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# ***MULIER OECONOMICA. ON BIOPOLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S BODIES***

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## **Abstract**

The article analyses the interplay between biopolitics and reproduction. The text examines Angela Putino's thought to show how reproduction, through the sexuality device and medical power/knowledge, becomes the site of application of biopolitical techniques. At the same time, however, Putino shows some risks of complicity in feminism that can reproduce a biological dimension in politics without being able to withstand biopower.

To find trails of resistance, then, the text refers to the work of Donna Haraway, that criticise the distinction between nature and culture, and to those of Melinda Cooper and Catherine Walby, who analyse the clinical labor in the framework of biocapitalism.

## **Keywords**

Biopolitics, reproduction, feminism, Putino, clinical labor.

## **Resumen**

Este artículo analiza la interacción entre biopolítica y reproducción. El texto examina el pensamiento de Angela Putino para mostrar cómo la reproducción, a través del dispositivo sexual y el conocimiento/poder médico, se ha convertido en un escenario de aplicación de técnicas biopolíticas. Sin embargo, de manera simultánea, Putino expone algunos de los riesgos de complicidad en el feminismo que pueden reproducir una dimensión biológica en las políticas, sin lograr resistir el biopoder. Para encontrar los rastros de esta resistencia, el texto hace referencia al trabajo de Donna Haraway, que critica la distinción entre naturaleza y cultura, y al trabajo de Melinda Cooper y Catherine Walby, quienes analizan el trabajo clínico en el marco del biocapitalismo.

## **Palabras clave**

Biopolítica, reproducción, feminismo, Putino, trabajo clínico.

## Biopolitics of reproduction

The maternity's discovery path, developed in the last centuries, runs in parallel with what Michel Foucault describes as the emergence of the biopolitics<sup>1</sup> and signs violently its characters. One of the fundamental phenomena of the 19th century consists in the undertaking of the life by the power, with a shift of paradigm from the other forms of sovereignty. If the sovereign power has always been characterized by the power of giving death, the biopolitical power, instead, assumes the assignment of nurture and let develop the life, transforming the power of death into the possibility of letting die (or better, in the power of not-let-reach-to-life). Without any pretension of facing all the implications contained in the notion of biopolitics, I will try to follow some suggestions proposed by Angela Putino in order to prove the hold of this kind of power on the moment of reproduction.

The relationship between populations and individual bodies is the starting point of Angela Putino's<sup>2</sup> reflection on biopolitics –biopolitics that has the human species as subject, that takes into management the life and the biological processes, that tries to organize these around their economical function. Putino notices how women bodies become “the point of application of techniques that, suspending sexuality and those desires connected to it, use the feminine sex in generation classes, as a supplier of matter, not only from a biological point of view but also from a juridical one”.<sup>3</sup> One of the main characteristic of biopolitics consists in overlapping biology and law, in anchoring norms and normalization on an apparently incontrovertible biologic basis. The field in which this overlapping finds its clear accomplishment is the one of sexuality that, above all, is assimilated to a reproductive phenomenon and according to this interpreted. It is in this “connection between sexuality-procreation that behaviours considered effects of a sexual instinct disorder become factors of illness for the future generation and, equally, become organic malformations and pathologies that can't do nothing but emerge in

1. To better understand the reflections made by Foucault can be read: M. Foucault, *La volontà de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, in particular pp. 119-142; Id., *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France. 1977-1978*, Seuil-Gallimard, Paris, 2004 and *Naissance de la biopolitique*, Seuil-Gallimard, Paris, 2004.

2. Angela Putino (1946-2007), feminist and philosopher, studied Michel Foucault and Simone Weil for long time, combining theories and practices in an active militancy in the women's movement. In order to deepen her thought we suggest: A. Putino, *Trompe-l'oeil. Il mito di Narciso in Hermann Hesse*, Napoli, ESI, 1977; Ead., “Donna guerriera”, in *DWF*, 7, 1988; Ead., *Simone Weil e la Passione di Dio. Il ritmo divino nell'uomo*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna, 1997; Ead., *Amiche mie isteriche*, Cronopio, Napoli, 1998; Ead., Simone Weil. *Un'intima estraneità*, Città Aperta, Troina, 2006; Ead. *I corpi di mezzo. Biopolitica, differenza tra i sessi e governo della specie*, ombre corte, Verona, 2011; e AA. VV., *Per Angela. A proposito di Angela Putino. “Simone Weil. Un'intima estraneità”*, Università degli Studi di Salerno, Fisciano, 2008; S. Tarantino, G. Borrello (eds.), *Esercizi di composizione per Angela Putino. Filosofia, differenza sessuale e politica*, Liguori, Napoli, 2010.

3. A. Putino, *I corpi di mezzo*, p. 82.

deviant behaviours”<sup>4</sup> that will be judged not only on a juridical and moral ground, but also condemned from a biological point of view as something dangerous for the future and present society.

Putino shows, through the twist between medical-power-knowledge, how “the family shifts from being an alliance device –on which were based the juridical codes, expressed with the parenting system forms and those of goods transmission– to a device of sexuality, that assigns it a role of biological control, able to enhance it as matrix of the adult individual’s future”<sup>5</sup> Putino rereads –understanding the family as a device of sexuality– the heterosexual paradigm as a consequence of the attention put on the reproduction of the species: “in this way, the sin of the flesh does not wait for the godly penance but [...] deals directly with the health of its progeny”<sup>6</sup> The heterosexual couple, in this sense, is necessary to the family because it shows its vertical disposition, and shows that what is dominant is not the horizontal relationship between spouses but the vertical one between parents-sons/daughters. The construction of power devices, so, starts from the bottom, from every single family who reproduces the norm educating every single child.

Biopolitics assumes, evidently, a double role: taking care of the processes that construct a population and a species, and, at the same time, the role of taking a look on every single living creature, in a continuous return from a universal to a particular level and vice versa. Sexuality assumes a privileged position because it represents the place of the connection between scientific knowledge and personal identity, between technology and psyche. According to what we have already seen, maternity is the privileged moment of the biopolitical sexuality not only because it represents the moment of creation of a new individual or because it guarantees the continuation of the species, but because it guarantees also a new subjectivation that actualizes itself through the transformation of the woman in mother. This transformation is the moment of the production of new forms of enslavement, of new forms and new subjects embodied in the woman, biologically designed for being mother.

As the family becomes the central place of the sexuality device, the woman becomes its privileged subject: “in the middle of these new controls is the family and with it, there is the woman, as mother, as point of application of new identified roles, jobs and cares”<sup>7</sup> through the enhancement of the care as *conduct*. The woman-mother, however, maintains

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4. Ibid., p. 17.

5. Ibid., p. 87.

6. Ibid., p. 93.

7. A. Putino, *Amiche mie isteriche*, p. 55.

a strong ambiguity: “from one side she is celebrated in care and education, but from the other side she is suspected of coinciding tout court with sexuality and, for that, of concealing immoral and untrustworthy aspects”.<sup>8</sup> This ambiguity pushes the mothers in promoting this image of care, organization, efficiency, and responsibility, as they wanted to make the others forget their shady part, connected with sexuality. Biopolitics, through family, has divided women between “the hysterical –as intensification of the sexuality– and the mother –as cure of the relationship and government of the activities connected to life”;<sup>9</sup> linking this division to the same device of sexuality that refers to biology.

This centrality of the biological and the centrality of its imperatives let emerge –in all its terrible consequences– the disposal of inclusion and exclusion that subtends politics: the biological advance becomes the criterion for excluding who does not correspond to the norms, hiding this choice under the inevitability of nature and under its merciless laws; Angela Putino unveils, indeed, how this centrality pushes “individuals to submit to an almost anthropological fascination for the authenticity”.<sup>10</sup> The discourse on maternity is constantly permeated by this fascination: from one side the medical-knowledge-power presents itself as direct delegate of the biology, but from the other, who tries to take distance from it, assumes it in the name of a natural authenticity, flattening women and their bodies among exams, measurement on one hand, and instincts and spontaneous feelings on the other, both fruit of the same biopolitical paradigm that unite bodies and minds. In order to satisfy a reasonable question, medicine becomes fundamental, a research of happiness and a healing from desires that becomes part of this biological destiny –in which bodies too are not the emergence of an unexpected dimension, but something yet happened, inserted in a scheme of functions and projects.

The creation of biological communities is, according to Angela Putino, one of the feminism’s risks but also “of those common feminine believes related to the affirmation of an irreducible woman identity”<sup>11</sup> (and one could also add: of mothers.). This articulation, this description of a feminine authenticity reproduces and reinforces the biopolitical power, attending the subjects’ construction that finds in biology their realization. Putino describes as hysterical<sup>12</sup> feminism, that feminism which constantly returns to the

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8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. A. Putino, *I corpi di mezzo*, p. 88.

11. Ibid., p. 88.

12. In particular, Putino reflects on the ideas of the mother’s symbolic orders, and on this theme we suggest at least three texts directly or indirectly quoted by her: L. Muraro, *L’ordine simbolico della madre*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1991, but also Diotima, *Mettere al mondo il mondo*, La Tartaruga, Milano, 1990; W. Tommasi, “Il lavoro del servo”, in Diotima, *Oltre l’uguaglianza*, Liguori, Napoli, 1995, pp. 59-84.

maternal relationship and underlines that “hysteria moves between two grooves”: from one side “projects a mother tongue retracing the structures of proximity” and from the other side “lies, roughly, creating in the world knowledges and another and separated self”.<sup>13</sup> This two grooves, however, are continuously braided in a hysterical position that “tries to reinforce the nostalgia of the maternal place together with all that forms of knowledge that allow a more inflected participation”.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the hysterical constantly revisits, under the light of the symbiotic maternal bond, knowledges because believes these will give her strength and vigor, in a mother-daughter relationship that is “an imaginary biological duty”<sup>15</sup> and that refers to vicinity and origins.

In this biological enticement, Putino sees “an excessive connivance with the governing power of the being [...] that orbits around an imaginary structure”,<sup>16</sup> a compatibility with the needs of biopolitics that becomes “a castling into an indissoluble bond” –at the end, biological– that preserve from the fear<sup>17</sup> of not being able to find strong similarities among women. Indeed, Putino considers that the maternal order has had too frequent exchanges with the exercise of governing, exchanges that are born from the “pressure by knowledge-powers” that exploits “a new ideal form of maternity, permeable to care and control of the living”,<sup>18</sup> and that is constantly reproduced by those women who crease in identifying it as a dimension of power. The relationships’ management among women in a maternal frame creates a community that has its own origins in the biology and that repeats the paradigm of inclusion/exclusion that is subject to biopolitics: “the hysterical [...] cannot unleash herself from the vicinity, from the fear of the loss [...] in so far as she is not able to hypothesize a feminine otherness”,<sup>19</sup> not coinciding with the mother who reproduces the form. The otherness, in the hysterical discourse, is substituted by “an attachment and, in this way, every woman action resounds in another one”,<sup>20</sup> by a relationship with the mother who constantly reproduces the caring attitude and the happiness –that recalls the characteristics of the pastoral power described by Foucault.<sup>21</sup>

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13. A. Putino, *Amiche mie isteriche*, p. 46.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

21. Putino affirms “the pole with whom the feminism is entered in competition is not the sovereign but the pope. What we are facing with is not the symbolic enunciation or its chain but the media procedures of identification and of imaginary vicinity carried on by a politics of ‘haste’”. *Ibid.* 50.

## Economy of women's bodies

The thought of Angela Putino puts on light how the bond between biology and power, for better saying it, between biology and the processes of subjectivation, have run over women reflections remaining, however, an invisible dimension, a difficult power to contrast and able to subsume also forms of counter-conduct and resistance. Even though second wave feminism has produced numerous reflections around the theme of the body, it has also removed the more properly biological dimension because of the fear of falling into essentialist forms, but ending anyway in making living processes invisible and more exposed to the hold by the power. Brunella Casalini underlines yet that “in recent years, the reflection of numerous authoresses<sup>22</sup> has, in various ways, collocate again biology and the material dimension of the body as the focus of the attention. This is happened starting from the certainty that, before the offensive leaded by neuroscience and genomics, and by their proposal –in more or less hidden forms– of a biological conception of race and sex, is always more urgent, in the current phase of biocapitalism and biocolonialism, working in order to imagine a new alliance among natural, social science and feminism.”<sup>23</sup> The investment of the science, and more those made by technology, on women bodies makes necessary investigate the relationships between nature and culture and interrogates ourselves on the power's reproductive devices.

Genes, foetuses, chromosomes, and cells are in the middle of a new form of reductionism that decomposes bodies into small pieces that can be analysed separately and that can be constantly manipulated. Against this form of reproduction is so proposed a new materialism<sup>24</sup> able to face itself with the biology but without falling into the trap of the bodies' exploitation. The twine between liberal governmentality and the *homo oeconomicus* by one side and the biological sciences on the other, seem to have produced a different conception of the body, not only considering it as a public space, exposed to power, but also as always available goods. According to a famous expression used by

22. I would like to thank Laura Fontanella for the term *authoress* that allows me to enhance the embodied subjectivity of the women I quote.

23. B. Casalini, “Il ritorno della biologia nelle teorie femministe contemporanee”, in O. Giolo, L. Re (eds.), *La soggettività politica delle donne. Proposte per un lessico critico*, Aracne, Roma, 2014.

24. For a general view of these new materialisms: cfr. S. Alaimo, S. Hekman (eds.), *Material Feminisms*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis, 2008; D. Coole, S. Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham-London, 2010. For a first discussion on new materialism: cfr. S. Amhed, “Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions. Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism’”, in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, XV, 1, Sage Publications, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore, 2008, pp. 23-39. According to Amhed, these ‘new’ materialisms do not present a true story inside the feminist thought because authoresses like Donna Haraway, Lynda Birke and Evelyn Fox Keller have always worked with the aim of conciliate biology and feminism.



Sarah Franklin,<sup>25</sup> in this scenario, is the life itself that is exploited throughout biotechnologies –thank the rhetoric of their objectivity.

Donna Haraway criticizes this presumed objectivity, affirming that “biology is restlessly historical, all the way down. There is no border where evolution ends and history begins, where genes stop and environment takes up, where culture rules and nature submits, or vice versa. Instead there are turtles all the way down”<sup>26</sup> She proposes so a neologism that could represent this slot of biology and cultural processes: she introduces the idea of naturculture that represents exactly the entangled bond between nature and culture. As Liana Borghi underlines in her introduction to Haraway’s *Modest Witness* “science takes the shapes throughout syntactic semantic and paradigmatic developments, inner culture, mobilizing a narrative with pretension of objectivity as opposed to other tendencies, instead, recognize the partiality and the wide raging responsibility of the technoscience actors”<sup>27</sup>, and Haraway situates herself in this field, recognizing the partiality and the historicity of the tools and of the scientific paradigms.

Following the will of unveiling the economic dimension of the reproductive technologies, there are the works of Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby.<sup>28</sup> The two authoresses, in fact, ask: how can bodies be embodied in the labor changing that we are seeing? Cooper and Waldby, starting from the notion of biocapital and bioeconomy, interrogate themselves on the material and power relationship produced by these paradigms and by biomedical technologies. They introduce, indeed, the term *clinical labor* in order to indicate all these forms of productivity –usually included under the shape of donation and gratuitousness with the compensation and not through salary but re-fund– not considering all the circumstances in which patients donate tissues or participate in clinical studies, but suggesting that these services should be meant as ‘labor’ when the subtended activity is included in the process of enhancement of a determined field of bioeconomy. Every change that puts on game the bodies becomes labor and it depends on a classic motivation: the research of purely economic compensation.

Analysing the historical formation of the biolabor, Cooper and Waldby focus themselves not only on the technological and scientific changes but on the economic trans-

25. Cfr. S. Franklin, “Global Nature and Genetic Imaginary”, in S. Franklin, C. Lury, J. Stacey (eds.), *Global Nature, Global Culture*, Sage, London, 2000.

26. D. Haraway, *Introduction. A Kinship of Feminist Figurations*, in EAD, *The Haraway Reader*, Routledge, London-New York, 2003, p. 2.

27. L. Borghi, “Introduction”, in D. Haraway, *Testimone\_modesta@FemaleMan©\_incontra\_Oncotopo™*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2000, pp. 18-19.

28. Cfr. M. Cooper, *Life As Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2008, and M. Cooper, C. Waldby, *Clinical Labor: Tissue Donors and Research Subjects in the Global Bioeconomy*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014.

formation that has affected the social and political ones. In particular, they study the story of the labor during the 20th century with the purpose of showing how the clinical labor has always been one of the more evident forms of the process of externalization and privatization of every labor. The proposal of the two authoresses consists in thinking workers of the knowledge and bioworkers as people submitted to the same paradigm, the one of human capital and of *homo oeconomicus*, able to contaminate each other: analysing the clinical labor of the knowledge allows to illuminate the knots of the knowledge and those of the power. These two settings are strictly connected; even if it is starting from the bodies, the property is made descend from the intellectual labor of the scientist who understands the productive processes and, in this way, the corporal activity of the involved human beings appear as *res nullius*. A strong reference is to Marx and to his conception of the salaried labor that puts under the light how the worker sells the energy existing in his\her living body. During the twentieth century we assist to a fragmentation of the living body thanks to the transfer of the laborative process to a molecular level: the manpower category, in this way, becomes a space to rethink to alienation and to the reduction of the involved objects in these processes.

The attention to the bodies, at the end, allows putting under light the differences not only connected with the class but also those related to gender.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the imaginaries that act on men and women are different: if the semen donors are attracted mostly by the possibility of making free medical tests –like a form of workfare that substitutes the welfare in many clinical works on women too– on women donors of oocytes or on surrogate mother, instead, act with strength an imaginary connected to altruism, to selflessness, to the metaphor of the gift. Technology, in this sense, does not scratch the stereotypes that represent women as naturally inclined to care. Materially too, these two processes –of donation– are regulated conversely: men sign a contract with a sperm bank while women –oocytes donors, surrogates mother– negotiate directly with the couple or with the interested person like it could reconstruct a personal relationship able to reinforce the idea of altruism and care, but, at the same time, exposing these donors to disadvantageous contractual conditions.

In this sense we assist to the birth of a figure that we can call *mulier oeconomica*, that unveils how the nexus between biopolitics and science creates forms of subjectivation

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29.The authoresses emphasize also the racial dimension and underline how the labor of reproduction markets are differentiated themselves also depending on the skin colour: East Europe becomes, in this way, the place in which produce oocytes, the best ones according to their whiteness while India developed, above all, a market for the surrogate maternity. The reproduction of the whiteness, indeed, is one of the central elements that regulates the fertility market, establishing the value of the oocytes, of the sperm also on a racial base.

that invest women and, in particular, their bodies for creating subjects who make of their cells economic tools but that, at the same time, is not interested in demolishing the patriarchal structures of the society. For this reason, the reflections of Putino can be useful in order to observe with other eyes the twines among medical science, biology, power and reproduction nourishing the hope that these could give us the devices for better seeing the links that stretch this net and for better imagining spaces of resistance and freedom.