

May these writings serve as a contribution to the  
withering of Politics, but also of Sentiment, of  
imaginary sexuality, of compulsory escapism, of  
unhappy loves.



# THE ORIGINAL INFAMY

THREE TEXTS BY  
LEA MELANDRI



## Notes

### *The Original Infamy*

- 1 This note introduces the collection of essays published in 1977 as *L'infamia Originaria* (Edizioni l'erba voglio, 1977), 7-8.
- 2 First published in *L'Erba Voglio*, n. 20, March-April, 1975. Reprinted in *L'infamia Originaria* (Edizioni l'erba voglio, 1977), 11-20.
- 3 “The poor woman, urged affectionately by the master, came out. A moment of great silence followed. When the door was closed, the master looked back at Franti with a terrible gaze and said to him, punctuating the syllables: ‘Franti, you are killing your mother, you are killing Malfatti.’ We all turned to him; and the infamous man smiled.” from “Franti’s Smile” by Stefano Reggiani, *L'erba voglio*, No. 20, 1975.

### *The Irreducible Gap*

- 1 Jean-Joseph Goux, “Numismatics” in *Symbolic Economies: After Marx And Freud* (Cornell, 1990) 34, 13.
- 2 Goux, *Symbolic Economies*, 222-224. [Translation modified to suit the Italian.—Eds.]
- 3 Goux, “Numismatics,” 35.
- 4 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Charles H. Kerr, 1904) 211.
- 5 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin, 1973) 105.
- 6 Melanie Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945,” in *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, Vol. 1 (The Free Press, 1975) 334-335.
- 7 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 221.
- 8 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Progress Publishers, 1959) 60-61.
- 9 Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Resistance Books, 2004) 60.
- 10 Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 63, 65, 74.
- 11 Engels, *The Origin of the Family*, 73.
- 12 Jean-Joseph Goux, *Freud, Marx* (Feltrinelli, 1976) 188. [We were unable to locate the corresponding passage in English.—Eds.]

# THE ORIGINAL INFAMY

LEA MELANDRI

“Personal Modification Is Not Revolution” and “The Original Infamy” were originally published in *L'erba voglio*, a magazine Melandri edited along with Elvio Fachinelli 1971–78. These texts were included in the 1977 anthology *L'infamia Originaria* along with “The Irreducible Gap,” the third text that appears here. All three were translated by with the help of Howard Slater and Leijia Hanrahan for *Ill Will* and published from 2021 to 2022, with Hanrahan providing original prefaces for each.

mism, with its simplistic parallels that make women the workers of the household and men a petty domestic boss, like a “staging” of great social conflicts.

When the reduction of feminine sexuality to a biological and economic function has already occurred as the result of an original violence, situated outside the consciousness (but not outside the body) of woman herself, it is inevitable that the same interpretative categories of the material force of producing of social goods comes to be applied to what is considered the specific productivity of women.

Even when there is a materialist consciousness of the male-female relationship, the difficulty remains of rethinking economic history as the history of a male doing, which bears the traces of his victorious sexuality. As we have seen, the search for parallelisms rather than implications turns out to be equivocal: firstly, because it recreates an artificial separation; secondly, because the economic order, unable to question itself about its deep origins, including the conditioning deriving from sexuality, ends up invading, dictating laws, and removing all specificity from every other type of problem.

Thus, what was supposed to be an opportunity to extricate productive activity from an alienated separation can become the source of new idealisms that transform individuals—before they can effectively reclaim their work and their needs—into machines producing new ideologies and new structures of power.

Obviously, it is not enough to reverse the hierarchical symbolic order that has placed the profiteer, the father, the mind and history at its apex. The worker no longer wants to be a worker, that is to say he wants to produce differently and live all his social relations differently; the woman no longer wants to be a mother in the sense that she must make procreation an alienated production of survival for herself and for her man.

It is no longer just a question of discovering the material supports of economic and sexual survival, but of rethinking survival from the consciousness that we are beginning to have today of the impossibility of separating sexuality and economics, sexuality and politics, sexuality and culture, etc.

between one order and another.

In both cases, the result has been the ideologization of everything related to sexuality and the disregard of the material weight that the relationship between the sexes carries within the overall social context.

Today, *the irreducibility of one material order to another* is becoming increasingly evident. By contrast, what seems to be diminishing is the difference between the bosses [*padroni*] and their opposition which share a common subjectivation to the law of the market, each consenting to the idealistic duty that positions sexuality among cultural, ethical and psychological problems.

Even Goux's attempt to trace, in the Freudian discovery, Marx's materialist reversal of the relations of production only winds up reinforcing the conviction that social conflict has its center in economic relations.

In his elaboration of juxtapositions and parallels, Goux even combines—through a facile recourse to etymology—“mother,” “matter,” and “mass.”

Likewise, the possibility of establishing a “homology” between wage labor (economic production) and motherhood (reproduction of the species), both repressed and subject to erasure by idealist ideology, arises from the application of a single interpretive criterion that is still essentially economic.

As far as sexuality is concerned, “the materialist reversal” does not coincide with the discovery and valorization of the material production of women, of their being mothers, as when the masses discover themselves to be the productive, value-generating labor force.

For women, sexist violence has meant that their existence depends upon their possession by men, that they can only represent their sexuality through the models afforded by men, that they only acquire value *as a place inhabited by men*. The antagonism is not between maternal function and paternal function (matter-spirit) because the mother participates, even in a conflicting and contradictory mode, in the order established by the father. *The antagonism is between the woman and the man, between a sexuality that is imposed and a sexuality that finds itself canceled, between a productive capacity that has been able to expand in the most diverse forms and a productivity reduced to its biological function.*

Only if we keep this in mind can we escape the perspective of econo-

## 1

Italian autonomist feminism emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, in large part as a response to the failures of 1968 and the New Left. In critical dialogue with Operaismo, thinkers of the movement worked to problematize a Marxist orthodoxy that had neglected the role played by gendered labor in the reproduction of capitalism. By classifying domestic work as reproductive labor—itsself the site of the constitution of gender, made invisible by way of the wage relation—and launching initiatives such as Wages for Housework, the Italian feminists such as Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa along with their international cohorts became best known for redefining materialism through a feminist lens, transforming the dynamic of workerism as a practice, and emphasizing political autonomy over aims of equality. Italian feminists interrogated difference rather than championing common ground between the sexes, setting them apart from many feminist initiatives elsewhere.

Lea Melandri was born Maddalena Melandri in Fusignano in 1941. She attended university in Bologna before moving to Milan in 1967, after which she soon became involved in the burgeoning current of feminism there. Through her engagement with a broader tendency of Marxist thought, Melandri was also among those who theorized gender through psychoanalysis, a task embraced concurrently by French philosophers such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous.

The text presented here appeared originally in a 1977 edition of the magazine *L'erba voglio*, which Melandri edited along with psychoanalyst Elvio Fachinelli from 1971 to 1978. In it, she presents an internal critique of “the practice of the unconscious,” an experimental project of collective psychoanalysis undertaken by many Italian feminists. This practice was part of a broader analytical framework, employed as a means by which to understand the ideology of patriarchy as it manifests in the interpretation of difference among women. Through the progression of the text, Melandri identifies, among other things, a shortsighted emphasis on personal transformation as a revolutionary accomplishment. Revisiting the text today, it is less its binary presentation of gender that is of interest than the ongoing tensions it raises: the importance of gender as a problem of material difference, rather than biological or cultural; and the urgency of interrogating such a difference, and building autonomy from within it, without becoming unintentionally mired in the realm of the individual.

Both Lea Melandri’s identification of a “paralysis of political practice” and the philosophical project of Italian feminism writ large, although rooted in their specific context, reverberate with the contemporary task of navigating escalating crises amid a collapse of traditional political distinctions. These works can inform efforts to grapple with difference as an irreducible catalyst—not a thing to be resolved or sidestepped, but a thing to be reckoned with, forged into a site of revolutionary potential.

—Leijia Hanrahan,  
January 2021

In order to triumphantly elevate the happy love of proletarian women, it is necessary not to have any doubts about the identification between pleasure and male sexuality, and not to want to see that *the less a woman’s sexuality is covered by other structures (material, religious, ideological) the more it reveals its violent and forced kinship with motherhood, illness and death.*

The moment in which the man-woman relationship loses its specificity is clearly defined by certain postulates of equivalence: subordination of women = division of labor = class antagonism:

The first class antagonism that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male.<sup>11</sup>

From Engels to Goux:

Genetically, social antagonisms develop in the image of sexual and family antagonisms, but structurally in developed society, it is family antagonisms which are, in the reduced image, the reflection, the simple scenic representation of social antagonisms. The opposition of the sexes is perhaps the *germ* of the class struggle; the opposition of the sexes is today the *mirror* of the class struggle.<sup>12</sup>

According to Goux, the male-female relationship loses its relevance and autonomy as soon as the modes and relations of production become more complex, more specific and more autonomous with respect to parental ties. Between the two “signifying levels” a gap is created whose fundamental consequence would be the subordination of the conflict between the sexes to the broader social conflict between classes.

Now, if it is true that the economic machine tends to absorb all other social productivity, to regulate and subordinate to itself every other social order, it is also true that *the man-woman relationship opposes to this incorporation its own specificity and structural autonomy.*

Not only capitalist society, but also the Marxist political tradition, have constantly attempted to reduce the effect of this gap, the separation

interpretation, and that could instead open the way to a specific discourse on sexuality.

On the transition from group marriage to monogamy, he writes:

The more the old traditional sexual relations lost their naïve, primitive jungle character...the more degrading and oppressive must they have appeared to the women; the more fervently must they have longed for the right to chastity, to temporary or permanent marriage with one man only, as a deliverance. This advance could not have originated from the men, if only for the reason that they have never — not even to the present day — dreamed of renouncing the pleasures of actual group marriage.

From sexuality to economics:

[...] the once so easily obtainable wives had now acquired an exchange value and were bought.

This sacrificial surrender, originally obligatory for all women, was later practiced vicariously by these priestesses alone on behalf of all other women. [...] Wage labour appears sporadically alongside of slave labour; and simultaneously, as its necessary correlate, the professional prostitution of free women appears side by side with the forced surrender of the female slave.<sup>10</sup>

But where the economic forcing totally loses its credibility is in Engels' description of proletarian marriage. Lacking property, the proletarian would have no reason to assert his dominance over the woman, apart from a certain "brutality" that has long been rooted in the monogamous couple. For this reason, "sexual love becomes the rule in relationships with women." A love, it should be added, made up of many children, abortions, rapes, and deaths in childbirth. Quite an eccentric concept of "sexual love"! One can agree with Engels that, the sexual relationship for the bourgeois woman, at least in the past, ended up taking a backseat to economic interests, to the ideal and moral reasons of the man. For proletarians, sexuality seems less hindered by extraneous concerns, yet the result, as far as women are concerned, is no less violent.

### Personal Modification Is Not Revolution

In recent years, the opportunities for meetings, knowledge, and common practices between women have intensified.

We have accumulated experiences of personal changes and collective work which are original and complex. What is it that prevents us from seeing in them a political achievement of our collective, and of so many other women?

To say that power relations have been recreated, or that they never disappeared, is to say everything and nothing. We should ask ourselves why we have still never been able to analyze what power between women means, nor how it *specifically* originates.

Psychological explanations are reductive and generic. To underscore every instance where, despite our best efforts, we continue to act like 'fathers', 'mothers', 'men', 'women', 'children', 'parents', inevitably generates the conviction that reality is, at base, merely a web of projections-introjections, fantasies, personal dreams. It leads us, in other words, to *idealism*, or worse, psychologizing drivel.

Since the paralysis in question is essentially a paralysis of political practice (and not of personal relationships, which, on the contrary, are very alive), I think that we must seek the reasons for it *in this very practice*.

What follows are a few observations on the subject.



### *Specificity*

Our practice should have highlighted the materiality of those relationships that have their historical origin in the difference between the sexes. It should have made us aware of contradictions hitherto ignored, such as those between man-woman, individual-collective, sexuality-politics, etc. It should have highlighted, for that very reason, ideological abstraction and the market of relations within those political practices that claim the mantle of Marxism today.

Instead, what is apparent in our meetings and the experience of living together is often a mere *reversal* of the terms of the contradiction: individual history against collective projects, everydayness against political involvement, psychological analysis versus economic analysis, and so on.

Hence the immobility, the sense of unreality, the theoretical confusion and the boredom that arises from the repetition of such discourses, with their uniformity of language.

As we know from experience, the energies of women are consumed in a *separate* affective life. A practice of liberation should, at the very least, diminish the fixity of the affective and emotional situations that have constituted our misery: the need for love, dependence, hysterical conversions, insecurity, etc. This will certainly not happen if we go on reinforcing our separation, if we take over the idealistic distortions of psychology, and continue to deny or imagine the social and economic reality that we carry within us — in the way we act, and in our relationships with each other — as an external and hostile reality.

(It should be enough to give the example of the commercialization of feminism: political merchandise, journalistic merchandise, merchandise for the uptake of new fashions, new sexual behaviours...etc. We often denounce the external aspect, the aggression and the recuperation of our work, without realizing that it is being enacted within the very practice of the movement, or by women who claim to belong to it.)

### *The Analysis of Difference*

The 'practice of the unconscious' is intended to offer a safeguard against ideological temptations. In fact, it has freed us from unitary illusions,

Economism and idealism are vices that the Marxist left has inherited from the bourgeoisie, but they are also, obviously, the extension of an older patriarchal privilege.

The confusion between economy and economism, individual needs and individualism, sexuality and intimacy, was born in the analyses of Marx and Engels—a fact we can perceive with all its contradictions only today.

Let us take *The Origin of the Family, Property and the State*. Here, Engels reconstructs the history of the family, of the relationship between man and woman, using the same interpretative categories that Marx had used for the analysis of economic exploitation.

When it is taken for granted that there is no specific difference between man and woman relative to sexuality, and that women's sexuality coincides with men's desire, the equivalence woman = proletarian becomes all too easy. The woman's body as it appears on the social scene is already "other than itself." She is essentially a labor force that produces children, housework, and pleasure for the man.

Male dominance does not therefore originate with private property and the monogamous family, as Engels says, but is located at the origin of the relationship between the sexes in an *act of expropriation* which is only now beginning to surface in consciousness.

*With the dominance of male sexuality also comes the material and ideological primacy of economic relationships over all other social relationships.*

In the rigid economic causality of Engels' analysis (the subjugation of women is born with private property and disappears with it), every omission and contradiction becomes indicative of the process by which the sexist structure simultaneously makes its appearance and disappears. Speaking of the high esteem enjoyed by women "among all savages and barbarians of the lower and middle stage," Engels feels the need to emphasize "the very high esteem for women, that is, for mothers."<sup>9</sup> The fusion-confusion between sexuality-motherhood, sexuality-procreation, has already taken place. Elsewhere, Engels asserts that the monogamous family is born for economic reasons and that "its express aim is the begetting of children of undisputed paternity...in order that these children may in due time inherit their father's wealth as his natural heirs." This remark is then followed by reflections that contradict this reductive and partial



The concept of the “mass” tends to be conflated with the Platonic idea of “matter” as an undifferentiated substance, which is more a reflection of a certain productive structure than its determining element.

Economism is the other face of idealism. The origin is the same: censorship, displacement, the reversal of reality into the imagination, and vice versa.

That these were the particular prerogatives of the “god of commodities,” Marx had no doubt:

I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore I am not ugly.

Money...the general confusing and confounding of all things.

Money [is] the external, universal medium and faculty...for turning an image into reality and reality into a mere image.<sup>8</sup>

As a product of the capitalist bourgeoisie, economism consists essentially in (1) an affirmation of the primacy of the economy understood as a technical moment and (2) the separation of the relations of production from any other form of exchange. The needs and interests that this separation allows to exist with a certain margin of autonomy are regulated by the capitalist economy itself, but with the implication they are totally different. Economic facts are made to appear, for example, as “objective,” “necessary,” susceptible to historicity, whereas all other events and relations appear on the contrary as “subjective,” “fortuitous,” “private.”

Historical materialism taught us that the economy “deals not with things but with people,” that behind the productive machine lies alienated human labor. In this sense, it laid down the groundwork for a critique of the supposed “naturalness” or “technical necessity” of economic history. But faced with the separations between economy-sexuality, public-private etc., historical materialism ended up operating a simple reversal, integrating the second term into the first and thus suggesting that the order of objectivity, of necessity, of history, is exclusively that of political economy.

Here again, it is the dismissal of the male-female relationship that allows the old antagonisms to fall within the framework of “conscious materiality”: class needs and individual needs, political struggle and sexuality, structures and superstructures etc.

from solidarist sentimentalism and organizational dreams. However, it has not allowed us to advance very far in our analysis of the differences that exist between us. We speak about differences often, but always in a more or less abstract way: as opposed desires or experiences (*I feel good, I don't*); as power relations (*who speaks and who does not, who makes decisions and who does not*); as parental psychological dynamic (*me the mother, me the daughter*). We almost never remember that personal differences refer to an objective context, namely, the economic, cultural, familial, or emotional milieu in which each of our histories developed, and in which we live. We almost never remember that, through individual difference, through the history of each one, pass all the specific contradictions of our historical condition as women.

The difficulty, but also the originality of our work lies in the fact that it does not allow itself to be tempted by ideology (difference = contradicting the norm), by psychology (difference = the result of personal history), by false objectivity (difference = divergence of political lines) nor, naturally, by indifferent ‘chance’ (difference = the diversity of experiences).

To succeed in not separating, denying or opposing the multiple aspects involved in the being-different of each of us, means that we concretely modify the idea of subjectivity and objectivity that we have inherited from politics, philosophy, religion, etc.

### *Specularity and Real Relationships*

Psychoanalysis cautions against this possibility that we would have to see each other as we really would be. The projections, masks, censures, and fantasies we sustain about each other are no less real than what we see and feel.

In the past, we considered the acquisition of an *analytical attention* as essential for unraveling this knot of reality and imagination and establishing less suffocating or more real relationships, and it continues to seem essential to me today.

In practice, however, things seem quite the opposite. We talk to each other, but we have the impression of not understanding each other, of not seeing each other; each seems attentive only to the image of herself that the other reflects. Specularity hinders real attention to and interest in the

other, or ends up highlighting, and transferring into a complex relationship, only affective dynamics. I realize that the peculiarity of analytical practice is reinforced in this case, by confronting the specific condition of women (fixation on one's own history, preponderance of affective ties, etc.).

Can we question the 'practice of the unconscious' while avoiding, on the one hand, the false objectivity of content and, on the other, the negation of subjectivity, sexuality, and the imaginary?

### *Practice of the Unconscious and Analytical Practice*

Two years ago, when the first attempts to 'practice the unconscious' began, we identified the following main obstacles: request for analysis, and the attribution of the interpretive function, even ambivalently, to a few definite people. Although the work that followed in several groups was felt by many women to have been positive, it nevertheless provoked some doubts and questions (I refer in particular to the work of one of these groups):

The assimilation—partly real, partly only formal—of the practice of the unconscious to analytical practice

In the absence of a fixed theme or a common activity for the women present, the weekly meeting inevitably ended up taking on the appearance of an analytical session: all contributions to the group were received in the form of personal experiences, associations, dreams, interpretations of particular cases or group dynamics. As a consequence: long silences, vouchsafing of affective assurances by the group before being willing to self-expose; deference to the interpretation of those deemed 'capable of analysis'; disappointment in answers deemed insufficient or overly tentative; difficulty avoiding the censorship of aggressiveness and sexuality when reference was made to the women of the group.

At the best of times, the group was gratified by those who said they felt 'personally transformed' by working together.

But individual change cannot be regarded straightforwardly as political transformation. *Personal modification is not revolution.*

exist, or the Marxist one, which reduces the needs of the individual to those relating to his or her class position.

About money, Marx writes:

Money is therefore the god among commodities [...] From its servile role, in which it appears as a mere medium of circulation, it suddenly changes into the lord and god of the world of commodities. It represents the divine existence of commodities, while these represent its earthly existence.<sup>7</sup>

The recourse to philosophical oppositions such as "heaven-earth," "sensible-intelligible," when adapted to the description of economic phenomena, albeit in the reversed form of a critique of idealism, is ripe for various explanations. The most immediate consideration to add here is that this reflects the internal contradictions of the existing economic order, such that Marx, while unmasking the idealistic deception, is still forced to repeat the terminology and the symbolic constructions it creates. On the contrary, we can think that, *if idealism persists behind its reversal, it is because Marx takes into account only certain aspects of the displacement at work here, to the detriment of material causes of existence.*

Beyond all metaphor, among the epigones of Marx, we may consider this excerpt from a speech on October 12, 1976 by Mauro Rostagno of *Lotta Continua*:

The individual conquers his individuality only by destroying, alongside his class, the determination that the opposing class has imposed on him. [...] I believe that the masses are the decisive and main source of real collective needs, and it is through class struggle that individuals learn to constitute their individual needs.

Materialism allows us, and the masses generally, to analyze such needs and desires.

Why was it necessary to idealize the "class," to once again pay homage to abstraction by installing a revolutionary subject as the common denominator, against the complex realities and social contradictions of singular life?

Idealism, the opposition between mind and body, rationality and matter, has its origin in a double occultation: the occultation of the woman's body, and of labor-power (commodity = labor).

But, chronologically, even before the commodity and the labor-power that produces it, the matter that finds itself negated in its concrete particular being, in its "relative plural form," is the woman's body. The woman who enters history has already lost her concreteness and singularity: she is the economic machine that preserves the human species and she is the Mother, an equivalent more general than money, the most abstract measure that patriarchal ideology has invented.

In her psychoanalytic considerations, Melanie Klein exalts the universal maternal presence to such an extent that she does not recognize the specifically masculine character of historically known production and creativity. The mother's body expands to cover everything to which man applies himself:

In the explorer's unconscious mind, a new territory stands for a new mother, one that will replace the loss of the real mother.

The sculptor who puts life into his object of art, whether or not it represents a person, is unconsciously restoring and recreating the early loved people, whom he has in phantasy destroyed.<sup>6</sup>

Maternal omnipresence is the maximal form of recognition, but also the greatest wrong that can be done to woman: to dilate her imaginary existence until she becomes the backbone of all that exists, at the same time as she is denied her real existence as an individual.

*The terms of the thousand-year-old opposition that disavowed matter and conferred reality upon the imagination, creating an upside-down hierarchy, are both abstract postulates of a culture that has sought to do away with one of its main material supports.*

As long as we continue to seek the answer to all antagonisms (real and ideological) exclusively, or even primarily, in the history of economic relations, we do not extricate ourselves from *economism*.

The women's movement has brought attention back to female sexuality and revived interest in personal histories so as to break away from idealism, both bourgeois idealism for which only generic "individual needs"

Moreover, when a group of this kind becomes the primary site of liberatory expectations (whether it is a collective of women, or an encounter engendered by the movement), the outside inevitably becomes the site in which transference phantasies, aggressions, and romantic relationships born within the group are acted out. As in both individual and group analytical relationships, real life ends up becoming a mime, the representation of a web [*trame*] that has its origin in the analytic relation itself. Analysis takes the place of the real: in the group, we talked for months about the internal relationships of the collective, while the same people who had expressed themselves in the group were silent in the collective, or delegated others to speak for them. We might think that a group, even a large one, is always more protective than a collective meeting, where differences are more marked and the chance of presence greater; we might suppose that the need, even if ambivalent, to trust a few people (who one feels are free from needs and contradictions) as interpreters of the desires and offerings of others, arises from this insecurity. The 'practice of the unconscious' may encourage analytical expectations. But we could also view the problem from another angle, by asking for example what 'less protective' even means. The flipside of insecurity is not only psychologico-phantasmatic (fear of abandonment, persecution anxiety); confrontations with those who are different from us, clashes with women who subscribe to a different political practice than us, or who simply speak a language different from our own, can also cause insecurity. If the practice of the unconscious had not, from the start, been marked by traditional 'analytical' modes, it should have helped us to distinguish differences and to dialectically articulate various political experiences.

Some of us may have hoped that the collective would turn into a large analytical group. But setting aside the various contradictions, intrinsic difficulties, and the opposition encountered from others, how might we have avoided the psychological, personalist distortions that came to light in the groups?

### *The Fall of Political Tension*

The analytic experience displaces forms of attention and energy that were originally disposed (or constrained) to remain elsewhere, shifting them

onto personal history. In some women, the practice of the unconscious seems to produce a similar displacement-exposure effect. I am thinking of the frequent use in meetings of the expression 'to lay bare', that is, to strip oneself of the interests we usually have, to strip oneself of general words and expressions that seem out of place in meetings. This paralysis-effect, aphasia, stammering, which would arouse no special interest in an analytical session, is always unpleasantly surprising when it arises, on the contrary, in a small gathering or a political meeting. All the more so during a meal or during a vacation.

The acquisition of an analytical perspective is undoubtedly fundamental for a political practice which does not want to mutilate itself or to separate itself again from the deep reasons for individual and collective action, but it would be a rather paradoxical outcome if, to keep one eye on the investigation of [psychic] depths, we had to close both at the same time. *Is it too much to ask for an enhancement of vision both vertically and horizontally?*

Awareness and modification cannot follow a single direction without running the risk of abstracting the content and deteriorating relationships. The verification continues, the confrontation-showdown with all the data of reality (which, before any other politico-cultural context, concern other women) could, on the contrary, enable us to avoid entanglement, immobilization, the confusion of individual reflection with the general opinion of women, or of personal modification with collective transformation, etc.

After all, even in the monetary economy the autonomy of gold is not the result of a process but is already present, in Marx's description, in the particular natural properties of this metal:

Gold and silver...are not only negatively superfluous, i.e., dispensable articles, but their aesthetic properties make them the natural material of luxury, ornamentation, splendor, festive occasions.<sup>4</sup>

It is surely noteworthy that the more precious the metals are, the more isolated is their occurrence; they are found separately from the more commonly prevalent bodies, they are higher natures far from the common herd.<sup>5</sup>

Gold = festivals = joy = splendor. It is legitimate to think that the parallels are already drawn on the basis of a triumphant sexuality that separates and opposes need and desire, object and subject, activity and passivity, etc.; that separates gold, festivity, and phallic primacy as vertices of a pyramid whose base is still, in part, outside of history: the liberation of women, the enjoyment of commodities in their particular characteristics, the realization of subjects in their specificity as individuals and social beings, the variety of expressive forms against the tyranny of speech, autonomy against authoritarian centralization.

The allegedly materialist explanation of binomials such as body-soul, real-ideal, particular-universal, once these are referred back exclusively to the oppositions of money and commodity, use value and exchange value, opens the door to new idealistic reversals.

The indifferent becoming of matter and the predominance of consciousness, of abstract rationality, do not depend only on the logic of exchange and the organization of production. In the history of the relationship between man and woman, the same fate befalls female sexuality. From the moment her body becomes the matter for the reproduction of the species and object of man's sexual satisfaction, woman loses her autonomy and her possibility of historical existence. Man himself, through the relationship that he continues to maintain with her, alienates and separates from himself, from his productive and social action, a part of his material existence (need for love, sexuality).

To maintain or isolate a *value*, a *meaning*, an essence across the multiplicity of its possible incarnations. [...] To *identify*, despite and even across an irrelevant diversity. To generate a rift between essence and phenomenon, between form and matter, value and support. [...] A process of replacement, of one thing set in place of another, of identification, substitution [...] A rift, whether understood or left implicit, between an *invariant* and a *matter*.<sup>2</sup>

If the simplest exchange between two commodities and “the equation of equivalence (A = B) that this implies” already includes the split between “invariant” and “matter,” it is clear that the “symbolic function” that Goux wishes to position as the basis of the entire historical-social process—the universal equivalent of money—is itself influenced in turn by the form that the man-woman relationship has historically taken: the *substitution* of female sexuality, its *assimilation* with male sexuality, the *identification* that takes place despite all difference, the *separation* between a (masculine) value and a *matter* that loses its consistency and finds itself overshadowed, and the indexing of an easily interchangeable *commodity* (the female body) to an invariant.

Money must negate itself as a commodity in order to become an external intermediary, opposed to all other commodities. From the desire to possess a particular good, we pass to the desire for enrichment as such; money becomes the absolute object of desire.

This is Marx’s analysis. To this, Goux adds: “this dialectic is none other than the shift from *need* to *desire*” by which the phallus becomes the “universal signifier of jouissance.”<sup>3</sup> Here “isomorphism” no longer suffices as an explanation.

The desire that detaches itself in order to assume the role of universal norm (the phallus) is male sexuality, whose autonomy is defined the moment that it leaves to the woman the task of ensuring survival (survival of the species, but also satisfaction of the need for love).

The act by which the father and the phallus become universal referents is positioned at the origin of history and radically determines its development, but it is also outside history until the protagonists become aware of it, until the man-woman relationship ceases to be a kind of history within history.

## 2

Lea Melandri’s “The Original Infamy” appeared in *L’erba voglio* in the spring of 1975. It was reprinted in an anthology by the same name in 1977, paired with a previously unpublished essay, “The Irreducible Gap,” under the heading “Critique of Survival.”

1977 was a boiling point for the Italian autonomist movement. By February, the rupture between autonomists and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) over the latter’s alliance with bourgeois power and its “historic compromise” with Christian Democracy had become irreversible. This refusal of mediation on the part of the movement was accompanied by an uptick in armed violence on all sides. The killing of Francesco Lorusso of Lotta Continua by Carabinieri in Bologna during a riot that March sent shockwaves across the country, catalyzing further rebellion.

Melandri occupied something of a liminal position among Italian feminist critics of Marxism and the extended milieu, neither fully affirming autonomism nor rejecting its political potential. As she emphasizes in her prefatory note to the 1977 anthology (below), she understood her decision to republish these texts as a contribution to those elements in the ongoing uprising that sought to break with both liberal and Marxist orthodoxy. Drawing on the author’s experience in autonomous women’s collectives, “The Original Infamy” shows how a rigorous feminist practice can accelerate the collapse of these dying political forms. Against re-



cuperative efforts by universities and political institutions to co-opt the feminist movement's organizing models while neutralizing the threat they posed to the intellectual order, Melandri sought to underscore their insurgent character.

This possibility depends in part upon the critique of the artificial severance of the private realm from the political. In spite of its appearance as a pseudo-natural site of difference, "the personal" is not an individualizing tendency that erupts into the political from "outside." In fact, it is this very illusion that sustains imaginary political unities such as that of a totalizing economic class. While her critique is more directly leveled at proponents of a narrow dialectical materialism, it also implicates those second wave feminists whose slogans rejected this presumed division without interrogating its source.

"The Original Infamy" probes the relation between sexual difference and "the social," calling attention to the triangular structures of familial domination that underwrite the reproduction of bourgeois society. As she illustrates, the divide between revolution and *conservation* rests upon a denial of the gendered mechanisms of survival, relegated to the private realm. Melandri identifies *survival* with the fulfillment of what we experience as an "original" or baseline need, one which is at the same time irreducibly gendered. Survival here is a condition into which we are thrust back, or to which we are returned, wherever the artificial separation between personal and political is enforced, a perpetual childhood in which our "pleasure and vitality" lies frozen. Echoing the existential feminism of French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, Melandri demonstrates that whereas women's survival is trapped in immanence, in the materiality of the body, and in reproduction, that of men is positioned as transcendent, an affirmation of affect and power. So long as the latter is guaranteed by women's submission, any effort to draw our political bearings from *within* the separation of the sexual from the economic will only ensure their further subjugation. In this way, Melandri links the suppression of sexual difference to the perpetuation of bourgeois forms of political organization. The possibility of a genuine rupture with bourgeois sociality is therefore contingent on a reassessment of *dependency* and archaic forms of sociality.

The critique of this dependency reveals the potential lying beyond the illusions on which it rests. To that end, it might even turn out that "the

in reconstructing the genesis of his history, cannot avoid adopting the perspective through which it unfolded. So it is for Marx and Freud alike.

The analysis that describes the origin of the money-form and that which discovers in sexual history the primacy of the father and the phallus both succumb to the same limitation: they destroy the fetish, but end up lending credence to an order that they discover to be *already there*.

What is presented as an outcome is present from the start: it is the result of a process, but it is also the internal reason for the development of the process itself.

Rather than being the original structure and model of all other analogous formations, certain of the oppositions (real or ideological) that are found in the writings of Marx and applied to the economy (use value, exchange value, etc.) themselves seem, at least in part, to be the result of commonplaces characteristic of the only culture that enjoyed a voice in history, that of man.

In fact, what Goux translates into a complex system of parallelisms and deductions appears in Marx and Freud only in the sporadic form of metaphors; he never seems notice that, in their use of metaphor, the different "registers" of the symbolic (economic, political, sexual, etc.) become almost *interchangeable*. As a result, not only does it become problematic to establish priorities, but we might even conclude that *symbolic organization as a whole refers to an origin* that is located outside of itself, and that, precisely for this reason, explains its existence.

Sexual history is marked by two essential facts:

1. The *negation* of feminine sexuality.
2. The *displacement* of sexuality out of the productive sphere specific to man.

It is in these, much more than from the development of the monetary economy, that philosophical oppositions between matter-spirit, heaven-earth, sacred-profane, individual-society, etc., have their origin.

The very formation of the general equivalent (exchange value) appears to itself be modeled on unconscious traces of the affair between the two sexes: *separation* from concrete particular products, *externality*, *opposition*.

Confirmation of this hypothesis can be found, implicitly, in Goux's account of the genesis and meaning of the "symbolic function" as the basis of all social exchanges:

for economic privilege. It is the symptom of an original action intended to open a deep rift in the order of the material conditions of existence, such that certain conditions come to be recognized while others are not.

*The original infamy* is a drama whose protagonists are beginning to be seen today.

The materialist analysis of the relations of production and the discovery of the sexual history that has kept the human species alive each occurred at *separate* moments not only in time (Marx, Freud), but also in the *partiality* that characterized each of them. The various aspects of negated materiality, which are always multiple and connected to each other, do not seem to bear the consciousness of their contemporaneity within them.

On the other hand, one material order cannot erase or diminish another without itself running the risk of becoming partly abstract and imaginary.

The search for links that might put an end, at least on a theoretical level, to the separation between the various moments of social organization has thus far avoided neither partiality nor abstractness.

For example, take the essay “Numismatics,” by Jean-Joseph Goux. The author writes that,

Starting from a science of money, we can trace the homologous articulations of all symbolic organizations in a society. [...] The institution of the Father, Phallus, and Language, of the major “signs” that regulate the values market, in fact stems from a genesis whose necessity and whose limits are doubtless most pronounced, theoretically, in the origin of Money.<sup>1</sup>

Goux’s syntax, which likes to present itself as assembled from various registers (“homologies,” “isomorphisms,” “parallelism”), in the end turns out to have one main driving propensity: the economic order.

From the discovery of the correspondences between different orders (economic, sexual, linguistic, etc.) to the affirmation that the monetary economy must necessarily be the determining and formative element of the whole social organism: such a logical leap attests, once again, to a normative *a priori* that escapes all analysis. The isomorphisms that Goux traces with Byzantine patience confirm, if there were any need, that man,

‘non-existence’ of women is also their strength,” if this means that “those who can clearly see what lies at the origin” are singularly positioned to demystify it. Such a demystification would also sweep away with it those “fictitious solidarities” on which revolutionary politics has long rested, as a necessary precursor to the birth of authentic ones.

—Leijia Hanrahan,  
August 2021



### Author's Note

It's been almost a year since Elvio Fachinelli proposed putting out a book collecting some of my articles published in the journal *L'Erba Voglio*.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this period, the time dedicated to the actual work (rereading-writing) was very short as compared with the time I spent thinking about doing it, or putting it out of my mind entirely.

The doubts that led me to believe, from time to time, that it was best to abandon or postpone it were various: excessive self-esteem or utter self-deprecation, uncertainty about the actual meaning of certain writings, an ill-concealed ambition to say entirely original things, embarrassment and suffering at having to endure the contradiction of individual work within the framework of a common practice with other women.

I have often thought, and I am still convinced, that writing a book becomes anachronistic once there emerges a political practice through which to analyze the relationship between individual and collective, sexuality and writing, etc. If I have opted to tackle the ambiguity and contradictions of this work anyway, it was essentially under the impetus of two events: a profound modification of my life, which I could define as "personal" only by misrepresenting the practice of political relations with other women, from which the change originated; and the resumption, in recent months, of a movement of struggle that, even in its most heterogeneous components, has deeply incorporated themes and ways of doing politics that appear destined to be banned by bourgeois institutions and dogmatic Marxists alike.

May these writings serve as a contribution to the "withering" [*deperimento*] of Politics, but also of Sentiment, of imaginary sexuality, of compulsory escapism, of unhappy loves.

—Lea Melandri,  
March 1977

### The Irreducible Gap

The economic and the sexual orders reciprocally determine one another, but every trace of this *originary implication* appears to have been lost.

The disregard of female sexuality, combined with the forcible consignment of women to the economic order, as producers of children and sexual commodities, has separated them from the economico-political context, relegating one of the material causes of survival *outside* of consciousness. The man-woman relationship has passed into the shadows: it presided over the formation of institutions like the family and the school, essential but marginal in relation to the productive cycle, and acted indirectly on all the historical forms of aggregation, and still its only recognized form has become the private sphere—neurosis and madness.

Confronted with this consciousness, which arises clearly today only within the women's movement, rigid Marxist theory (infrastructure, superstructure) collapses, and with it the omni-interpretative voracity of psychoanalysis. It is no longer enough to be content to point out "parallelisms," "homologies," or "nexologies" between economic organization and sexual organization.

The *negation* in human history that has opposed matter and spirit, idealism and materialism, nature and culture, the individual and society, etc., is not simply the fruit of a repressive social order, or an ideological cover

### The Original Infamy

Two institutions, the school and the family, merge into an ideal order, the Delegated Order.<sup>2</sup> Franti's smile is *infamy*, it is the *different* that does not hesitate to break the idyll of a consenting majority.<sup>3</sup>

As the revolutionary militant thinks back to his private dreams, the suspicion arises that Politics itself is but a dream. All that was pushed aside, denied, or held apart shamefully returns, in the form of insidious dissenting "voices," the "voice" that "discriminates, divides, indicates a difference."

But inside, in the rift, Franti's smile leaks out: an infamous smile that kills both his mother and Malfatti, the Heart and Politics.

In recent years, while parties large and small reinforce their hierarchical and bureaucratic structures, their imaginary pyramids of ancient family "geometries," revolutionary spontaneity has discovered more and more clearly the truth of everything that bourgeois ideology has chased out of the public sphere, relegated to the ghetto of the household, the man-woman relationship, or individual deviance. The search for circularity and synthesis between the *personal* and the *political*, artificially separated, appears as the final shore beyond which either a new mode of political existence is born, or politics itself dies as a collective project for liberation.

The difficulties that autonomy encounters in its various forms of aggregation (autonomous assemblies, consciousness-raising groups, communes, etc.) are no different from those that push "disappointed"

militants to reconstitute the party as a *separate* site of politics. But, for those who have left even this illusion behind, the risk lies instead in a return to private life.

*Nostalgia* and *repetition* continually creep in wherever the appearance of different and freer attitudes is felt as a threat of loneliness and marginalization as compared to a sociality that, although recognized as imaginary and repressive, is [at least] less disturbing.

Slavery accustoms one to a fear of freedom. The idea of movement carries with it that of paralysis, like its shadow.

At this point, one wonders if we are not always too hasty in drawing boundaries between *conservation* and *revolution*. If by conservation we do not only mean the defense of privileges, but, in a broader sense, submission to norms and relationships that guarantee an alienated survival, then the boundary shifts and enters into the history of each person, touching upon the most “private” situations.

Fantasy and reality have always been intertwined in our private/social history. In order to give substance to abstractions (money, exchange value), the capitalist organization of production had to present itself as an unchangeable objectivity (nature). Everything associated with it has suffered the same fate: the divisions of labour, technology, the individual-society relationship, etc. The “naturalness” of economics and politics is the ruse [*l’inganno*] of capitalist ideology, preserved in part even by those who seek to destroy it.

Discovering glitches in a machine that seemed perfect therefore means exposing its attempts to lay claim to reality. Once *the social* no longer appears to us in the false solidity of *what is objectively*, outside of and totally other than us, it is easier to see the kinship that it has with each of our personal histories.

Over the past few years, the image of an unshakeable and rational system has suffered a crack that cannot be easily repaired. The ideological and moral mystifications on which bourgeois society has been sustained up to now are collapsing, and basic guarantees of subsistence can no longer be taken for granted.

It might seem like the most auspicious moment to put an end to mass dependency. Some certainly counted on it. But there are also signs that point to contrary trends: the revaluation of institutions (school, family,

ification is not Revolution,” we find a reflection on group psychoanalysis frustrated by an emphasis on personal enlightenment rather than gender analysis, whereas “The Original Infamy” offers a searing critique of the “fictitious solidarities” (such as a totalizing economic class) that emerge from the bourgeois suppression of sexual difference, zeroing in on men’s survival needs as contingent on the submission of women.

“The Irreducible Gap” concludes by returning to the theme of survival as it relates to sexuality, and the refusal of dominant forms of subjectivation. Already in 1977, it was apparent that “the worker no longer wants to be a worker...the woman no longer wants to be a mother”—statements that have only become more true since then, and which must be reconsidered in light of the inadequacy of false separations and inverted hierarchies on which they depend. It is crucial today that we not only refuse dominantly imposed identities and categorical distinctions that no longer serve us, but also forge a new critical framework that does.

—Leijia Hanrahan,  
March 2022

For Melandri, economistic epistemology is marked by a constitutive misrecognition of female sexuality, which it incorrectly assimilates to male sexuality. When Friedrich Engels asserts that woman is essentially the proletarian of the household, he ignores, among other things, the intricacy of the individual, reducing it to a class position. Why, Melandri asks, is it necessary to idealize the class form at the expense of the complex reality of social contradictions?

“The Irreducible Gap” takes aim not only at Marxian economism but psychoanalysis as well. In the 20th century, many critical theorists, including Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and Louis Althusser synthesized Marx and Freud in various elements of their work. These works constituted an important intervention into the status of subjectivity in Marx’s materialism and the communist movement more generally, but also tended to fall flat when called to account for the idiosyncrasies of subjecthood beyond the economic sphere. In her critique of one such Freudo-Marxian synthesis, Jean-Joseph Goux’s *Freud, Marx: Economie et symbolique* (1973), Melandri shows how a tendency to translate metaphors found in Marx, Engels, and Freud into systematic parallels between the libidinal and political economy repeatedly subordinates the question of patriarchy to the terms of economic structures. On the other hand, the exaltation of motherhood by psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein tends to ignore the gendered terms of its production, a misrecognition that likewise results in an erasure of the individual. In this, Melandri echoes Simone de Beauvoir, writing that, “from the moment when her body becomes material for the reproduction of the species and object of the sexual satisfaction of the man, the woman loses her autonomy.”

In sum, the relegation of gender and sexuality to the margins of materialism has impoverished it as an analytic method, by depriving it of key sources and supports. The interplay between gender, the unconscious, and political economy does not lend itself to the privileging of one realm over the other. However, for Melandri, the lesson to be drawn from the critique of economism is not to discard materialism but to expand it, to reveal the irreducible plurality of the antagonisms that drive it forward, the better to attack the violence that engulfs us.

Similar themes recur in other essays that appeared alongside the present one in the 1977 anthology *L’infamia Originaria*. In “Personal Mod-

party), the nostalgia for a return to the private sphere, the emergence of new forms of magico-religious escapism as a shelter from loneliness and uncertainty. In addition to being more topical than ever, the problem of *dependency* is now loaded with complex and profound implications. In the face of a crumbling order, the various efforts to plug the rifts and drown out dissenting voices respond to a need for conservation that is no less material than physical self-preservation in the strict sense. Even among those heralding the collapse of the capitalist pyramid, not everyone can suppress the temptation to climb the ranks of organizations that are “alternative” only in appearance.

*Conservation* returns us to *survival*. What is there that you cannot risk losing, besides food, in order to ensure life?

Both individual subject and social subject, under the current economic structure, have alienated connotations: those individuals bourgeois ideology describes as active, free, autonomous subjects are in reality reduced to passive objects, abstract individuals; by contrast, the mass of producers and performers is comprised of individuals unknown to each other, isolated and dispossessed of the product of their work. By opposing the social subject (class) to the individual, as if the class were already itself, objectively, the subject of revolution, dialectical materialism risks attributing concreteness and revolutionary force to an entity no less abstract and alienated than the individual.

The search for a *concrete individuality* is therefore inevitably linked to the search for a *new sociality*.

When we speak of the “personal” and the “political” as two instances present within the revolutionary movement, there is a risk that we project a consistency and a polarity to two moments that are instead merged and confused. To descend into the history of what has been seen only as private and individual is like being swallowed by a funnel. Real time and political intention become more and more blurred, while a depth without history seems to take shape, where there stirs only a handful of intense passions, always the same. The “personal” takes on the appearance of the *different*: a sort of immutable yet suppressed “nature” that resurfaces once again, introducing disintegration and confusion into a social fabric that likes to represent itself as homogeneous.

Beyond the truths that all these dangers express (partiality versus imag-

inary unity, conflict versus fictitious solidarity), however, one can end up unwittingly reproducing an ideological mystification: to see as a “natural” and separate impulse what is at once the effect of, and the support for, the perpetuation of a distorted and abstract sociality.

Jealousy, rivalry, and the demand for love are the distorted face of an interpretation of the social that passes directly through the dualism-triangle of familial relations.

From this starting point, an alienating and destructive model of *survival* cuts across the whole of social organization, with only minor differences.

In a group of women who aim to give a concrete, non-ideological basis to their political relationship, the arrival of new people triggers a discussion about whether the group should keep itself open or give itself a minimum of regulation.

But who are the “newcomers”? M. declares herself openly hostile to any new presence that feels like a “rival” of the group, since it risks diverting the attention and love of the group. The group is clearly configured like a *third person/group* to whom we imaginatively give (or are afraid to give) a face. Our history seems irremediably marked by triangular relationships.

“Could there ever be an ‘active fourth’?”, L. wonders.

For G., the group is welcoming, warm as a mother’s belly. Not always; sometimes she feels like a stranger and barely recognizes anyone. When she feels comfortable, she wants to talk. Her voice is penetrating, voracious, but also betrays the fear of being devoured.

For others, the group does not have the face of a particular woman; they want it to remain neutral, anonymous. The most deeply rooted fundamental structure of all interpersonal relationships is thus reproduced, but in a recognizable fashion: the duality/triangularity of the type of social relationship that the family imprints on each of us. Whatever the face of the group (the mother, the parental couple, etc.), the *original situation* is there, implicated in the fragile reasonableness of our discourse, in the poise of our bodies. Freeing speech means “betraying oneself,” by revealing impulses and images partly unknown to ourselves, but without going so far that we fail to sense in them the reappearance of something that we already know. It is not by chance that making explicit the request for affective guarantees in a group of women can arouse deep terrors: they fear

### 3

In a recent interview for *e-flux*, Lea Melandri elaborated on her relationship to other currents of the women’s movement in 1970s Italy. In her view, the projects she was involved with, such as the Free Women’s University and later the *Lapis* journal, presented “a challenge that was more radical [than Marxism] on questions of domination, exploitation, violence” as they showed that the “profound expropriation of women [was] not solely an appropriation of the female body as many other Marxist-feminists said at the time, but something deeper than this.” This refusal to submerge the framework of women’s liberation within either the metaphysics of the commodity or the historicist vocation of the class is by no means unusual for Melandri. Her interrogation of sexuality, love, and motherhood has long differentiated her from many Marxist feminists of her generation, for whom emphasis is largely placed on reproduction as work. This is true of the Wages for Housework campaign at the time, as well as many later preeminent critiques of primitive accumulation according to which the enclosure, devaluation, and expropriation of women’s reproductive labor served (and still serves) as the constituent matrix enabling the reproduction of capitalist labor power. Without abandoning the insurgent communist movement of her time, Melandri nevertheless accuses this analysis of being inadequate to the broader question of gender, since it fails to challenge the misogyny underwriting Marxian economic thought more broadly.

rejection because it is an intolerable repetition of our original abandonment, but also acquiescence because it recalls fusional fantasies, deadly embraces; as if lacking the reassuring *difference* that men possess, that difference that has made them historically powerful, women find themselves facing one another without any boundaries, mutually permeable.

Before the meeting is over, one of them proposes to meet for dinner, to meet the others *outside the group* so as to more easily distinguish the faces and voices of each of them from their own fantasies. The meeting takes place a few days later in a bar where the music is so loud it is nearly impossible to hear one another. The need to refer to an anonymous group/person resists the desire for freer relationships.

The 'active fourth' is born slowly and with difficulty. Meanwhile, survival.

A woman has decided to separate from her husband. She spent the evening alone; she fell asleep right away but woke up with a headache. She imagines falling seriously ill and being taken to the hospital. She wants her husband to know and be moved by her fate. Other fantasies: to strip herself of all desire and devote herself to religious meditation; or another: to become like her reserved, thrifty mother, sacrificing herself to family obligations.

We can escape from dependence, from waiting for someone or something to arrive from *outside* and guarantee our life, but what remains forbidden is to *play freely*.

The privilege of man consists also in allowing himself to "be hungry" and, at the same time, to "play." An alienated balance between survival and pleasure based on separation, but which allows one to escape the suffering of those who are forced, in the absence of pleasure, to "be hungry" and feel ashamed of it.

Breaking the circle of dependence means entering a *transitional* phase, where the risk is to eliminate not only the corpse of an alienated existence but also the pleasure and vitality frozen in a sort of forced childhood.

Survival must be rethought from its *point of origin*: an indication that applies not only to the analysis of the specific alienation of women, but to all those political organizations that stress autonomy as an essential moment in the creation of a real political collectivity.

The moment it takes up such themes (survival, the personal, etc.), the



political practice of feminist groups collides with an ideal Order and Unity that continually returns without much variation in the history of the Left. In this case, partiality presents itself unequivocally as *diversity* and *dissonance*, a threat of change and new unforeseen contradictions.

The fact that women have given themselves organizational forms that disregard all pre-existing models, and that appear spontaneous (in the sense of “non-organizations”) only to those who have hierarchical and bureaucratic structures in mind, shatters the illusion of those who still hope that the conflict between men and women will be pacified within the Great Single Class Unity.

When an order, whatever it may be, feels threatened, the reaction is the same: censor, fetter, integrate.

For women, even in adulthood, survival continues to present itself in its original form: the need to be nourished, the need to feed, the need to be loved, the need to give love. It does not appear, or else only rarely, as the elaboration of needs in the various forms typical of male development—affirmation, power, competition.

The activities of man—whether economic, cultural, artistic or political activity—also bear the sign of the original relationship of dependence on the woman-mother. But with the added difference that arises from the privilege of being able to place oneself in a position of power with respect to the mother.

Affective survival is guaranteed to man, even in the absence of maternal figures, by the awareness of playing the role of those who ‘can’ or who ‘possess.’ The world, such as it is organized, and whatever the economic, political and cultural structures that govern it, confirms for him daily his hereditary possession: the submission of women.

All cultures, G. Róheim argues, can resemble the history of an individual with his neuroses, his defenses, his anxieties. Civilization as an extension of childhood? But those who can “create culture” are those who, in one way or another, have satisfied the needs of childhood, those for whom separation from the mother has been possible, because they were able to repeat the original bond with other women. This does not mean autonomy and freedom with regard to primary relationships, but only the fact of setting foot on solid ground, on a ‘material’ sturdy enough to leave us free to “do something else.”

*Economic survival and affective survival* (to be loved—to be fed) are originally indistinct. Even eroticism is an integral part of the relationship by which life is transmitted. The separation that follows (production—reproduction—economic relations—family relations—work—sexuality) is already the sign of a deep alienation whose roots lie in a sexist and patriarchal structure even prior to its anchoring in the structure of capitalism.

The way it presents itself in the daily experience of women, survival appears as if it had neither time nor history. The point of arrival and that of departure remain at the place of origin, a fixity and immobility that provokes a paralysis or mutilation of “doing.” It is only at the cost of great effort that a woman succeeds in making the work of men her own, while maintaining a kind of reserve with respect to it. Her energy remains obstinately linked to the search for an ideal maternal love, which is weighed down by fear and feelings of guilt. Motherhood is the only “doing” possible: to transform herself from an abandoned daughter into a generous mother. The experience of maternal abandonment-betrayal leaves her in the position of having to seek definitive proof of her existence and of her value in men.

She thus finds herself dispossessed of life and of the meaning that her life could take, forced to bring her impulses within the limits imposed by man for the satisfaction of his own, to measure and mystify her desires so as not to repeat the experience of abandonment.

But the “non-existence” of women is also their strength. Those who can clearly see *what lies at the origin*, because they have never been separated from it, are the bearers of a truth that shakes up all the social and political analyses that were founded on the denial and mystification of even this very origin.

The attempt in many quarters today to carry a political practice developed by the women’s movement over to the platform of congresses, universities, or political parties is the conservative reaction of those who feel that their daily privileges and their credibility as intellectuals or politicians are being threatened.

But now what is new—that the critique of survival can become part of a political practice—has happened.

Nourishment and love, sexuality and doing, play and necessity can only be reborn together.