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# Shifting Bonds, Shifting Bounds

Women, Mobility  
and Citizenship in Europe

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Chapter 6  
SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP AND MOTHERHOOD

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In the beginnings of western culture, especially among the Greeks, women were defined according to their reproductive role, their ability to give birth. Since then, there has been a difference between female and male status in the process of procreation — he engenders, she gives birth — as a consequence of their different positions and roles.

**Women and nature**

The fact that women were defined according to their motherly function is not a problem in itself. The issue here at stake is that this function, inscribed in a female body, and its correlative functions — such as pregnancy, giving birth, nursing, menstruation — were regarded as natural phenomena. Women, given their physiological nature, were thus seen as beings of nature. As we know, in the history of western thought, the state of nature is opposed to culture. Therefore, every action exerted upon nature is cultural work. This dichotomy implied that, within our culture, women, defined as natural beings, remained confined to nature, without having access to other spheres of activity and limited to a world of sensitivity, affection and corporeal cares. They were meant to shape new-born bodies with their hands, turning them into human beings capable of promising, in the Nietzschean sense (*The Dawn*).

More than having been defined according to one of the poles of the dichotomy, what concerns women is the undervaluation of the pole of nature, both from a social and a political point of view. As if they were unable to transcend this corporeal, emotional and sensitive sphere; unable to transcend this capacity to make bodies, when at the same time they are demanded to be able to perform a long-lasting task: that of bringing up an unfinished, depending, infant (*in-fans*) being, in order to build up its autonomy, independence and speech, so that it becomes a subject, capable of reasoning.

In the *Republic* (454d-e), Plato wrote about male and female roles in reproduction — he engenders, she gives birth. However, this difference has to be understood within the context of another dichotomy of western thought: soul/body, intelligible/sensitive: “The outcome of sensitive knowledge, since it derives from corporeal channels, can only be a mixture, that is, something impure: in fact, the objects of such knowledge are equally impure. They are the products of this combination of being and non-being which govern the process of change” (Somville, 1975: 70).

The philosopher’s work, which brings life to truth in souls, and that of the midwife, which brings life to bodies, were conceived as similar ones. However, this resemblance goes no further, since one can never be sure whether, within their bodies, women create chimeras, fictions or real beings (*Theaetetus*, 150a-c). It is indeed this uncertainty about what is created within the woman’s body that has determined the creation of a particular scenario surrounding the pregnant woman, as if this production of beings had to be contained within a framework that demarcates and channels the production of the imaginary during pregnancy, since the bodies of the woman and the child are all at once one-and-the-other: everything that occurs in the mother’s body is inscribed in the child’s. Thus, there was a necessity to delimit the space where women could circulate, which meant (and still does) that their access to other statuses, at a social, political and cultural level, was limited. Within a civilisation which considered women’s main task that of producing and mothering human beings, this sort of control was easily ensured (it still is) by means of the creation of areas of exclusion and interdiction.

### Nourishment and the imaginary

This is an extremely interesting subject because it demonstrates how in the practices and beliefs about pregnancy — which prevailed for centuries and survived up to the present, though undertaking different forms — one implicitly assumes that, in order to become human, a body needs both nourishment and the imaginary, and that human beings cannot exist without these two dimensions. In order to be human, it somehow needs to be “desired” and placed among a human community which will turn it into someone. One has forcibly to take these two dimensions into consideration to understand the present articulation of private and public spheres.

If we take once again the similarities between the philosopher and the midwife, we notice that both of them set something free, but also that the creations of the soul and the body are completely diverse: truth and beauty are never born nor die; the body, in its turn, is subject to change and death. It is unstable and fragile:<sup>1</sup> this is the way women are conceived, as unstable (*la donna è mobile*), fragile, etc. In our culture the definition of the female being is

circular: women give birth to mortal, thus fragile, beings and this is also their own definition. Because they are mothers, they are unstable, fragile, emotional, etc.; therefore, they are not able to exercise other kinds of activities. Already in 1789 Condorcet revealed his astonishment: “In order to deny women the benefit of their natural rights, it is unfair to allege reasons which have no grounds beyond this denial itself” (qtd in Darmon, 1983: 172).

The 17th and 18th centuries saw the emergence of the idea of the “body” “considered as a repairable instrument”, manipulated by techniques which allowed to extend life and control death.<sup>2</sup> It is precisely this idea of body manipulation — the idea that the body can be recreated in a kind of generation other than human — that would make possible the development of contraceptive and fertility-control techniques in the 1960s. The emergence of these fertility-control techniques would allow this long-lasting image of woman to expand into other directions, along with the metaphors associated to it.

### An everyday-life citizenship

Within the context of the public sphere it is hence pertinent to discuss the type of political participation women can have as subjects plurally defined, as opposed to an exclusively private and domestic definition. The ethical problem is to know what are the life possibilities our type of society offers and allows for, regardless of the normative definition of women as mothers.

Today, the articulation between the public and the private sphere must be rethought. Some authors (namely Paola Cappellin and B. Marques Pereira) have proposed the idea of an *everyday-life citizenship*, in which production and reproduction, the public and private spheres are articulated in a different way.

Still, if these boundaries are kept, how are we to move across them by means of two impermeable streams of rationality, where one prevails over the other? How can we presently ponder over this exclusion? What dichotomies are we — women inheritors of the Enlightenment — to reproduce, once darkness has been dispelled and threads have been disentangled? It is as if the scene had not been changed; as if we had to name, to invent the words and create multiple spaces for the everyday-life citizenship that women ask for. The feminist movement argued: “everyday life is political”. Can we then affirm, at the end of the century, that thought has been emptied and that nothing else is left to be politically revalorised in the public sphere, apart from everyday life and the domestic/private spheres?

According to Françoise Collin, “feminism was the first movement to raise the political issue *par excellence*: the lack of rights within a State of Law. (...) However, to speak of a political definition of feminism (...) is (...) to demand and to accomplish the opening of a public space, of a *common world* — not only a public space and a common world of women, but also full access to the

common world in its widest sense. Feminism means to have the right to political speech and the courage to pronounce a public speech" (Collin, 1986: 6-7). Collin proceeds arguing that this was just the beginning. This moment is nowadays overcome, since equality of rights has been achieved in western countries. It is still to be seen how it is enforced, how it explicitly and materially becomes visible both in facts and practices.

We are at the same time inheritors of the idea of the *polis* and the exclusions it implies: namely the erasure and elimination of what remains unnecessary, feeble and perishable in western tradition ever since Antiquity (the dichotomy between perennial works and perishable bodies).

"The political work of women (...) should not induce them to forget that not all human experience is political and that acting and doing are not the whole of experience" (Collin, 1995: 169-70). Collin's statement reminds us that, in a certain way, to create human beings is related to loss, to an unaccountable work. In this work there is no opposition between the two spheres, since this unique work of creating humans is based on a relation with the community: there can only be a unique and singular body within a common space. The body's identity depends on *us*, who differentiate it and confer it a place.

One of the political fights of feminism has been to create a community, a place, a space for being together, resuming in a certain sense Socrate's idea of the *polis*. This may be related to what Arendt defined as "the space of appearance in its widest sense: the space where I appear to others in the same manner as others appear to me, where human beings do not exist as living or inanimate objects, but explicitly make their appearance" (qtd by Collin, 1994: 120) — the space where one recognises oneself through other people's images. As she puts it, a new world arises once we perceive the existence of other men and women, recognising at the same time that "the plurality (as for a long time happened with the so-called universal suffrage) is performed and thought of without her [the woman], even though she is part of it" (qtd in Collin, 1994: 128). Women are excluded from the activity that constitutes the *polis*, perhaps because public and private spheres — when they are uncoordinated, separated from this community life where the new could appear — "repress likewise whatever is birth-related in each of us" (Collin, 1994: 123).

From a social citizenship point of view, how can a political female subject take form given this ambivalent situation where she is deterritorialized in a territory that does not belong to her? How can she have her own speech in a city that excludes her?

It is precisely this position of the subject that raises the question. When we search for our place in the city, we find ourselves facing a paradox: at the exact moment when the subject is crossed over by multiple forces that turn him/her into what s/he becomes, the assumption of femininity by women as political subjects may seem incongruous, in the sense that it assigns them a fixed identity.<sup>3</sup> This point of view is criticised, for example, by Chantal Mouffe

— "women's interests *as women*" lead us to a criticism of Carole Pateman and others: "maternalists [want us to adopt] a feminine policy of the private sphere shaped by the virtues of love, intimacy and interest for the 'concrete other' which are family-restricted" (Mouffe, 1996: 108).

Yet, in the creation of a human being, there is no distance between the private and the public sphere; there is rather the insertion of a desire rooted in an identity which is itself structured within a community. This allows for the intersection of personal and intimate ties with the community through practices, beliefs, rituals and memories. Thus, there is a psychic structuration formed within a community that hosts, integrates and takes care of newcomers. Still, we have to emphasise that nowadays this community is also multiple, in its several spaces — that is, the context is different from that of the Greek *polis*, with its single space and its exclusions.

### Private/public and the multiplicity of spaces

From this point of view, it seems to me that Mouffe's criticism regarding the theoreticians of an *ethics of care* is fully accurate. The latter is informed by a dichotomous vision of reality, that implicitly accepts without questioning the oppositions between public and private spheres and between men and women; furthermore, this ethics reproduces a vision of separate spheres that have different values and practices, and thus it conceals their links.

The proposition of an *everyday-life citizenship* (B. Marques Pereira, Paola Cappelin) points precisely to the overcoming of the dichotomies public/private, production/reproduction and to a politicisation of everyday life. In my opinion, Chantal Mouffe's definition of citizenship meets this idea of a community made of change and permanence: "in this perspective the distinction between public and private is not forsaken, but conceived in a different way. This distinction does not correspond to discrete, separate spheres; each situation is an encounter between 'private' and 'public', since every enterprise is private, though never free from the public conditions established by the principles of citizenship" (Mouffe, 1996: 114). This definition is intended to respond to the "politics of women as women", in a way with which I agree: it proposes the rejection of a reification, of a female essence, in the sense that a gendered identity is neither fixed nor unchangeable.

However, can women nowadays think of themselves as political subjects? This search for a place that is not women-specific raises new problems, because it concerns the search for a common space, an identity that is constituted within a multiplicity of spaces, though the access to "public speech" remains problematic.

In order to achieve this, the sphere of "women as women" must be displaced. Likewise, alterity must be accepted as well as natality in Arendt's sense:

that which brings the unexpected, the capacity to be someone else within oneself. Or else it can be achieved by transposing a non-unified subject into modernity, constructed according to multiple spaces and places, where "each situation is an encounter between 'private' and 'public'" (Mouffe, 1996: 114), an encounter that is different every time.

### Notes

- 1 Is it because of this that in the *Republic* it is stated "that the natural aptitudes are equally distributed between the two sexes (...), although in every [task] women are weaker than men"?; is it because they are merely procreators of bodies and not of souls?
- 2 "The idea of delaying death through natural techniques has not always existed in men's consciousness. (...) It emerged only when human bodies began to be considered as repairable instruments, subject to the action of the natural sciences at the same level as the animal or vegetable world (...) Mortality and birth changes are material signs of the several moments of a single evolution" (Ariès, 1971: 397-8).
- 3 This is what Chantal Mouffe criticises: "Feminist politics should be understood not as an independent political form aimed at fulfilling women's interests *as* women, but rather as a quest for feminist goals and objectives within the context of a wider co-ordination of demands. These goals and objectives should consist of the transformation of all speeches, acts and social relationships in which the concept of 'woman' is built so as to imply a subordination. In my point of view, feminism is the struggle for women's equality. Nevertheless, this should not be interpreted as a struggle to accomplish an equality of a definable empirical group, that has a common essence and identity — that is, women —, but as a struggle against the several ways in which the concept of 'women' is based upon subordination" (119).

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