

## VII. POWER AND RESISTANCE

### **Asphyxiating Genital**

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While I would prefer that these practices did not exist and there was therefore no need to speak about them, they do exist and must be addressed. I believe that many people share a similar desire, preferring to be on the other side where no words are necessary because no man has murdered his wife or partner, no woman has experienced physical abuse from her partner, and there is no place for the question that I would like to consider: what kind of life leads a man to murder or abuse his female partner?

Notably, the twentieth century saw the clear beginning of an anthropological age that interpreted human life in a wide variety of societies, each of them moulding gender culturally, apprehending the physical and anatomical features of the species symbolically and using these as a tool to articulate the relations between individuals. Taking into account people's diversity, gender moulds exist not only in the man-woman duality but in other differences too. Even today, we can observe how they are being changed in the development of transgender identities. Of course, anthropology knows that biology is a cultural discourse of our own devising. It does not pertain to nature as such. Rather, gender moulds abound perpetually with a veritable explosion of strategies by which each individual constructs his or her difference by recurring to a mould that is itself, as we know, an invention.

All humans are born wounded and then are nurtured and prompted to subject themselves to the activation of gender-

moulding practices by those who have power over them. Power is a strategy, it is something that is possessed, it passes through the relations between individuals. Beyond establishing prohibitions, it governs, induces and channels behaviours in a particular direction and, as Michel Foucault would say, it takes shape in terms of rivalry, mechanisms of repression and ideology.

Anthropology always speaks of the body, of human bodies as composites inhabited by numerous crowded, transformed, recreated layers. How some bodies are being recreated today in many societies—among them, bodies in this country—is the subject of the present paper. In the social arena and in the heart of each household, there have been relations between men and women in which the apparent or actual submission of the woman to the man has produced the effect that good order was ensured in the matters of daily life. The appearance of man's subjugation of woman dispelled uncertainty; the appearance of woman with no will of her own obeyed the order of things. All other activities simply had to disappear.

What happens, let us be clear, is that powers are conjured up and various procedures coalesce in order to keep women from the task of rethinking how collective life should be. At some point, we were told that the truth of the world was not in the world, but rather in the world as the book tells it, the myth of a monotheism such as that in the Talmud or the Bible or the Koran. These are books that have recreated the dualism of our lives. Each speaks of those who live as men and those who live as women.

Those who wrote about the Christian god, which has had such a powerful impact on daily life in Europe, the Americas, and the US in particular, liked to cast women in a marginal space right from the outset as they gave their accounts of events in Garden of Eden. There Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge: the apple. Eve wanted to increase her knowledge so she ate of the fruit, for which she was punished with painful childbirth, a punishment that still survives. Today, women in the Christian religious order continue to be marginalised. It is a cosmology in which the individual is not the principle of value, which instead resides in the gender mould, and living as a Christian woman has meant being a mother, a spouse, nearly stripped of libido, with her intellect muzzled.

Between 2005-2008 I conducted anthropological field research on men prosecuted in court as perpetrators of violence against their female partners. I attended more than four hundred trials. When any of the men was sentenced for abuse, I asked to speak with him. I reflected on and interpreted what more than thirty convicted men told me. Before I spoke with each of them, I first familiarised myself with the accounts of what had happened based on their claims and those of their female partner at the trial; I gathered information from encounters struck up with the litigants in the courthouse corridors and from the arguments made by the lawyers and prosecutors. I had access to medical reports from the women's admission into hospital and to police reports. I knew whether there had been complaints from neighbours. The shortest interview lasted five hours and most of the men asked to meet again to continue talking, give me more information or rather clear up the "real" causes of the incidents.

Each of the men informed me of the state of his partner's mental health, passing judgment as follows: "The thing is, my wife, she's the one who is crazy". None mentioned living under the compulsion of emotions over which he had no command; nor did any of the men accept the idea that he had a complex relationship that might have led to the emotional problems that the women typically suffered. As a whole, each and every one of them stated that nothing had happened, "nothing at all", between him and the woman, and that if he was in that legal predicament it was because of her accusations, but in reality nothing had happened.

One man, who had broken a glass table during a fight with his partner and then picked up a shard of glass and scratched her face and arms with it, said, "Truthfully, nothing at all happened between us". Another individual sentenced for fighting with his partner, who had fallen against the bath and needed emergency medical help to treat an enormous gash, said: "Nothing happened, the usual thing during a fight. If I had wanted to kill her, I would have done it. I'm very strong and she's quite tiny". They all contended: "It was a normal fight, nothing out of the ordinary, like the ones everybody has. Couples have always had fights".

The refusal to recognise something is part of the will to domination.

We act, that is, we are free to the extent that we are the cause of the things that happen to us; and we suffer, we are slaves, to the extent that the causes of what happens to us lie outside ourselves. This is how Baruch Spinoza put it. The individual who decided one day to live with a woman is not obligated to remain in that room; the context in which he made his original choice has undoubtedly changed and he no longer wishes to remain in the spot that he had once deemed perfect. There is no cause for reproach in this; today the bond that was safeguarded by law can be undone in what we call divorce. But we must not shut our eyes. This is not where the man who murders or commits violence against his female partner resides.

When we analyse living in partnership, what we find are reciprocal relations and constant differences between individuals, and it is in these repeated situations when practices of abuse by men against their female partner occur. We are talking about individuals who engage in domination, outraged at their female partner without being able to reflect on what it is that moves them. Individuals who live immersed in a network of power relations that they construct with others like themselves. Individuals allied with other men who between them sanction what it means to be a man, perhaps sharing hidden emotions, inherited turmoil, political ideology or possibly only religious ideas, or perhaps they forge their complicity only by means of a football team with which they identify. Typically, they all share one idea: they see their female partner as a thing, one that belongs to them; she represents them and must carry out the activities and practices that they deem appropriate—at least in public.

An individual immersed in such a life is considered a real man according to the criterion of his allies, dependent on their ratification of this fact day after day. It is not easy for him to free himself of dictates agreed with his fellow men, nor is it easy for him to disobey them. He is in subjugation, disciplined, living in bondage to comrades he has embraced. If he has problems with his allies, if he feels that they do not hold him in the esteem that he believes he deserves, if he thinks they look down on him or do not respect him or fail to acknowledge him or they demean him, he feels that his manhood has been belittled. A process of rejection has begun and he strives to overcome it by turning on his subordinate female partner. Abuse that seeks to break her resistance, nullifying all of

her power, obliging her to be submissive, trampling on her, will reclaim the manhood that his fellow man have put into question.

In his view, his female partner must live in submission. She must be subordinate to him. She is not someone with whom to have a relationship of equals. As a result, he will not tell her of the distress he is suffering in his relations with his allies. He seeks to reclaim his manhood by exerting control over her, making her feel terror, bullying her with mathematical arbitrariness. In my field study, more than one man gave an account equivalent to what one of them told me: "It really bothered me that my friends were telling me to keep an eye on my wife and her boss. They told me: watch out, because we already know what's going on, that guy gets off with all the women. They said things like that and I felt really awful. That's why I told her she couldn't work". The outcome in such a context, in this case, was not benign for the woman.

This is how their gender-based violence worked, using crippled logic. Living in their difference while still repeating an obsolete gender mould, they played it out by activating their submission to allies. They are individuals who imprisoned their difference in a web of masculine power relations in which they share ideas on life with those who imprison them and who keep them interdependent, one to the other.

A human being a priori is potential, one changes into what one is, what one has become, which is the sum total of what one has lived over a time, with parents, in a family, in a milieu, in one's schooling, the readings that one has done, the individuals who have brought opportunities into one's existence, the encounters that have made one who one is. Accepting this trajectory, one can say that "this is what I have made myself", this is my identity. However, if what one is instead corresponds to the control of a collection of associated men, to an agreement, to other people's laws, this eclipses the possibility of saying: this is what I have made myself. One becomes committed to saying: I am what my allies and I agree is good and bad, I depend on their approval to feel like a real man.

To gauge the power structures that have given meaning to the gender mould in Spain, I offer a brief account of a saga of four women and a man that begins in the nineteenth century and concludes in the twenty-first century. The story opens in 1860 in Gaucín, a

village in the province of Málaga, which was an important centre for travellers at the time, particularly the English. They passed through Gaucín after their arrival by ship in Gibraltar, stopping in the village to obtain the necessary provisions and then continuing their journey overland.

The story involves a woman living Gaucín who had no parents, was 38 years old and had become pregnant though she was unmarried. After she gave birth to a daughter, she decided to flee. We are talking about a village in the highest part of that immense mountainous region, surrounded at the time by bandits. A woman with child could not have escaped from the place without the assistance of a man and a horse. From there, she travelled to the city of Valencia.

In Valencia the girl born in Gaucín went to work on the stage at a young age, performing in variety shows. Later she became pregnant as an unmarried woman, like her mother, and had a daughter who was similarly not recognised legally by the father. In her youth, this girl also worked in the variety shows. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the three women decided to move to Barcelona for work. The youngest, who was 16 years of age when they arrived, met a man of the Catalan haute bourgeoisie and, though unmarried, had two children with him: first a girl and then a boy. Her lover did not recognise them legally as his children and soon abandoned them to marry a woman of his own social class.

With this story, my aim is to highlight only two matters of substance. The first concerns what was found in the bedside table next to the bed of the youngest woman after her death: the drawer had a box containing the baptismal certificates of all three generations of women and their children, all scrupulously folded and safeguarded. The reason for this is that, until the end of the twentieth century or beginning of this century, a woman could not enter a child officially in the civil registry; only the man could do so. These women with offspring that had not been recognised by a man could only demonstrate the family ties that bound their children to them by means of the baptismal certificates issued to them by the Catholic Church. At the same time, this situation meant that the women had to keep the same surnames over four generations, the surnames that the original woman from Gaucín had acquired in the early nineteenth century from her father and mother.

The second element in the story concerns the first son/man in this saga of women, the boy who was the child of the third woman when they were living in Barcelona. It concerns what he said, covered up and ultimately did.

From a very young age, this son without a father who recognised him became a member of a right-wing political party. When asked as an elderly man why he had made this choice, he said: "What I wanted was for my father to accept me". Remember that the father was a man of the Catalan haute bourgeoisie and so presumably of a right-wing political ideology. "I wanted to stand out as a politician, I wanted my father to be proud of me. My aim was to appear in the newspapers so that he would admire me."

After the civil war in Spain (1939), this man married and he would say again and again to his children: "My family begins with me", we are a "tribe" (he had three sons and then two daughters). These were the two phrases that announced the effects on him of the practices of the gender mould of his times. He said that his family began with him because his surnames did not belong to the man to whom he owed his existence; he was not recognised by the man as a son, but instead abandoned by him. He came up with the idea that he was the first of a "tribe" because as a man he could then enlist his children in a group; he could found a family. Based on his own experience, he knew that women bore the children, but that only a man had the authority to link them to society, to enrol them in the civil registry. However trivial words may seem, the objectives that we express through them reveal very quickly their link to desire and power.

This individual never revealed his origins to his children. He altered the civil registry as best he could thanks to the political power that he acquired. He hid all information of his background from his political allies, from everyone. He managed to construct a place in society for himself, though he had once belonged to the marginal. His words are a matter of biopower, as Michel Foucault would argue. The phrase "my family begins with me" was activated by an individual, living as a man, using the particular weight of his power to flee a marginalised life. With his own force, he activated what, for more than a century and over three generations of women, his female forebears had no chance to activate.

To conclude, there is one last thing that I want to point out: what activates the man to murder his female partner and what leads him subsequently to commit suicide.

This is an extravagant scenario: he murders his partner judging that she means nothing socially without him. He lives in the belief that being able to inscribe the meaning of respectable woman on his partner is a possibility that belongs only to him, but this is a social terrain that he can no longer grant her when he thinks that this allies have denigrated them, marginalised him, banished him. In this circumstance, he experiences, he interprets, that he is empty of manhood because he has been abandoned by his fellow men. This is a scenario in which he does not commit suicide without killing first the woman who belongs to him. When he conceives that his partner, even when he continues to abuse her, is no longer valid for him to reclaim his manhood, he murders her. The story is not hers. It is not her place to make known his misfortunes. He imposes silence on her by taking her life. To his way of understanding, the social machine that has rejected him only belongs to the man, and his female partner is strictly his "business".

The scenarios that give shape to what we call history are, of course, made up of specific relations established in daily life by these individuals and every other individual in society. None of us is guilty of murders or suicides like these, but we do have a responsibility to the victims.