself a strong potential for destruction. Behind the house of the adult stage there is the first abode, namely, the mother’s womb. The nostalgia that transforms coitus into a return to the womb also brings with it the possible risk of loss of distinction, of becoming indistinct. By transforming woman into mother, the male assures for himself the continuity with the body that activated both *hunger* and *love*, but which also condemns him to live with the “disturbing” (the uncanny) that is most familiar to him.

In this experience, love and hate, eros and thanatos, are interwoven and almost indistinguishably so:

It often happens that neurotic individuals declare that female genitalia are often disturbing. This uncanniness (*Unheimlich*) is, however, the access to the ancient homeland (*Heimat*) of human beings, to that place in which everyone dwelled for a time, one’s first abode. “Love is nostalgia,” is an old humorous saying. And when one dreams of a place or thinks of a landscape, always dreaming, “this place is familiar; I have been here” is the right interpretation that substitutes the landscape for the genital organs or the mother’s body. Even in this case, then, *unheimlich* was once *heimlich* (home), familiar. The German prefix “*un*” denotes more than a negation, the opposite of a removal.¹⁶

At this point, Freud, who remains faithful to his idealized vision of the mother-child relation, “the unique site of ambivalence,” also seeks another explanation. Not succeeding in recognizing that the capacity to destroy is born from within /65 this “repetition” of Eros in its originary form, he moves it outward and

¹⁶Sigmund Freud, *Il perturbante*, in *Id, Opere*, vol. 9 (Torino: Boringhieri, 1977), 106.

links it to an external factor: he puts forward the hypothesis about the “death drive” as the basic, originary, and independent drive that stands alongside and opposes eros. The human being is not domesticated; rather, it is moved by something other than love, by an aggressive impulse that is also part of the most tender of relations, including mother-child relations.

Concerning the differences of power and prestige, which aggression exploits for its own use, nothing has changed, nothing changes in the essence of aggression. Aggression was not created by property; it has dominated almost without restriction, even in primordial times when property ownership was extremely limited. We see aggression in the behaviour of children [...] it constitutes the sublayer of all tender and love relations between human beings with the only exception perhaps being between mother and the male child.¹⁷

The struggle does not lie within eros, but between two interwoven, opposing powers, which cannot be confused with one another. One can only hope that eros will be the victor.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud draws closer to the discovery of the violent aspect that nests within love, the prehistoric heritage that human beings carry within themselves, namely, the originary nostalgia for the unity of two into one. Violent is the male’s appropriation of the female body, from which he has received care and sexual stimulation (patriarchal dominance). Also violent is the *dream of love*, understood as the fusion of two beings into one, the re-composition of the male and female figures created by men into a sort of *blurred doubling* (*sdoppiamento*). The death drive is the temptation to drown in the beatitude of the release of all tension and, hence, of all life. Aggression is also necessary to preserve the *ideal unity*, to push outward that which threatens this unity. This is also true for the quest for union that settles into a *group*, a *nation*, an *ethnic group*.

/66 It is in this aspect, much like the repetition of the originary breath of life, that eros contains within itself, it is the *logic of war*: the undeclared war between the sexes that passes through the

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Il disagio della civiltà*, op. cit., 248.

appropriation of the female body, the fixation of women on the role of motherhood, women's expulsion from the historical community of men that configures itself as homogeneous and as having its own genealogy. We can speak here of "sexual cleansing," negation, on the part of males of their heterogeneous origin.

But the historical community, in turn, could not have avoided the analogous movements of communalization and closure, inclusion and division. The ties that have made men visible in private as husband, son, lover, sometimes and with great intensity, transfer themselves into the public sphere, especially when the life of the group appears threatened.

According to James Hillman, "The intensity of the love for war is born from the collapse of others [...] the desperation of a life experienced together compromises all human love in the few with whom I dwell, beyond eating, pissing, and sleeping together."¹⁸ Where a community of persons is constituted, understood in terms of an organic unity, in both war and nationalisms, in identitarian constructions, in ethnic castles, in the absolutization of differences, there one can hypothesize that the union with the mother, an imaginary model of love that is exclusive and that sees both opening and diversity as a threat, is reactualized as a blind replica or as another open recapturing of new solutions. This is why nationalisms acquire the consensus of women. The "birth" of nations is the birth of a patriarchal genealogy, but it also recalls an "organic cohesion," a total and mystical unity that has to do with the maternal body.

/67 One finds here the mother-homeland (*madre-patria*) or even the motherland (*matria*): the face of males in the female body. In this configuration, one finds the restoration of the traditional roles of mother, wife; it is the recovery of the metaphor of the family that speaks of men as father, sons,

¹⁸ James Hillman, *Un terribile amore per la guerra* (Milano: Adelphi, 2004), 186.

lovers. If the nation is a completely male idea, it first needs to incarnate itself in a feminine figure that is not only a symbol but also a “mute effigy.”

Freud begins to seize the “irritating factor” that inserts itself into civilized society and the relations between individuals and peoples with his discussion of the tie between love and hate, which comes from inside that “first abode” that males did not wish to abandon, thereby relegating women to be mothers and appropriating for himself her generating body and thereby leaving love to be the centre of life. To safeguard eros in its “prehistoric” form—the only form that can give us happiness, according to Freud—he is constrained to displace aggression onto an external factor, to hypothesize the death drive (thanatos) as equal and contrary to eros.

In his correspondence with Einstein (1932), the latter asks, “Is there a way to free human beings from the fatality of war?” Freud, in his response, begins to take on a less dichotomous view of the relationship between love and hate. It is the very mixing of love and hate, preservation and destruction, life and death, that has made difficult the recognition of these drives. And this failure to recognize is also true within our personal lives, the relations between the sexes and in social life: groups, nations, etc. Just as eros possesses a logic of war internal to its structure, so too does hate contain within itself love.

War, which almost always accompanies birth and the most important events of a nation, destroys, expels, but always in order to collect and protect. It is here that Freud begins to view love and hate as more intertwined than he had previously thought, seeing them as opposing drives.

/68 Love and hate, conservation and preservation, are less prolonged than one thinks [...] War as a sacrificial duty, even though it essentially absolves all functions of destruction, signifies for human beings a destruction in the service of conservation of what one loves.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Carteggio con Einstein in Id*, vol. 11 (Torino: Boringhieri, 1979), 298.

Perhaps we can undo, with the greatest awareness possible, the magic knot that today we call “the humanitarian war.”

The consciousness that has subtracted from the millennial naturalization of the relation between the sexes can today reintroduce into history, that is, into culture and politics, other enigmatic, unspeakable knots, including first and foremost that which has up until now impeded the radical discussion of various relations, not allowing for the distance necessary to see the imaginary that supports the aforementioned relations, especially the knotting together of life and death, love and violence. Even though far away, one sees here the beginning of the end of a ruinous legacy. Have we arrived at the end of the “dialectic”?

The Vile Body

Politics has always needed to simplify, proclaim, ascribe blame, make use of facile symbols familiar to common sense. The undeclared war on female sexuality, which has signalled since its inception the dominance of a historical community of men, could not be leave enduring traces in the lives of individuals and society, in cultures and the institutions of public life, in the daily habits and histories of peoples. Rape and murder are the extreme forms of sexism and it would be an error to consider them separately from one another, as if they were not situated in a continuous line of relations /69 of patriarchal power and culture that, despite constitutions, laws, and the trumpeted “values” of democracy, struggle to recognize women as “persons.” Women remain—unfortunately, even in the feelings and thought of many women for reasons of adaptation and survival—a sexual and procreative function. It is the body that ensures pleasure, care, and the continuation of the species. It is not by accident, then, that one of the great causes of concern for society that warns of potential crisis, a society surrounded by growing immigration and by the hatred of other peoples, is being denatured.

It is important, therefore, that the violability of the female body—its penetrability and the possibility of its being killed—not belong to the order of “natural” drives, to the momentary *raptus* of madness or to backward, foreign “barbaric” customs; rather, the violability of the female body remains in our history, our Graeco-Roman-Christian history, to which we return today to refer in order to differentiate it from other cultures in Europe. The violability of the female body is one with the birth of the polis, with the sexualized division of labour, with the separation between home and city, family and the State. The annihilation of woman as a person, individual, political subject, inevitably produces the debasement of women’s bodies and its assimilation to other “vile bodies”—for example, the adolescent, the prisoner, the slave—all upon whom men have exercised from the beginnings of modernity a sovereign power over life and death.

The ideologies and habits of the political class and the intellectuals who court this class have not changed. The extension of citizenship to women, who have up until recently have been considered “imperfect,” continues to coincide with a view of the feminine as lack, as being subhuman, a weak subject to be protected, to be led, defended from her own bad impulses. If emancipation is often viewed as repulsive by women who desired it, this is the case because emancipation has been configured as a flight from devalued, /70 insignificant femininity that is viewed as subaltern to the very vision of the world that produces it. Hence, the definition that Paolo Mantegazza offered in the 19th century does not seem so outdated:

This new freedman of modern society is tolerated, but is not equal to us. She is like an orphan found along the way who lives with the members of a family but who is not an integral part of it. She becomes a concubine and then a mother, but a great step needs to be taken before she can become a woman or, in other words, a female-male, a most noble and delicate creature, who thinks and feels like a woman and in so doing completes in us the aspects of things.²⁰

²⁰ Paolo Mantegazza, *Fisiologia delle donne* (Milano: Brigola, 1879), 149.

What is the “feminization” of work, of politics, if not the extension of the traditional domestic role within the public sphere, a “reserve” of energy called upon for help in a civilization in decline?

To combat against evident violence today means to face the problem at its roots: to drive out the culture that produces violence, which is incarnated in institutions, work conditions, morality, in the images of advertising and TV programs, in the unwritten norms of tradition and collective knowledge. It also means, above all, that, outside of all ideologies, we recognize that the family is still exalted as a refuge, security, and a guarantee of cures and affects—all of which is under the watchful eye of all, documented by the reports of international daily newspapers: the perverse linking of love and hate, of connections of dependency, reciprocal necessity and beaten faces, all in order to affirm autonomy. One can kill a woman whose absorbing force one fears and who, on the contrary, we cannot tolerate for having her own life and the freedom to use her own body and capacities in the way she likes. The repression that continues to weigh on the most ancient form of domination in the world has undoubtedly to do with the material and symbolic turmoil that awareness produces insofar as /71 the construction of the public sphere is indebted to that familiar hinterland that has sustained and guaranteed it.

“Without our intervention,” wrote Virginia Woolf almost a century ago, “no one would have cut through these oceans, and these fertile lands would still be a desert. We have given birth, raised, washed, taught, up until about six or seven years of life, 1.62 billion human beings that statistics say populate the earth.”²¹

²¹ Virginia Woolf, *Una stanza tutta per sé*, in Ead., *Per le strade di Londra* (Milano: Garzanti, 1974), 300.

Violence against women, which mostly occurs in homes or at the hands of fathers, husbands and lovers, does not bespeak a “natural” or “divine” order to which one must yield; it does not bespeak a freedom that suddenly and disturbingly presents itself there where men had been deceived and therefore rendered unable to see the secure, obedient and faithful foundation of women’s public activities. Men become violent almost always when a separation appears. They rage and sometimes kill when they encounter a refusal of their sexual advances. Do they kill on account of the anguish of abandonment, do they kill because of the limit that women’s freedom imposes on them or because men find themselves for the first time at the mercy of necessity and dependencies that remained hidden or negated?

If violence today manifests the detonator of a rebellion that has been brooding for decades, since female consciousness, having become freer from internalized models, has communicated the opening of disconnections in existing equilibria, this is perhaps the case because today women are located on the ever-growing imperceptible borders that separate the private from the public spheres. Family violence continues to pass as the simple facts of the news, but from these facts one can dig out, even in quantitative terms, from statistics and inquiries, the nature of the violence. Rapes and murders that have the street as their theatre, the open space of the cities, when they are not distorted by the /72 campaigns against foreigners, leave open to view the insides of the family, precocious relations from which a destructive fury takes form.

Political forces that have responded with indifference or hostility to the feminist revolution of the 1970s, which discovered the political nature of the body and the person, are constrained despite themselves, and with the risk of greater decline, to interrogate with the same awareness the power that men have arrogated for themselves in public life. These forces have to ask whether or not the greatest violence, the most unjustifiable violence today, is the silence and neutrality that cover over the domination that now reveals itself in all of its extended form.

The most ancient and “savage” residue of domination that has woven itself into the social fabric to such an extent that it has disappeared from our conscious awareness paradoxically re-emerges as actual at the moment when women make headway, when they are pushed toward emancipation and liberation. The demand for an equal female presence wherever and whenever “decisions are made”: the criticism of all sorts of fundamentalism, the discussion of the centrality of work and the *operaismo* in politics of the Left, the rethinking of all dualisms, starting from those that have opposed and made complementary female and male, biology and history, individual and society.

There are those who would read this reappearance as a regression and barbarization of the relation between the sexes. I prefer to think that, rather than a return of the same, we are dealing here with the recovery of an eclipsed “prehistory” that now returns to upset society’s unexplored insides, but which cannot give an account with a different consciousness and with a yet existent female freedom.

/73 Liberated or Prostituted Bodies?

The body, in all its vicissitudes, from birth to the end of life, is always the object of the greatest powers and understandings of public life: the State, the Church, medicine, biotechnology, morality, etc.

The body is a biological body, reduced to a sum of organs; it is “bare life” (*nuda vita*) exposed to wars, hunger, disease, and migrations. The body is “put to work” in slave-like conditions or it put “into shape” (plastic surgery, fitness, diets, etc.)—a body flattened by fashion and advertising. One could say that the body is coming out from the shadows, that it is taking its *revenge*, but the very moment that it appears on the public scene, one clearly sees the signs that history has left on it, ultimately devaluing and naturalizing it. The body is a body-object, the body of merchandise, an object of consumption—the body is far removed from that non-embodied I that the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1970s sought.

The presence of women in public life—work, professions, representation, etc.—has significantly increased. The analyses of how to qualify this presence are many, but they are almost all stamped by a traditional point of view: “the female question.” One finds in these analyses discussions of advantages, disadvantages, discrimination, advancement of equality, as if women were a “minority,” an “imperfect citizenry.” Newspapers put forward a great amount of data on work, careers, on underused female “talents,” on the work of women in firms and corporations, the facilitation of maternity leaves and so on.

Rarely does one ask why young women are not interested in modifying this state of affairs. It is true that even the most radical components of feminism have never opted for a battle over rights, laws and /74 integration into a society created by men and according to their own standards.

The dream was more ambitious: to redefine the economy and politics on the basis of that which was rejected, confined to the private, in nature, that is, the body and the person. Today, the dreams of the new generations seem to be heading in a different direction: they look, on one hand, to the female models of advertising and TV (show-girls, images of women, models, etc.) and, on the other hand, there seems to be a desire to reconcile motherhood and a professional career.

The female body today, then, is both the *erotic body* of seduction and the *maternal body*, understood not merely as the desire for motherhood but also as the valorization of “female gifts”—a request that stems from the system of production and the new economy. Research carried out at the Università Bocconi calls this aforementioned view *Value D*. More generally, one could say, taking relief in the public sphere, that it is the feminine in itself, as was traditionally defined by the attributes that characterized it and that appear today as a precious “resource” for a system, that blurs the border between the private and the public and, therefore, between the destinies of female and male. The precariousness, fluidity, relational capacities, sentiments, emotions, imaginaries, these are all the

characterizing traits of our times insofar as we now speak of the “feminization of the public space,” of work and politics.

The recent debates on show-girls, escorts, and images of women arose in response to the events surrounding Silvio Berlusconi, especially as they pertain to the representation of women on TV and in advertising. The connection between Berlusconi and the representation of women happened because of the move of female figures from the world of entertainment to becoming political candidates, from the dealings of the president /75 of the cabinet to women procured for him with the promise of political favours. The notoriety of the protagonist, his habits unmasked by the public declarations of his wife, Veronica Lario, the declarations of certain escorts, have allowed for the discovery of an essential aspect of the relations of power between the sexes, which Paolo Tabet calls “the sexual-economic” exchange.²²

The relation between sexuality and politics, which has always existed, emerges at the moment in which private events rupture into the highest offices of the state, but it is precisely there that the political meaning of the commodification of the female body, in the connections between the personal and public spheres, encounters a new form of occultation that transforms itself into the arms of a political clash, moral indignation or scandal.

The question spontaneously arises: what bodies are at play in today’s scene? Are they *liberated bodies*—women who have appropriated for themselves their own lives and use them as they like—or prostituted, commercialized bodies? Do they indicate a change in the relations of power between the sexes or do they confirm such relations? Do we have here the subjectivity that feminism sought or a

²² Paolo Tabet, *La grande beffa. Sessualità delle donne e scambio sesso-economico* (Rubbettino: Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005).

new objectification of women? Are these bodies figures of victims, heroines or something entirely different? Why did feminism intervene earlier? What changes have occurred in the historical, political, cultural context?

The shifting of the borders between the body and the polis made appear in '68 "unforeseen political subjects," youth and women, and together with them problems linked to the relation between biology and history, the individual and the collectivity, problems which ought to have distanced us from opposing dualisms stemming from male and female identify.

/76 The impression that one has today is of an overturning: the body, sexuality, personal life, all are no longer the "repressed" of history; rather, they enter as the protagonists at the heart of history. The ancient separations between private and public have fallen away and we are moving toward an amalgam that is difficult to unravel. When one sees the Prime Minister of Italy treat institutional questions as if they were the administrative problems of his own corporations, identifying politics with his own person, we can say, then, that the private is devouring the public.

We also have the opposite impression when, for example, we realize that no intimate corner of our lives exists that is not regulated by the outside, by our consumption, advertising. Bodies, sexuality, our intimate lives are the prime matter that feeds the media. The risk is not only that we are unable to "narrate" our experiences, but we are also unable "to experience," for the public discourse dominates everything and in all places.

In this hybrid and undifferentiated mix of archaic folds and postmodern accelerations of our contemporary society, we find the reflections of the final pages of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*: "I believe, therefore, that the form of oppression that threatens democratic peoples does not resemble anything like we have seen before in the world ... the ancient words of tyranny and despotism

are hardly sufficient. We have here before us something new, and we need to try and define it because it is not possible to define it with one word.”²³

The “immense and protecting power” to which “the crowd of equals” draws—seeking only to procure for themselves small and vulgar pleasures—and the power that fixes them “immediately in infancy” is no different than the figure of the “deadly mother,” who is both “satisfying and devouring,” and who Elvio Fachinelli sees /77 lying behind our consumer society in his writings on ‘68.²⁴

Regulated slavery, the need to be guided, and the desire to remain free, centralization and popular sovereignty, rule by one and the omnipotence of the majority: do these not represent “Berlusconiism,” from which it is so difficult to disentangle oneself?

In the events of the last few years, ambiguous female figures have emerged—show-girls, escorts, images of women—that cannot be considered as prostitutes, understood in the strict sense of the term, even if we are dealing here with a commodified body, with a sexuality exchanged for cash or a career. We cannot even speak of “victims” here—at least, insofar as we are not dealing with contemporary models of victimhood—insofar as it is women themselves who challenge the prerogatives that men have recognized for women; women have also attempted to turn to their own advantage the reasons for their own minority status throughout history. We are not discussing here the appropriation of the body, which we spoke about in the 1970s; rather, we are dealing with a form of emancipation, though it may be even perverse and questionable. It is the “feminine” as such that is emancipated, which takes its *revenge* by entering into the public sphere and by profiting from the requests made by the market, industry, and show-business, business, and by the exchange of favours between men.

²³ Alexis Tocqueville, *La democrazia in America*, op. cit., 732–33.

²⁴ Elvio Fachinelli, *Il bambino dalle uova d’oro*, op. cit., 107–113.

It would be better to define these ambiguous female figures as gladsome slaves (*schiave radiose*), willing slaves, drawing upon the insights of a short work by Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid.” (1941)

While English men, writes Woolf, fight in the skies against an “unconscionable Hitlerism”—desirous of dominion and aggression—women gaze upon their reflections in shop windows, “powdered women, disguised women, women with red lips and nails. /78 They are slaves who seek to make others slaves.” She concludes, “If we could liberate ourselves from slavery, we would have liberated men from tyranny. Hitlers are generated from slaves.”²⁵ Both men and women obey “instincts encouraged and nourished by education, by tradition,” and this pertains to both male aggression and maternal instinct. We are dealing here with opening new possibilities for the creative power in both sexes, but men must give up their arms and women must not “restrict” the exercise of motherhood.

Virginia Woolf always continues to clearly synthesize the contradiction in which women had come to find themselves: imaginatively exalted, historically insignificant, praised for their beauty and motherly talents—seducers and mothers. In every case, women were identified with the body, a body that defines itself by its functions related to the sole sex that is recognized as possessing an individuality, an I, a moral will, a language, a power, the pretext of speaking on behalf of both sexes. The place of women—mother, wife or prostitute—has been assigned to them by men.

The female body, understood as the body that generates and gives sexual pleasure, renders women “powerful” in the eyes of men. And who can we hypothesize as pushing men to assert their dominion, their control, ensuring that attractive, powerful women were made so for the sake of men’s

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Pensieri di pace durante un’incursione aerea*, in Ead, *Per le strade di Londra*, pp. 148–52.

own interests, in order to make life good for men. One finds an overturning at the origin of the relation between the sexes that makes the “weak” into “masters.”

Rousseau perfectly describes the aforementioned situation in his *Émile*, where he specifies the place women are to take in the social contract:

...she is dependent on our feelings, on the price we put upon her value, /79 and the opinion we have of her charms and her virtue. Nature has decreed that woman, both for herself and her children, should be at the mercy of man’s judgment.... The children’s health depends in the first place on the mother’s, and the early education of man is also in woman’s hands; his morals, his passions, his tastes, his pleasures, his happiness itself, depend on her. A woman’s education must therefore be planned in relation to men. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young. The further we depart from this principle, the further we shall be from our goal, and all our percepts will fail to secure her happiness.... The man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive; the one must have both the power and the will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance.²⁶

The discussion above concerning the relation between the sexes has not been investigated fully as it should. Nevertheless, it is not by chance, albeit with different words and understandings, that such a discussion has been taken up in our own times by the feminist economist Antonella Picchio: “What destroys women is not the strength of men, but their great weakness. Patriarchs have never been able to stand on their own two feet solely alone; this is why they constructed a patriarchal system of control over women’s bodies and minds. It is not only the practices and symbols of the patriarchal system that oppress us, but also our own assuming responsibility for the quality of life for our friends and our children. We suffer from the delirium of omnipotence and they suffer grave weaknesses that remain hidden from us and covered over.”²⁷

²⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Sophie or Woman,” in *Émile*, Book V, trans. Barbara Foxley, accessed at: www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5427/pg5427-images.html. July 28, 2015.

²⁷ Seminar held at the Libera Università delle Donne, 27 March 2010. (www.universitadelledonne.it).

In a few “fragments of clear intuition,” Sibilla Aleramo notes:

Intimate drives of dedication, pleasure in giving oneself over to the beloved without receiving joy.

An internal self-deprecation and exaggerated concern for the oppressor, love and hate together ...

/80 Why do we adore sacrifice in motherhood? Where does this inhuman idea of motherly sacrifice come from?

I was now a slave to my own strength, to my creative imagination. My own power consisted in making life good ... My strength lie in the preservation of such a power, even if it meant from my own perspective, that I gave up on all illusions. Love without a why, as if without a subject.

I do not succeed in finding my own interior freedom, the obligation to exist for myself. I need to be necessary for another living creature in order to live. Love is like this; it is the attachment to a person whom one thinks is necessary, this is love for women. For eight years I gave everything, my all, to Franco. I did this sacrilegious act from the perspective of my own individuality.

I could not wholly take into account all of his needs, prevent and satisfy them. I was miserable if I did not succeed in doing so, especially if I had accepted to sacrifice my individuality, to forget myself, to give all my energy to that individuality that was being formed next to me.²⁸

To understand how deep was the conviction that the duty of a woman was to make a man’s life good, one need only read the assessments of two well-known men, Benedetto Croce and Emilio Cecchi, about Aleramo.²⁹ “I am not a cheap moralist; and I understand and excuse—Croce affirms—even the error made by the passion of youthful sensuality and fantasy when you abandoned your husband and child ... But the deed was done, and you have had an excellent chance to create a new life when you

²⁸ Lea Melandri, *Sibilla Aleramo. Un pudore selvaggio, una selvaggia nudità*, in Ead., *Come nasce il sogno d’amore* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), 27.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

were with Cena. You wanted, however, to love Cena, but your duty was to sacrifice yourself to him.” Cecchi responds, “No maternal slavery or unconditional gift would make me relive them in an other, thereby negating her. I do not need anything but her.”

To achieve the “annoying obligation of living for oneself, to legitimately have one’s own life, it is these things that remain /81 unresolved in the female condition. It is very difficult to mitigate the sense of responsibility that women feel for children, husbands, and to family members in general. Time for oneself must be justified with the feeling of the guilt of those whom have internalized the care of others as a destiny of nature.

Turning back to the figures of the mother and the prostitute, which we have before us, we are confronted almost always with a reaction of contempt when we deal with the erotic body, the degrading image of the feminine that we see on TV and in advertising. We see less contempt when one reads newspapers devoted to the economy of the exalted talents of women, the capacity for relationship-building, the mediation of conflicts, adaptability, etc. The rhetoric of motherhood is evident and makes acceptable the fact that the system of production wishes to utilize the very same work that women do at home for free.

In the 1970s, femininity was critically analyzed for how it was defined in relation to men and in function of men. One did not speak of the “valorization of differences”; rather, one spoke of the necessity of talking about differences and distancing oneself from all forms of dualism. We discovered that “differences” are the product of abstraction, a deforming abstraction of a process of differentiation that flowed through every individual, ultimately separating parts that are indistinguishable, for example, body and thought, sensation and reason. The discussion of differences polarized into opposites aspects that were complementary, it ordered things hierarchically, from superior to inferior, ultimately culminating in the obligatory direction of reunification. It became clear that the “differences of kinds

(species),” as they were understood back then, were the symbolic foundation of a relation of power that crossed all dualities: woman/man, biology/history, individual/society, etc.

The experiences of female managers, as recounted by the central protagonists themselves and as recorded in Luisa Pogliano’s book, */82 Donna senza guscio. Percorsi femminili In azienda* [*Women without Shells: Female Journeys in Action*],³⁰ clearly demonstrate the contradictions one finds in women when they think they can modify the organization of work and the exercise of power by drawing upon their “female competencies” that stem from motherhood and the care of the home. Better still, we also find contradictions in the fact that women today can be the only subjects that can “reconcile,” “reunite” in themselves, in an “internalized ideal,” the times of life (love, motherhood), the time of work, attention to persons and professional capacities.

Many of the difficulties and disappointments that women encounter, when they maintain that the call for change stems from the “valorization of differences,” are born from the ambiguity that distinguishes between the figures of gender from illusions of reciprocity deriving from completely opposite poles, from the relations of power that hide. Not only the domination of men over women, history over nature, but also the *sexual division of labour*, false reciprocity between that which is considered to be the domain of women in the home and men in the public sphere, have been founded on the stereotypes of gender.

Women, in truth, have been subjected to patriarchy, both within the family and also outside of it. One could ask: How tempted were women, in the private sphere, to destroy a power by using their own dominion over their children and the obligations of care for men in perfect health. But seduction and motherhood in relations of love and domestic life find a certain foundation. The “maternal code”

³⁰ Luisa Pogliano, *Donne senza guscio. Percorsi femminili In azienda*, (Milano: Guerini, 2008).

and the “erotic code,” married to one another as a corporation, make it difficult to change the relations of power. It is easier to “use” them to increase production. Given these attitudes, inspired by love and care, which are not monetizable, the risk /83 emerges of multiplying invisible and free work already consumed at home.

Another aspect comes to the fore, which Pogliano’s book does not discuss. This aspect shows the unique coincidence between an orientation as the thought of a component of feminism and the changes in the economy and politics caused by the shrinking of the borders between the private and public spheres, especially with regard to reciprocally influencing states of affairs. The fact that today production itself, the prevalence of immaterial and cognitive labour, requires “the female talents of forging relationships,” understood as a resource and factor for innovation, has resulted in both the making of the process of “feminization of work” an opportunity, and, on the contrary, the “putting to work” of one’s whole life. Changing the fashion, style, and the rules of the organization of labour established by men does not mean displacing relations of power. This non-displacement is only possible insofar as men hold themselves to be the only human being endowed with *intelligence, will and moral sense*, whereas women are viewed as “naturally” complementary to men. Moreover, the aforementioned case is possible only if women are viewed as “uniting” family and work, the sole individuals to take on such a responsibility that concerns both men and women. We have here a collective responsibility that has remained up until now the natural destiny of women.

In the beginning pages of Pogliano’s book where one learns of the meaning of the collected interviews, the horizon of the firm has the upper edge, almost as if women are empty containers. The experiences recounted with great generosity and intellectual integrity ought to “expand the gaze of institutional agents,” demonstrate the great investment of passionate, personal growth, the search for one’s own existence that women conduct at work. It also shows how a great amount of unjust labour causes the very discrimination these women encounter. How much of what goes unrecognized is to the

advantage of productivity! No one considers the fact that expecting recognition from someone carrying out an injustice /84 is the very opposite of confronting a conflict. It is more important to think that there is an expansion of the gaze of other women, who experience similar situations and are in need of intelligence and collective strength to effectively change the relations of power.

Among the many “messes” that are disappearing, one finds slowly emerging the subalterity in which women find themselves regardless of their commitments; the absence of conflict is one of the most striking features to emerge. What is being blocked or what is fleeing is the desire to “hold harmoniously together” realizations of themselves as persons and the interests of the firm, work and affects. Women are always now being “virtually present” in more places, sometimes out of pride, manifolds of competencies, malleability, and sometimes they can hardly hide the acrobatic and exhausting effort required to hold together domains that have traditionally been at war with one another.

Family and work outside the home are frowned upon: pleasure, success, the new affective relations are born outside of the home. One prefers that family and housework remain at home; family members should look after them, given that they continue to be an obstacle for relations with the manager of the firm and for requests for maternity leave. But our awareness grows, although it requires much work and faces many contradictions: “Motherhood and the firm are incompatible,” Pogliano emphasizes. The playing out of affectivity and seduction in the workplace, instead of allowing for the “recognition of what is uniquely feminine, as a value,” often become “ancillary.” Whereas places where “one thinks and decides” reside firmly in male hands, women are assigned roles that are judged to be more traditionally suitable, for example, director of personnel and training.

It is singularly noteworthy that while in more places one sees the exaltation of the female talents of listening and mediation, the solitude in which women /85 find themselves trying to advance

their careers—amidst rivalries and diffidence while facing the hostility of their peers—goes largely unnoticed.

More than the recognition of their bosses, husbands, and children, which fatally pushes them into a position of waiting and insecurity, women need to become aware of the history that unites them as well as the strength that they can potentially draw from their collective undertaking.

The analyses and judgements of the work experiences of older women and of different social classes oscillate between noting the “advantages,” the “greater number” of competencies, that women today bring to the economy, and the admission of slipping into forms of self-exploitation that extend to the whole of women’s lives, ultimately forming a “larger sense of feeling prostituted out.” Some seek to unchain themselves from an excessive and complicit involvement by seeking “small” administrative jobs” that offer little “possibility of great satisfaction” and affirmation of one’s identity. Other women elevate firms to the level where they are seen as being identical with the construction of oneself, as an affirmation of existence, especially within a professional context.

The worker is asked to put into play a certain form of embodiment, always friendly and smiling. It is possible here that one created a greater context of feeling oneself prostituted out, which is linked to the fact that, when the work of relationship-building becomes central, the subject must also allow the use, action, and exploitation of the capacities of the body as well as the mimicking of sexual advances ... In atypical jobs, the personal and relational component always takes on greater importance, be it in the context of work or in the contractual relations with the boss. I must learn to look good, to be desirable. I do not know my rights, I would not even know with whom I can discuss them at work.³¹

There is a sort of white noise that accompanies women working at a firm, no matter what areas they cover. In order to be heard it a certain attention is required: a woman is first of all a body. One is always referred back to her physicality, to her role of being a woman before being in /86 any other role, before being even a manager ... Every woman knows, either when she enters a meeting or takes the podium on stage, that she will be judged by how she dresses, her hair, etc. ... One could say that even in corporate firms the show-girl

³¹ *Divenire-donna della politica*. Outtake from the journal *Posse* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2003), 54.

model of women has taken hold ... showing that one is willing to be seduced is not only appreciated at the personal level but also that it has become a sort of unofficial requirement, or at least it should be considered seriously.³²

The discussion about women and work, no matter the side from which it arises, does not succeed at extrapolating itself from *the equality/difference* binary, which has also contaminated various parts of feminism. This failure exists even though for some time feminists have been aware that the binary presents a false dichotomy imposed upon us by male power. If it was easy for the '70s generation to distance themselves from an idea of emancipation that was confusingly linked to male models, all the more torturous and uncertain now is the process of liberation that needs to criticise all forms of dualism, complementarity, and the reunification of opposites. One is struck by the fact that it is women, at the moment in which identities and belonging are coming undone and being eclipsed, who contest, either as revenge or the affirmation of authority, a "female" "nature" or "gender" deployed by a society of men to confine women to a minority social, legal and political status.

But it is probably in the aforementioned "incongruity" that one finds the undoable knot of the question about the sexes.

There are many incongruencies and contradictions, including the analyses that have as their explicit objectives the "valorization of gender differences."

We think of small requests for small works of service that, for a man in a certain position, would never be made (for example, taking a memo). In these practices, we often find the attempt to lead the woman back to her being a woman, thereby diminishing her being a professional at work, especially when women are sidelined into ancillary roles. Recall that in /87 any position obtained, "men expect the strategic roles, those of thought, whereas women expect executive and organizational roles. We even see (nothing new!) women reduced to their private roles: being a mother, being found interesting on account of a woman's physical appearance.... Establishing good relations, taking care of people, these are ways of responding to an often non-explicit need: placing oneself as a refuge in conflict, especially with one's "employees" and colleagues. This is one of the problems that women live in work relations or perhaps even in all

³² Pogliano, *Donna senza guscio*, op. cit., 104–105.

relations: the incapacity to manage situations of conflict without suffering excessively, without being dragged into conversations, without recognition.³³

The reconciliation of love, maternal care, work, the search for the integrity of the whole person despite relapses into ancillary roles, both in public and in private, continue to be pursued by women themselves unconcerned about the labour and disappointment that they encounter. The determination of wanting female “authority” recognized, even in the domain of production, is accompanied by a side-stepping of power, which is solidly in the hands of men and dominant economic parties. But is it only the need to be loved, the expectation of a shared exchange of affection, that fixes women to the dream of an “integrated and harmonious” family? In the overturning of the parts, is it not perhaps female omnipotence—accessing public power by renouncing private, seductive and maternal power—that women unconsciously desire and that men fear?

The Mother: The First and Last Taboo

One can only hope for a lively debate, much like the one found in French newspapers, following the Italian translation of Elisabeth Badinter’s book, *Le conflit. La femme et la mère*.³⁴ But /88 it is better not to get one’s hopes up too high. The interview with the author³⁵ seems not to have had the same provoking effect that one expected. Like everything else, Ferdinanda Vigliani and Paola Leonardi’s edited

³³ Pogliano, *Donna senza guscio*, op. cit., 121–128.

³⁴ (Paris: Flammarion, 2010)

³⁵ “D. La Repubblica delle donne,” n. 681, 13. February 2010.

collection of interviews of “special women,” titled *Perché non abbiamo avuto figli*³⁶, went largely unnoticed. Yet, the problem that appears today on account of the persistent marginalization that women encounter in their workplaces and from the exertion of having to be at the same time an excellent mother and an outstanding professional is not new for female consciousness, and it is not new to the maternalistic rhetoric that has rendered female anatomy a destiny.

In 1906, it was the autobiographical book of Sibilla Aleramo, *Una donna (A Lady)*, that gave voice to the conflict that led her to the “scandalous” choice of leaving her husband and child.

In truth, apart from the amount of energy I used to spend on the baby, there was in me a growing incapacity to see, will, to live; it was as if a moral fatigue superimposed itself on my physical exhaustion: I was unhappy with myself, the chastising by my better part of what I underwent ... In me, the mother did not integrate with the woman ... Lacking in me was the continuous will of the educator, the serenity of spirit to guide this small existence. I could not entirely be absorbed by the consideration of its needs, I could not prevent and satisfy them. At certain points, I used to hate myself for this very awareness. I was so miserable when I did not succeed, once I accepted the sacrifice of my individuality, forgot myself, to focus all of my energies on that individual that was being formed right next to me.³⁷

It was as if women did not need to affirm their individuality, as if they were destined to “live for others,” “love and give birth.” And this self-sacrifice of women was made into a “religion”; it became the highest tribute that thinkers of the preceding century, for example, Michelet, /89, Bachofen, Mantegazza, could make to the “female difference.”

“The woman-mother is the whole woman: the young, beautiful, rich woman could not be happy if she was not a mother. The woman who was not a mother was the eunuch of her own sex. The

³⁶ Paola Leonardi and Ferdinanda Vigliani, *Perché non abbiamo avuto figli. Donne “speciali” si raccontano* (Milano: Angeli, 2009).

³⁷ Sibilla Aleramo, *Una donna* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1980), 74–180.

intricate mechanism that is our civil society unfortunately fabricates every day thousands of these mutilated women."³⁸

In a more provocative discussion, Carla Lonzi's early 70s book, *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (*The Clitoral Woman and the Vaginal Woman*), launched a time of radical feminism that shook up traditional foundational roles, certainties of identity, the equilibrium between nature and history, family and society, individual and collective, all of which survived hundreds of years of change.

The patriarchal couple is the couple of the penis and vagina, husband and wife. It is the father and mother or procreative animal culture: Their relation was not determined by sex, but by the procreation to which women were subjected. The vaginal woman carries on this culture: She is the women of patriarchy and the seat of all maternal myths.³⁹

Evidently, to separate sexuality from procreation, to legalize abortion, to shake off all the violations of freedom that have burdened women, including the annihilation of her very own existence, is not sufficient to scratch the foundational character of female identity, which is still being attributed to being a mother. At the moment in which feminism found itself facing the presence of women in the public sphere, the dilemma of equality-difference, constructed on the basis of the complementarity and hierarchy of genders, has forcefully returned in an acritical manner, and this is why it is difficult to say if this dilemma is a repetition of what we discussed earlier or a /90 reprisal open to new solutions. It is not by accident, then, that this return is today the component of a feminism linked to "thinking difference"; it is not by chance, too, that we see new female figures, for example, wives and escorts who out powerful men; we also see women, mothers and workers, all considered the unique subject who holds

³⁸ Paolo Mantegazza, *Le estasi umane*, op. cit., 156–157.

³⁹ Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1974), 139–140.

together all of life in its “entirety.” From this *aut-aut* [either/or], which constrains women to be assimilated by men or to bear witness to women’s complementarity, one moves to an *et-et* (and-and), that is, to an ideal union that produces nothing other than the joining together of “divergent natures” traditionally attributed to males and females.

If the two fundamental parts of the self that cannot remain separate are realized in motherhood and professions—and not, as one would expect, the body and thought, a completion of the human that men have reserved for themselves—then the motive becomes clear: “When we say yes to motherhood we give shape to a desire inscribed in our bodies and minds. A desire that, when freely enacted, carries with it the necessity and the pleasure, even physical pleasure, of staying close to the child. This occurs not only when the child is little, but also intermittently during other phases of growth. Paternity inscribes itself in a different way.”⁴⁰

Badinter also remains connected in some way to a logic of opposition when she affirms that in order to flee from that which has been up until now considered to be the essence of the female, there is only one escape route: Not to have children. We can recognize in Badinter’s position the merit of bringing once again to our attention the “domestic domain,” the crucial node of the experience of the sexes that lies at the origin of and which continues to be maternity—a power that men have envied and subjugated, confining it to nature, and which women today are tempted to vindicate as a “true and proper gesture of freedom,” a power and value that needs to be recognized. One should not be shocked if, in the new generation, some women do not see the challenge of the “double yes” while others, on the contrary, say “no, no mothers in these conditions.”

Why must I be a mother? For the sole reason of being a woman? There is a taste of the wild in saying no. There is pleasure in saying: Let my hands remain free of chains. I have too much to give to the world and not only to one individual. I need to remain with myself, now and in this world. I do not wish to be two only because one must be so. It seems that when the principal

⁴⁰ Gruppo lavoro della Libreria delle donne di Milano, *Immagina che il lavoro*, Milano, 2009.

occupation of a woman is not that of mother, but of a citizen, there is always someone who worries about putting her in her place.⁴¹

Right between the sacred and the natural, the mother is the first and last taboo of a dominant male culture. For women, the mother risks dividing them or even (and why not?) becomes the beginning of a movement capable of pushing more deeply the analysis of the relation between the sexes.

⁴¹ Eleonora Cirant, *I racconti del corpo* (unpublished).