
Libreria delle Donne di Milano

The Women's Bookshop opened in Milan in 1975, after about a year spent in planning, finding the necessary money, locating a site, solving the legal questions, etc. It was founded by a group of women active in the feminist movement in Milan, either in the Demau group, or in the Collettivo di Via di Cherubini, or later in the 'practice of the unconscious' and in the Via Col di Lana groups (see chapters 1, pp. 33-5 and 4, pp. 82-108). The Libreria is on the one hand - obviously - a bookshop, that is a 'public' space and an enterprise subject to economic laws; on the other hand, as a 'women's' bookshop, it inevitably has a political dimension, as do all the other women's bookshops in other Italian cities (Rome, Florence, Bologna, Cagliari). Any enterprise by and for women is a 'deviation of female energy' away from socially accepted channels for the purpose of gender-marked activities.

But in the case of Milan, this political dimension is particularly important; in fact, the women of the Libreria have been and are a significant point of reference for any political and theoretical debate in the feminist movement. Their writings have been very influential in shaping this debate, and the issues of their irregular publication, *Sottosopra*, have always aroused great interest and provoked discussion. They have also edited two *Cataloghi*, and later a few issues of a journal, *Via Dogana*, devoted to a commentary about books by women, often grouped around a theme, such as the search for a symbolic mother or women's attitude towards war. Their work bears the mark of their interest in French feminist theory, especially in the ideas of *Psychanalyse et Politique*, and later, more cogently, in the thought of Irigaray, with whom they entertain a relationship of reciprocal esteem and of collaboration.

In 1983, 'More women than men' (included here) set going a lively discussion on the nature of women's social difficulties. They proposed 'entrustment' as a means of overcoming this paralysing situation; that is, sexualizing social relations by always choosing another woman as one's point of reference with whom to establish a privileged relationship even in the work place, and accepting, even supporting another woman's social superiority and wish for affirmation in view of a symbolic (and eventually a practical) gain for oneself and for other women. A proposal which, either enthusiastically endorsed, or rejected as an authoritarian demand for hierarchies and a betrayal of sisterhood, has anyway become central to later discussion; for example, those about the relationships between/among women, or about the possibility of gendered representation in the institutions (see chapter 15, pp. 339-67).

Included here are two more pieces which further develop the ideas of 'More women than men': 'Bonding and freedom', by Luisa Muraro, a leading figure of Italian feminism, who is also a member of the Diotima group (see chapter 9, pp. 181-5) and 'Entrustment enters the palace', by a group of women lawyers and magistrates - among them Lia Cigarini, whose writing about the issue of representation is also included in this collection. (Other pieces by women of the Libreria, either collectively or individually signed, can be found in the chapters on abortion, on sexual violence and on Chernobyl.)

In 1987 the Libreria authored *Non credere di avere dei diritti* ('Don't think you have any rights', a quotation from Simone Weil), a highly subjective, idiosyncratic and therefore fascinating reconstruction of the history of the group and of Italian feminism. Parts of Ida Dominijanni's review, highlighting the main issues of the book, and discussing them in relation to events and themes central to the movement in Italy, are also included here.

MORE WOMEN THAN MEN LIBRERIA DELLE DONNE DI
MILANO, 1983

A group of women, involved together in political and emotional relationships, record here what they have gained from the last few years of movement and struggle, and, on that basis, assess what they still lack.

We have fought, effectively, against the social poverty of women's condition. We have discovered the originality which goes with the fact of being women. Through the political practice of relations between

women, by spending time with other women, by loving other women, we have come to value ourselves. But at the moment we have no way of translating the experience, the knowledge and the value of being women into social reality. In social relations, outside our groups, we feel uncomfortable, as if in a world where the best part of ourselves is unknown and counts for nothing. This is something which weighs more heavily on us now than it did a few years ago, when we were uncertain about what our own desires, our own wants, could be.

We have experienced this sense of inadequacy even in our groups, when we have been with other women: perhaps this is because the sense of discomfort and blockage of which we are conscious in the social world is associated with every desire and every wish to be active. Our strongest and deepest desires risk becoming the wellsprings of paralysing fantasies so as not to remain unexpressed. But in a women's group there is at least the chance to question this experience and, even more important, to estimate its proper weight, so that we lose nothing of what any of us can become conscious of and desire. We enter social relationships for various reasons - some of us to earn a living, some to satisfy their own ambitions, some simply because it can't be avoided - and in these social relationships our unease has remained completely unspoken. *There*, the fact of being a woman has proved meaningless, an embarrassing peculiarity which we have to justify or which we forget and want others to forget. To a greater or lesser extent this uses up a part of our intelligence and diminishes our enjoyment. And it reacts back on the project of women's struggle as well, impoverishing it. We lack any positive experience of self-affirmation in social life, and this is, by reflex, missing in our groups. Instead we act like beginners and copycats.

It is no longer a matter of discrimination

We want to start from our present condition and talk and ask questions about our failure to achieve in social life. This failure reverberates in a diffuse sense of discomfort, a feeling of inadequacy, of mediocrity. As failure it needn't be anything special: on the contrary, in general it doesn't present itself as extraordinary failure but more as inhibition, as a block on capacity, a source of anxiety and withdrawal.

In the face of this experience it is an advance to acknowledge openly that we try hard but that our results are generally mediocre and that for the most part we are unequal to the performance demanded in

social transactions. We focus on the feeling of being blocked because it reveals more intensely than does our vague sense of discomfort that we want to do something, we want to achieve, and that perhaps something inside ourselves stops us, says 'no'.

We are not dealing with an external obstacle. To think of ourselves and present ourselves as victims of discrimination against women by now no longer signifies what is essential about our condition. It runs the risk of being a cover. We know that discrimination exists and can return, especially when material conditions are hard. But this is an easily recognized difficulty which we know how to fight and which has no power to inferiorize a woman or make her feel inadequate. On the other hand, a sense of inadequacy contributes not a little to reinforcing the residues or the return of discrimination.

This sense of inadequacy must therefore be brought into the open and questioned on its own account as a more profound stumbling block than any which derives from an unjust social order. We are therefore discussing the failure of our social performance in terms which do not attribute it to discrimination. We are relating our sense of blockage to what we want for ourselves, not to what others want of us against our own interests. To discuss this just in terms of discrimination is to remain silent about something which is a part of our experience – which is that our difficulty does not only come (does not essentially come) from external obstacles, but from our own wish for social recognition which clashes with its own excess. It is enormous, abnormal, not because it is itself greater than it should be, but simply because it finds no means of satisfaction.

The wish to win through

There is within us a wish to live in the grand manner, to have a secure familiarity with things, to find every now and then the gestures, the words, the behaviour, which correspond to our own feelings and are appropriate to the external situation, to follow our thoughts, our desires, our projects, through to their end. We call this 'the wish to win through'. We wish to be victorious over everything which makes us insecure, unstable, dependent, imitative. And yet at the same time we do not want to betray anything of what we are, not even that part of ourselves which at the moment speaks only hesitantly.

To begin with we have to overcome our fear of our own wish to win. When this wish presents itself it does so as something abnormal, almost without an object and without any relation to our own

resources. At the moment of a 'block' we recognize our wish as hesitant but insuppressible.

We can speak of our 'block' and attempt to understand what we mean by it, to follow it through, because in these years of struggle we have shifted the emphasis of our work on to our own desires. The women's movement has revived in us the sense of fearlessness we had in childhood and thought we had lost. We find in this a point of reference for becoming what we are and wanting what we want.

We have inside us a wish to win which paralyses us rather than carrying us forward because, separately from any form of discrimination, the possibilities offered by this society do not correspond to it. Because of this clash society will perhaps have to change.

Estrangement

When we place the sense of blockage we experience in our attempts at social existence alongside our persistent wish to win, a resistance or an estrangement is revealed; something within resists an entry into social games, doesn't want to be there, isn't there.

What can it be, this something which says 'no', this stumbling block? It can't be named, because it hasn't a name. Our estrangement consists precisely in this, that something inside has no means of expression or self-realization but still exists, making its presence felt the more the wish to win presses its claims. Its way of making itself heard is as a mute presence which hinders us, provokes paralyzing fantasies, robs us of words. What we are in the social lives we lead – mothers, housewives, professional workers, political activists, those who make a living where they can – inspires criticisms of this society; but no criticism is as radical as this objection, raised by something which doesn't want and can't stand what society offers as the possibility of a life.

The wish to win and the sense of estrangement are components of the problem, not reasons for it. What creates the obstacle, the refusal to have anything to do with social games, whether experienced as a block or as diffuse discomfort, is definitely the fact of being and having a woman's body. If we want to name what it is in which a sense of estrangement resides, all that can be said is that it is being and having a woman's body, something in itself quite common, as common as having a man's body. And yet they are not comparable and never have been. To be sure, with each day that passes fewer obstacles are put before women who want to realize themselves in social life and

our eyes become accustomed to seeing women in men's places. But meanwhile, within each woman, where the eye cannot go, there is a constant labour unwinding to make her keep her body, a woman's body, in a place where those who are given pride of place have a man's body.

This constant internal work will never cease because there is something inside which will never get used to it; every now and then the work is interrupted by an almost physical refusal of the effort involved.

The sense of blockage is produced because this society is fashioned by male desire, by being and having a man's body. To be a woman, with a woman's experience and desires, has no place in it. This is the only way to explain why it is that when the wish to win is not intimidating it becomes inevitably an aspiration to virility. By following this line of thought, much more than by using the idea of discrimination, we have realized how much society is imprinted with male prevalence; the imprint of the male is clear within us, in the desire to exist, to act, to count for something, which in fact takes the form of a desire for virility – the only form of victorious desire, one can say. But a woman's stake in this game is her body: this is what she can lose.

When a woman enters the social world, even in the simplest way, for example, by speaking at a neighbourhood meeting, there is always an *extra* effort to be made so that she can explain herself according to procedures which do not harmonize with either her feelings or her thoughts and which result in her feelings and thoughts emerging more or less distorted. Each time there is a void to be filled, a sense of having to climb a little higher. In this way a fantasy of perfection can be born, which paralyzes because it doesn't foresee, doesn't admit of, mistakes. The feeling of real estrangement is also given by this: one cannot live comfortably in a world in which everyone is bound to make mistakes but *you* are not allowed to make them.

There are those who will say, 'But I manage, I can do it.' Perhaps. There are certainly women who, in given circumstances, manage to establish their equality with men, even their superiority. But this is at the cost of a disablement which is often shadowed by personal suffering and eventually manifests itself as isolation from those like you, an inability to understand them and, underneath, a contempt for your own sex. This disavowal of the loser, in yourself and others, is the reason why many of the few socially successful women are conservatives or reactionaries.

It is undoubtedly the case that some men feel themselves isolated.

to the virile model and to the social performance which corresponds to it. But a man has always his body, his being and having a male body, which can be displayed to his fellows and made something of, even if in a manner marginal to or opposed to their models and values. In a man the experience of inadequacy can be and often is the occasion for raising the stakes in the social-sexual game and renewing, for example, the terms of the dialectic between sexuality in its literal sense and its sublimation (or displacement) into areas like careers, the arts, finance, politics and so on. Female sexuality, in its literal sense, does not enter into any of this. In social life its display of virility is not attached to the body and therefore has no real stake, to such an extent that it often ends up rigid, imitative or conformist. The fantasy of perfection which paralyzes so many women or makes them insecure comes from this inability to put their body into what they do – to those who put their body into the social game is given the right to make mistakes, to transgress, but this right is given by a body which is never completely bounded by the norms. Our paralyzing fantasies derive from an asexual model, interposed between body and language.

In this society the profound feelings of a woman, an intelligence true to her emotions and desires, are not allowed free rein. In one way or another they end up either distorted or forced into silence. As a rule we use our sense of estrangement as a corrective to our wish to win, and our wish to win as a corrective to our sense of estrangement. And we divide in this alternation into those who support (or exhibit) what is foreign about us and those who support (or exhibit) ways of enjoying inclusion in the social world.

The loneliness of the emancipated woman

Social existence is won in a sexual competition between men. When discrimination disappears a woman can enter the competition, but it remains a man's event. She finds herself alone even if there are other women around, alone in the midst of male self-assertion, which is men loving themselves by making careers and money, creating knowledge and political parties, attempting revolutions and so on. Female emancipation equals letting women enter a social competition which confirms virility. Emancipation, of necessity, places an emphasis on individual talent. The most women can achieve is solidarity with their own kind as a defence. In other words, emancipation puts us into a social game with words and desires which are not our own. And it

things to be ashamed of, when in fact they contain an objection and a force for change which is usually not effectively exercised because women exhaust their energies in efforts to adapt.

Bring sexual differences into social relations

The massive entry of women into social life does not automatically modify this situation. What automatically happens is that women tend to assimilate themselves to the male model.

We need a moment of reflection and a specific political practice which can make our sense of unease and inadequacy in social transactions into the principle of a knowledge and a resolve in relation to society. As a result we will be able to say: society is made like this, functions like this, demands this kind of performance, but I am a part of society and am not made like this, and because of this society will perhaps have to change so as to give expression to my existence within it as well; through an understanding of this contradiction we can become aware of what we wish to be.

Social relations must be sexualized. If it is true that social and cultural reality is not neuter, that within it human sexuality is expressed in a displaced form, then our search for social existence cannot but clash with the domination of men over women in the fabric of social and cultural life. To sexualize social relations means to tear away their apparent neutrality and show that a woman cannot be fully herself if she adopts the socially current ways of relating to one's peers, either with regard to her pleasure or with regard to her abilities. In fact the stimuli to become involved in social games, to treat their rules and rewards as everything, are directly or indirectly addressed to masculinity, fashioned so as to bring it out or to gratify it. It is difficult to become involved in a situation in which your own pleasure is always in suspense.

From this it can be understood why many women, even given the choice, prefer to keep themselves apart from social life and do not follow the path of emancipation through to its end. They are defending their own integrity. What must be taken up from their attitude is their knowledge (the knowledge that men prevail in social relations) and their implicit resolve (resistance to assimilation into the male).

It therefore seems to us mistaken to continue to insist on discrimination and beside the point to issue demands for more social and cultural space for women. The concession of greater space is a

response to a flagrant injustice, that of a society half made up of women but almost entirely run by men; but it doesn't touch the substance of the problem, which is that in this society as it is, women find neither strong incentives to become involved nor real opportunities to develop to the best of their ability.

The struggle for a sense of ease

For at least a century the politics of emancipation has developed amongst socially underprivileged groups, aiming to achieve equal acceptance in the social world. As far as material conditions are concerned we are approaching the finishing line, but nothing has yet been done about a perhaps more serious disadvantage: that of finding oneself inducted into a social life which provides no pleasure, no sphere of competence, no sense of ease. These are also material elements. The emancipatory struggle passes, unseeing, over energies which are blocked by a sense of real irreducible estrangement, and does not touch those energies which are exhausted in the effort to adjust.

Some writers from socialist Germany, one of the most advanced countries from the point of view of the struggle against discrimination against women, tell of this deep sense of estrangement, this not being able to stand it, which comes from a woman's body. Read, for example, *Mutation* by Christa Wolf. The process of emancipation has a limit which may emerge later but which is there at the start, in its demand to women that they push forward, enter a condition which is in many respects desirable but where it is not possible to take with you the integrity of your own most elementary experiences, those associated with the body and with sexuality. And yet the integrity of your own experiences is a fundamental condition for entry into society in the best way. Without that, mediocrity and a sense of blockage are almost inevitable.

From the moment that this becomes clear the struggle against discrimination appears secondary. What comes to the fore is the struggle to have a sense of ease in social life: to stay in the world whilst being faithful to one's womanhood, having emotions, desires, motivation, behaviour, criteria of judgement, different from those which are aligned to masculinity and which therefore still prevail in society, governing it even in its freest expressions.

It is because we do not wish to give up our social existence that we are now concentrating on our sense of unease. First of all we wish to

emerge with an explanation of its roots. Our difficulties in social transactions are caused by the prevalence of the male, a maleness which translates itself into money, careers, culture, politics, art, and which arrogantly demands admiration and imitation. We are saying nothing new. These are all things which are known in the abstract, yet in practice are negated. To sexualize social relations means to oppose this act of erasure. In practice it means constituting separate women's groups even when and where we are in search of a social existence, in order to interrogate this 'block', to recognize our wish to win, to start a struggle to be at ease with the world.

Against static separatism

After ten years and more of political movement the experience of discomfort and 'block' in the struggle for social existence remains an individual fact which everyone perceives on their own or with a special friend or therapist. It is difficult to talk in our groups about the conflict between our wish to win and our sense of estrangement, although the outcome of this conflict is fundamental to all the choices we make (or do not make) and not just to those about work. The women's movement has neither studied this point enough, nor has it developed a political practice around it.

Within our groups there circulate in abundance accounts of our experiences in relation to men, women, children, even animals and nature in general. Anything regarding wider social transactions is passed over in silence, or labelled as soon as it is mentioned as an aspect of discrimination of which we are the victims and the male world the author. This glosses over one part of the situation: our own wish to achieve and the checks that this encounters. As a wish it endures through various adaptations and disguises and operates even in choices which appear by their very nature to be purely sentimental. One can also have a child because of the wish to succeed or the fear of failure. We tend to present ourselves as human beings dominated by emotional needs.

The insufficiency of analysis is reflected in the fact that the movement, whilst arousing in many the wish to change their own lives and the wish to win, has at the same time served as a cover for the small change of marginality and emancipation. Women's groups risk becoming the site of female authenticity, cut off from social intercourse and involvement in social exchanges. The proclaimed marginality of women, like the emancipatory process, does not prevent

women from meanwhile being subject to male initiatives in social life, whether as chatty collaborators or as paralysed mutes. Feminist separatism, understood as women with their specificity on this side, society with its specificity on that, merely prolongs the silence of desire and of women's knowledge: it does not end it.

We draw to one side in relation to groups dominated by men (dominated, that is, by projects thought by men in language appropriate to the male) in order to find an existence by reference to those like us, and in order to articulate our own desires and knowledge of ourselves, how we are in the world, what the world is like. We draw aside in order to exist in the world and to participate in it, not in order to celebrate a marginality which is either bogus or despairing and hopeless. In other words separation is an instrument of struggle, not a way of regulating relations between women and men. If we respond to our desires as was done in the past, by choosing between emancipation and evasion, between making it through our individual abilities or giving up, our relationships with men, which we have been able to modify in part, will also regress.

Our profound estrangement from society and culture must be interrogated at the moment at which we become involved in society, when it is felt alongside the wish to win through, to exist, to count for something in the world. These two, estrangement and will, working together rather than negating each other, demonstrate that society will not be the same when women's desire and knowledge run free within it. At that point man will be able to discover his own incompleteness and free himself from his oppressive universality.

A common world of women

The main difficulty we face is that we lack 'a common world of women'. This insight comes from Adrienne Rich. A woman who in some way tries to live socially, whether to make her living or for her own satisfaction, enters the common world of men, a world where the things which to her seem basic and essential fall into the void, count for nothing; they have never existed there. And where, conversely, she has to confront things in which she cannot recognize herself although certainly she knows they exist: masculinity has no difficulty in getting itself recognized. With the political movement of these last years, personal relations between men and women have changed, and so have our ways of talking about them between ourselves. This is not the case in social relations, where we still lack any criteria rooted in

our own interests and therefore lack freedom of judgement.

An analogy can be made between sexual frigidity and blocks on achievement in social life. The frigidity of some women revealed to us the mute resistance of the female body as well as the violence that male sexuality exercises on women, and this pushed us to a struggle to change personal relationships with men. In a similar way, to feel blocked in social life, unable to speak, anxious, uncomfortable, 'speaks' of an estrangement and a resistance.

Up to now resistance has only been silent. In the social world we are still isolated and uncommunicative except about matters that are marginal to the situation. Even when moved to criticism we are silent or repetitive about essentials. Conformists or subversives, we act and think according to criteria into which our womanhood does not enter. Society does not deny us position and even success just because we are women. But this is really because in terms of social acceptance the fact of being a woman is irrelevant. What a strange existence we have, creatures who are not men but who cannot come out as women.

Only by reference to those like us will we be able to rediscover and therefore support those contents of our experience which social reality ignores or tends to cancel out as scarcely relevant. This is also perhaps the only way in which women can give to man the measure of his incompleteness, letting him perceive the existence of relationships and interests which do not put him first. So long as the incompleteness of men/women remains without substance in social and cultural life, society is maimed and, for us, maiming.

It is almost unthinkable that women can manage alone in a world in which, from the factory to the laboratory, from the nursery to the football stadium, from law to poetry, what circulates and is willingly endorsed is the excellence of having and being a male body. Once a tissue of preferential relations are woven between women, within which the experiences associated with womanhood are strengthened by reciprocal recognition, and once ways have been invented of translating this into social reality, then women can manage. This is what we call the common world of women, a web of relationships and references to others like yourself which is able to register and make consistent and effective our experience in its integrity, recovering and developing the practical knowledge which many women in difficult circumstances have already intuitively acquired. In other words, we must develop ways of being in the world whilst at the same time holding on to relationships with others like us. Through this, substance can be given to what male predominance negates, the basic fact of our being women rather than men. There is only one world,

inhabited by women as well as by men, children, animals and various living and non-living things, and it is in this world which is one alone that we wish to stay, at our ease.

Create a strong precedent

Solidarity is precious but it is not enough. What we need are diversified and strong relations in which, once minimum common interests are safeguarded, what links us is not just the defence of our interests; relations into which differences enter into play as enrichment and no longer as threat.

Differences between women sometimes take the form of real and proper divergencies and with the recognition of difference goes an attribution of value. Such an attribution of value can have its place amongst women: on it depends the feeling that it is valuable to be a woman. Not in a general and abstract sense, but in a context in which everyone lives with their own wish to achieve and their own sense of estrangement. To attribute value in this context means to put one of your own kind first, to privilege her wish to win through, her sense of inadequacy, and to do this in your own interest. In this way a material link can be established which can allow the communication of things which have been forced into silence or distorted in individual confrontations with male society.

Our objective is to weave a world in which the interests associated with being a woman circulate, and in which a woman can exist without having to justify her existence. To this end we are using our political practice of relations between women, to make a contribution to the issue of disparities between women, the need to engage with them and the need to practice a confidence in and reliance on one of your own kind.

Generally we do not admit of difference and disparity in our groups, in the name of an egalitarianism inherited from the youth movement. But this refusal is also and perhaps fundamentally a reaction to the obliteration of the mother in our society. The relationship between mother and daughter has no form in patriarchal society; it is therefore conflictual and mother and daughters are both the losers. We have come to understand that we can engage with disparities between women in our political practice and that this is precious. To recognize that someone like us has 'something extra' breaks the rule of male society according to which, once the mother is removed, all women are definitely equal. At the same time it liberates us, intimidated or

inferiorized as we are in relation with men, from a reactive need to feel on a par with our own kind at least. Women were also brought into the world by a mother. In order to struggle against patriarchal society we must give real strength within our relationships to that ancient relationship in which there could be, fused together, love and esteem for another woman. Every woman had, in her mother, her first love and her first model.

Are we then proposing to reproduce in our relationships that hierarchy of 'better than'/'worse than' which rightly we detest because in our society we find ourselves the losers? The answer cannot be other than 'yes' and 'no'. 'Yes', because there is a need to break with the regime of sameness between women which is based on an undervaluation of womanhood — parity between us has its roots in the deep insecurity each one of us feels. To that extent it does not impede submission to the hierarchies current in society. But 'no' as well, because the 'better than' which determines a disparity between women is being given space in a relationship in which love and esteem circulate together.

The recognition of disparities between women is therefore not an end in itself. It is the practice of a contradiction, a practice which is needed to allow freedom from the fear of being less than other women and through which each woman can arrive at a sense of her own value because she can rely on what is valuable in others, and treat it as an element of strength.

That this recognition of value and mutual trust takes place between women who spend time with each other and work together creates a strong precedent. It means we have a point to refer to where the integrity of womanhood is confirmed and the 'something extra' which is being looked for can be found.

To the extent that we can engage in the recognition of disparity, we will be able to find an order, a dynamic, the fertility of the primary emotions linked to the ancient relationship with the mother. With the recognition of the 'something extra' that another woman can be, these old emotions will find a means of positive expression — freeing themselves from ambiguities and us from recriminations.

In the light of a living desire

The articulation of emotions is part of our journey towards a sense of ease, the diminution of anxiety. Ease is in fact the third term between a savage wish to win and submission, between fantasies of omnipo-

tence and failure. Ease is a sense of connection between our own emotions and what we think and do in a given situation. This is not a psychological matter. The search for a sense of ease is a political practice which continually says: 'The effort to masculinize our mind and our emotions is oppressive and, what is more, useless'; 'We wish to translate women's experience and desire within a society which doesn't want to know, and to change things that way'; 'A sense of ease is a most material need along with other material needs, and a struggle for a sense of ease is subversive in a world in which desire is petrified.' This wish to stay comfortably in the world brings things back into a living relationship with the desire for them to be examined. In the light of that desire they can be changed (a lot or a little, probably a lot) to the degree that it is necessary.

BONDING AND FREEDOM LUISA MURARO, 1985

Before talking about the relationship of entrustment between women, perhaps we should clarify that 'relationship of entrustment' is a new expression indicating something which already exists in relationships between men, as in the relationships many women have with men. To put it simply, this relationship occurs when you tie yourself to a person who can help you achieve something which you think you are capable of but which you have not yet achieved.

In our society relationships of entrustment between women are rare. Why this should be so is a complex question. Here I would prefer to go round it and approach it from the other side, explaining why I have tied myself to a woman in the way I have just been describing.

I work in philosophy. My training has been in philosophy, at the expense of the community, and philosophy is what I am now paid for, still at the expense of the community. I don't know what need society has of philosophers, or how many. But I do know that up to now society has expressed no need for philosophers to be women rather than men. I've been able to study philosophy and now I teach it and write about it, because I have shown my abilities to be no less than those of others, of men, who have the same aspirations as me. This society acknowledges that my right is no less than theirs. But this is only a right. By which I mean that it has not been accompanied by expectations and requirements with regard to my sex.

I will not linger on the mental confusion which this absence of specific requests has produced in me. In effect I couldn't translate my

abilities and inclinations into a project to which I felt bound. Not long ago I read the biography of a Milanese woman, Gaetana Agnesi (*Le scienziate sante del Settecento* [The Holy Scientist of the Eighteenth Century], Giovanna Tilche, Rizzoli, 1984). Up to the age of thirty she was a mathematician of great renown, but with the death of her father, who was enormously proud of her, she abandoned the mathematical sciences and devoted herself to looking after poor and sick women. It seems to me that in this story we can see the parabola of superfluous female thought.

All programmers of female emancipation break down at this point: sexual difference has no meaning outside the family. Women's presence in society satisfies the need for justice towards women but it is not a response to an intrinsic social need. This has two major effects, which have become clear to me over the years as I have tried to sort out my own mental confusion. There is an inner effect of uncertainty about what one is to do in life. As far as society is concerned, if we do not take on children and a family one female project is the same as the next, and the only support for it comes from yourself, from the fact that you, on your own, wish to achieve it. Nothing and nobody will help when you run into difficulties and you are tempted to forget all about it. The second effect is an external one but corresponds to the other. This is that a woman's words and actions carry very little social weight, no matter what their intrinsic value is. There is a general lack of attention which neglects to acknowledge value just as it easily forgets mistakes and lapses.

In these conditions we can't do philosophy; perhaps we can't do anything with a keen sense of personal involvement. It's depressing to know that you are useless. Old people know it, orphans in institutions know it, the unemployed know it. And when we get to that point, if we have the strength we have to draw a conclusion about this, and do something about it. What I did about it was to tie myself in a relationship of female entrustment, at the moment when this idea of entrustment took shape in a woman's mind and was communicated to me.

In the idea of female entrustment, which is actually far richer and more complex than my description of it here implies, I suddenly saw the possibility of tying myself, of emerging from superfluity and having the support of precise requirements to put forward or to satisfy.

I feel very strongly this need for a social tie which gives me answers, which tells me when I am wrong, which agrees with me. This possibly has something to do with the fact that I work in philosophy. However,

the question of sexual difference, which has no recognized reason to exist outside the family, doesn't affect me alone. It is a general fact that whatever a woman does outside the family is seen as something she does through choice or personal need, except in those cases where women are called on to substitute for absent men. And in all cases, including this last one, society does not signify a need for a female social presence; neither, therefore, does it have expectations and criteria which would give sense to what a woman does as well as to what she is, a human subject of the female sex.

I think it's because of this that a woman often feels her aspiration to a free social existence to be almost a denial of her sex, and that so do other women. Society's interpretation of this aspiration as virile might faithfully reflect the experience of some women, but it certainly betrays the way many others feel about it. In her diary, Virginia Woolf tells us that when a book of hers was due out, she was mortally shaken by terrifying fears of humiliation. Other women, especially those with family ties, are tormented by a sense of guilt. My own experience tells me that these phenomena arise from a conflict between what we want to achieve and the fact that sex is excluded from this something: excluded in two senses, which are interdependent: both as a part of the individual woman's human identity and as that part of humanity which is like her.

It would be a mistake to turn this conflict into a problem which women should resolve within themselves. The problem has very definite personal aspects, but its solution affects the whole of society. Indeed, society is structured in such a way that in realizing her desires a woman almost inevitably finds herself split between her aspiration to a free existence and the privacy of her sexed body.

But it would be equally wrong to make of it a question of social justice, because society does not have the means to establish the ties which woman really needs, between body and word, between herself and her peers. Society can only register it when it happens, and this it does.

The relationship of entrustment between one woman and another constitutes this tie, which is simultaneously intimate and external, personal and social, which makes a coherent whole of being a woman and having a social existence; which makes sexual difference visible and significant in social relationships, in that the female aspiration to something more is reconciled with fidelity to her own sex.

In the feminist movement much has been said against emancipation. Here I would like to add my strongest argument against emancipation. It was available to me, and it attracted me because of

my human need for an autonomous existence. But every step I took was like taking something away from another woman or from all women. When I finished school, with a lot of female friends, women began to seem to me generically wretched, and I felt within myself that I had impoverished them. It's not difficult to work out what was actually happening: faced with the social pre-eminence of the male sex I was denying my own sex its wealth; denying first myself and as a result all others whom I saw as similar to me. In this sense the relationship of entrustment is also, for me, a restitution.

ENTRUSTMENT ENTERS THE PALACE M. GRAZIA
CAMPARI, ROSARIA CANZANO, LIA CIGARINI, SCIANA
LOALDI, LAURA ROSEO AND CLAUDIA SHANMAH, 1985

In general women steer clear of taking on the law. These days, however, there are a number of women lawyers and magistrates. Because we feel compelled to place ourselves in the most telling situations, perhaps. We've given a name to this compulsion: the wish to win through. Yet we know that in these places there is no leading role for us, and we hesitate to make one for ourselves because we realize that the rules of the game have been worked out by the other sex and not ours. And so we are happy with a kind of reflected glory, staying on the stage and sticking as closely as possible to the spotlight.

When a group of women lawyers and magistrates met in Milan, after *Sottosopra* came out in 1983, we took these contradictions as our point of departure, knowing that in our experience it was a hard nut to crack.

So hard that straightaway we ran into the problem of recording coherently and developing in any detail the contradiction between our wish to win through and our estrangement. A gap inevitably opened up: on one side we carried on our professional role in the world with its reflected, individual glory, and on the other side we used the women's group as a source of comfort and consolation. In the group we took our time, we relaxed, all judgement apparently suspended, with an every-ready justification for our every failing. Relaxed, indeed. We treated ourselves as men do, according to their image of women.

There, with our likenesses, everything which in any other place was a failure or a source of anxiety just disappeared. After that interlude, comforted by the group experience we had gone through together, we

would return to our work which – in spite of everything – gave us the sense of something of value.

Some of us defend this manner of relating between women and maintain that in this way 'we reclaim our bodies'. We don't agree, because the body recovered in this way remains separate from the word, and the pleasure of relating with other women from the production of value. And so it is that when we speak, be it in the field of law, science or politics, our words have no sex, they are the words of a neutralized body with no substance of its own.

Precisely to stop this split repeating itself we chose to take the 'failure' as the privileged moment of our analysis, our point of departure in changing the world. It's quite clear that that women's group, comforting and consoling, was useless for us. Indeed, it avoided the suffering of failure, and relationships within the group tended to reproduce the split between female pleasure on the one hand, professional seriousness (value word) on the other. So much so that within the group we couldn't even accept with any equanimity the disparity that there certainly was among us, while every contribution had to be given the same value. As if we didn't trust ourselves enough to imagine that someone like us could contribute something valuable and worth taking seriously. And so, paradoxically, that 'something extra' which women have won circulates in and nourishes the world as it is, and doesn't nourish the women themselves.

In the end we realized that not recognizing the disparity among us, standing in the way of the strongest proposals and desires, actually annihilated the value of each and every one of us, insinuating a sort of desperation as to the possibility of our sex creating anything original or modifying the existing situation.

At this point some of us separated ourselves off, putting ourselves in a situation of disparity which we accepted, and which was made practicable and positive within relationships of mutual entrustment. Which is to say that we acknowledged the oldest and most experienced among us, the one who is intellectually gifted, the one who carries authority within the group. We have a common desire for change, a common refusal to content ourselves with what we have, an awareness of the limits of emancipation, the will to be recognized in society as we are, with our sex.

Our fundamental stimulus is the desire for change, which must be shared by the women who place themselves in a relationship of mutual entrustment; the refusal to accept our lot, overcoming the tendency to live in society as it is – marked by the male's imprint; so that women are ashamed of the lowly status of other women and therefore of their

own sexed being. Cutting out for themselves a tiny space, a niche which is never totally secure.

As it happens, we are all lawyers; the magistrates have not taken this step. Together we've set out a plan of work in the field of law. We've chosen a limited area but one which we think is particularly telling, that is, family law.

In family law (law, jurisprudence and court trials) different and sometimes contradictory interests of the two sexes come into play. It is the case that the interests of the woman often give way because of the very difficulty experienced by women in knowing exactly what they are and being able to stand up for them when confronted with the other party. A power situation is recreated which the law, leaving to one side its intrinsic justice, only encourages.

We've noticed that this happens repeatedly, even though there are many women lawyers and judges in the section of our tribunal which deals with this area. This is a matter of circumstance which has no effect on the administration of justice because the person who administers it either is a man and speaks as a man, or is a 'neutral' being, in other words a woman who wants to be impartial because of her insecurity as a woman.

We are working to bring this conflict out into the open, to shed some light on it, to act it out in the first person, so that both men and women can measure themselves against it.

Talking amongst ourselves we decided not to take the path of legislative intervention because it seems to us that it passes over the reality of the conflict, and reduces the fractures of the situation to abstractions.

If women hesitate to defend their interests and rights because of their own inner censorship and their aversion to confront the law, it will certainly not be the laws which recognize these rights (see the law on parity, on sexual violence, on family rights) that will help them to fight, to be involved as 'different' subjects, with their own specific interests. A relationship of entrustment serves to make the female sex visible in society, to give it presence and a voice, and the social visibility of the female sex is fundamental for our project, as it is for the whole women's movement.

Sexual difference in society as we saw it functioned only at the level of physiology and the family, not in a social context where the man remains a man and the woman becomes a neuter. We thought that this is because women do not have a network of significant and pleasurable relationships, a circularity of reciprocal desire such as men have amongst themselves, and women have with men.

That's why we choose to begin with ourselves and our own contradictions, just as the women's movement has done over these past few years. In other words thinking of women not as objects of intervention, in this case legislative intervention, but as subjects.

In practice, then, we put the politics of jurisprudence at the centre of our work. The politics of jurisprudence means taking on the whole area of conflict between the sexes at the moment in which it comes up against the reality of the law, that is to say the moment of conflict in the courts.

It should be said that in this very field and at this very level women have an intimate knowledge and an intimate competence, because of their involvement in personal relationships and because of their very conception of the world, seen not as an abstract entity but always through ties lived in the first person.

The relationship on entrustment constitutes a new kind of social relationship which takes us out of our isolation, and puts into circulation that something extra that a woman can be, to the advantage and gain of those who produced it.

RADICALITY AND ASCETICISM IDA DOMINIJANNI, 1987

'Language is the social dress. In other words it is the symbolic apparatus which makes sayable what is, so giving sense to what a human being lives inside him/herself, and which can be the death of him/her if he/she can't externalize it by signifying it to others.' I begin with this quotation because it sums up perfectly the sense of the political proposal of *Don't Think You Have Any Rights* and the *raison d'être* of the book itself. The sense of the political proposal: what a woman suffers from is being put into the world without a symbolic placement, deprived precisely of that social dress which is language and of all the successive mediations that can 'signify' her in the world; that is, speak her sexual difference and give it a social existence. It is this suffering which calls for a revolution, and so the revolution of feminism will be of a symbolic order, just as the nature of that suffering is of a symbolic order. The *raison d'être* of this book is to give a name to that which didn't have a name; to put into words a political practice, so turning it into theory; to reconstruct and circulate its language, thus giving it a 'social dress'. So that it might finally be sayable, signifiable to others, transmittable.

It seems to me that this is precisely where the first merit of the book lies, in managing to communicate a political experience which in its

turn – just like the existential experience of the subjects who constructed it – could have stayed within the realm of things lived but not significant to others – to other women – not translatable into the explicit and settled heritage of memory. And in managing to do this while giving that political experience an interpretation. Anybody who spends any time within the spaces of women's politics knows that one of the hindrances to communication, one of the obstacles in our way is exactly the lack of a consensus on an interpretation – or to be more exact of several interpretations which might not always agree with each other but which are consequent – of our political past. This obstacle not only makes women fall back on the interpretation and politics of the present, it removes power from the memory, makes it difficult for things to take root in the mind, removes security from the subjects themselves, the very women who have constructed that political past and who should have it at heart to transmit it.

The authors say of this interpretation they make of the facts of the past that it is partial and selective – just as for the present, they add, there is in the book 'the partiality of taking up a position'. The rereading of the past does not present itself in the form of a story, but as the subjective journey of the group who lived through it, a signed accumulation of moments of experience and thought. Will all feminists recognize themselves in this interpretation? Perhaps not, certainly not. We know that the very writing of the book was not without conflicts on the reconstruction of the past, and it is likely that other women readers will not agree with it. They will say that things didn't happen exactly as they are written down here. [. . .] They will criticize the lack of context – political, social, cultural – in which these twenty years of feminism are gone over again. One way or another they will defend themselves from the radicality of this book, which is in fact its greatest merit.

Yet for one thing I believe that everybody will have to recognize themselves in *Don't Think*: the way the book and its language can restore experience to us. This obviously can't be put down just to a good piece of writing (and all recognition for this should go to Luisa Muraro, who was largely responsible for the final version of the book), but is bound up with the political and cultural choices made about the book's field of observation. It's a crucial point, which explains the almost total absence of 'context' I was speaking of just now. The context of the twenty years between 1966 and 1986 in which the book moves only appears as occasional background hints: the society of emancipation in which feminism matures, the politics in action in

mobilizing on abortion, the sociological interpretations which tried to reduce feminism to a 'cultural movement'.

But the context chosen here is in reality another, and only that: the political practice of the relationships between women; that is to say, the very core of feminism, the original nucleus of its theorizing and its politics, what brought together the feminists of the seventies aside from the incidence of external facts and loyalties. This is a context, we might say, which becomes a text, because that practice is the site where female experience shows itself at its root level, and searches for a solution at that level – a root level which could not show itself in previous women's movements which did not consider this practice. This also helps us to understand the organization of the book, in which the rereading of the political past, the analysis of the 'female condition' (I will give it this provocative term to underline the colossal distance from figures which traditionally go under this name) and the theoretical and political proposal of entrustment are tied together. In the practice of relationships between women the female condition becomes legible, and the practice of relationships between women suggests the way to change it.

We will come back to the rereading of the political past which the book performs. For the moment let us stay with the 'female condition' as it is here described and assumed. What the woman suffers from, we were saying, is 'being put into the world without a symbolic placement', with no sense-horizon that would connect her being of female sex with her living in society. It's an age-old state which goes back to the original constitution of the symbolic order and of sexual roles in western civilization, but more importantly it is a condition which has been not eased but worsened by the society of emancipation. Indeed, a woman's existence in the world has sense only if it is tied to her anatomical destiny and to corresponding social roles; if she wants to move outside these roles, then she must forget about being a woman. Outside of these roles, societies which want the emancipation of the woman will give her many other possibilities but will not value these female activities, will give them no reason, necessity or responsibility: 'freed from the slavery of her anatomical destiny, a woman becomes not automatically free but superfluous.' To the extent that in emancipated societies the great majority of women 'restlessly move backwards and forwards between emancipation and female roles, they try to do the most disparate tasks at the same time, they go from one project to the next, they try one thing, then another, like somebody pursuing something which exists only in her mind and is nowhere.'

Hands up who doesn't feel described or jolted by this description . . . And yet women, a lot of women, have great designs on the world, they have desires and projects, they want to be in the world and leave their trace in it. But this binomial, being a woman and making claims on society, is a combination which our societies cannot tolerate, unforeseen and therefore undervalued in their symbolic order. From a binomial common to every human being, it is destined to become for women a split: between body and language, between female sexual difference and the symbolic order. This split reveals the absence of a symbolic mediation between women and the world, it explains the defect of liberty in which woman finds herself acting. So it is at the root, at the literally radical level, that the problem of woman should be tackled.

The connection with the reading of past political practices is now clear. It is in the political practices based on relationships between women that this split has been made visible, in the form of a repeated split between 'inside' and 'outside' (you will remember this as the jargon of *autoscienze* groups), between the search for the self and the search for social existence, and has shown itself in its effects, in blocking projects or in political impotence. Revealing itself in this way it has also become dealable with, subject in its turn to theorization. The rereading of successive practices of feminism in this book is rich in many elements of analytic density, but in substance it is the story of this 'repeating split' and of the many attempts to resolve and overcome it, up to the idea and theorizing of the proposal of sexed mediation: this will be, philosophically as well as factually, the mediation introduced to knit back together those two split terms.

Let us look at the main moments of this history. It is with the exhaustion of *autoscienze* - 'simple and genial practice', but naive in believing in the authenticity of the lived experience and of the word which expresses it, and therefore unable to go beyond the recognition of each woman in her fellow-women - that we see the 'double and opposite movement of the female mind, turning inwards to her own darker side and turning out towards society'. The meeting with the Frenchwoman of *Psychanalyse et Politique* steers the second side of this double movement into the social practice of relationships between women, thus beginning a 'period of female association which continues to the present day', the separate and transgressive channelling of female energies which in itself transforms social relationships. The practice of the unconscious on the other hand nourishes the search for the self, the analysis of that denied part of female experience which it

will turn into a political issue; it brings to the surface the lack of connection in woman's behaviour between the word and her real motives, it analyses her dependence on man, her anxiety for approval, the invasive role of fantasy which compensates for women's difficulty in interpreting themselves and imposing their own desires, as men are able to do; it brings into focus what blocks women's access to the symbolic and, tied in with this, the problem of an unresolved relationship with the mother.

But as the first Pinarella national feminist conference (1979) was to show, that 'double opposed movement' finds neither agreement nor mediation, and furthermore women's groups tend to reproduce within themselves the split between body and language, deep female experience and its social translatability. The following 'practice of doing', which over the years was to give rise to a number of initiatives still going, is created precisely to get round the solid block of the word, to give female desire the opportunity to address objects and projects directly (which nonetheless, as the text acutely observes, themselves also express desire and mastery of the word: they are most of the time bookshops, libraries, publishing houses, information centres . . .). It links this 'doing' in separate female spaces to the transformation of the social body, but it soon reveals, in the effect of self-moderation which it produces, that female desire remains reticent, it does not come out into the open. Not only this, but the 'collective space not regulated by male interests' seems to have no relationship with the world; female experience remains without social existence. We had to wait for the two 'memorable disasters' of Col di Lana (feminist groups' common premises in Milan, 1975) and Paestum (third national feminist conference, 1976) before abandoning what had to be abandoned and going down a new road. But in the meantime, and this is also extremely important for the analysis, there was the impact of the whole issue of abortion and sexual violence.

This is the point where the story becomes more unilateral, where we can and should say to the authors that things could have been told differently; for example by those in *autoscienze* groups (the taking of sides by women in favour of demonstrations and by those in collectives was not as clearcut as the book makes out), who decided, once it was clear that there would never be a straight decriminalization of abortion, to participate in the battle over the law, even while being aware of all the contradictions between the poverty of legislative tools and the complexity of female experience (sexuality, conflict with men) which came into play over abortion. They decided this not so much to

'give substance' to what would otherwise have been an impoverished battle, but because they are aware that through the contamination of diverse practices – for example, through the severe clash of those years with much older organizations such as the UDI, through throwing into question and breaking up any 'double militancies' and 'double allegiances' – they could spread the practice and content of the *autocoscienze* – based kind of feminism. The difference of interpretation of this struggle has to do not so much with the final judgement about the choice to take to the law: today – in the current climate of increasing male initiative over abortion, and a context such as that of the 'right to life' campaign, which have little in common with our reasons for acting then – there are, I believe, very few women who would not subscribe to the thesis developed by the book; that 'when women turn their attention to the law and ask Parliament to resolve some of the social conflicts which affect them, and when sexual difference and the man-woman conflict are involved, they damage their own sex and put it into a position of lacerating contradictions.' The difference of judgement has more to do with the effects of that battle *within* the women's movement; they were not without influence, for example, in the relative lack of support for the law by popular initiative on sexual violence, which was soon to follow.

But the Libreria's strongest point of interpretation of both 'legislative' ventures during those years is another, and has to do with the representing-representation nexus of the female sex. Both struggles, the authors write, were based on a lowest common denominator representation (image) of women as the oppressed sex, and did not take account of the differences with which the female sex is marked. The struggles frustrated and made irrelevant the 'extra' of those women who did not identify with that kind of narrow image. Moreover, whoever carried this battle forward did so as a 'representative' of the whole female sex, in the name of that mistaken representation. There are two consequences. One leads directly to a problem which we see today; whether and how it is possible to work out forms of political representation which do not simply reinforce that 'common-denominator representation', and which would be authorized by women in their complexity as a sex and not as a presumed oppressed social group. [...]

The second consequence, the slow divorce from the collective representation and self-representation of common oppression, takes us back to the main strand of the book; it will become a matter of urgency to free ourselves from that representation when we understand that it is a main reason for the impotence of female desire, for

that 'repeating split' between female experience and self-awareness on the one hand, and on the other estrangement from society and subordination to prescribed roles.

Critique of the ideology of oppression, and of the related politics of vindication of rights, is one of the cardinal points of the book, going right through it, from the rereading of the first documents of Demau and Carla Lonzi right up to today's questions. But it is important to point out that it remains firmly tied to the analysis of female subjectivity, of that part of it which is denied, and brought to the surface by the practice of the unconscious. The moment of crystallization, the abandoning of the acknowledgment of a common oppression, is placed by the authors during the Col di Lana episode, an emblematic example of the vicious circle which occurred in groups because of the passivity of so many women in the face of the power of a few women – a power which was both unrecognized and blamed. This was in 1976: we all have memories of similar situations. In this setting of collective impotence to go forward, we can see down to the bottom of the weakness of female desire, the difficulty it has in expressing itself in both the 'passive' women and the 'authoritative' ones, those who are seen but not said to be as such, and who are blamed for being so.

A figure intervenes to break this vicious circle who, even on a linguistic level, is one of the most effective in the book: 'the objection of the silent woman.' Not the woman who never speaks, the oppressed woman, but 'that part of every woman which refuses to be described, illustrated or defended by anybody', and certainly not by those women who would like to describe her by grouping her together with others living in conditions of oppression: 'If that part were to speak it might say, for example, that she couldn't care less about those for whom abortion is a problem.' The 'silent woman', then, is the figure of a female experience which had found neither place nor words in the victim-oppressor scheme which feminist language had followed up to that point; the figure of the experience of those who could not express active claims and desires in that scheme of things, who were a priori censured by that scheme. So it is the figure of the 'loss which is the fault of no-one, but is the desire for something.' The way is open to an analysis of the female 'extra', the desire of the woman who wants existence but who cannot come out into the open from the shadow of this lowly representation of women, free female thought which in the scheme of oppression was a contradiction in terms.

So the way is open for the passage from the 'subordinate female symbolic', in which to speak of oppression suffered was all but in

which female freedom could not be said, to an 'autonomous female symbolic' capable of representing female freedom in its female origin. This is the beginning of 'political work on the symbolic', which will consist of 'dividing into two the unity with which the functioning of the social body is represented, showing its sexed nature. And in giving legitimacy to the presence of female sexuality in the social, to female desire which seeks satisfaction in taking part in government and knowledge of the world.'

For those who have followed from the green *Sottosopra* ['More women than men', reprinted in this chapter] onwards the proposals of the Milan Libreria delle Donne, the rest is recent history, and in fact the book talks about it in the present tense, as of 'what we think and want today'. In the meantime, however, it is the case that in giving a name to things past, things of the present take on the density of history. So that the theoretical-political proposal of sexed mediation takes on a body and reasons which it did not have in the Libreria's previous, more abstract theorizations; it sweeps aside a series of objections made to it over the past three years (disparity as synonymous with hierarchy, authority as synonymous with domination, the coupling of ethical issues which aim for a 'better' society to the practice of sexual difference) and opens the way to new passages – it draws conclusions, as the authors prefer to put it, which are very demanding when they touch on the sacred territories of freedom, of social responsibility, of justice, of sexed thinking and acting in and on the world. [...]

'Liberty' is the noblest word in this book, and is the word which inspires it. I notice while reading it that it is a word which has disappeared from feminist political vocabulary, as well as that which is not feminist. When we used to speak of liberation we did so with reference to oppression; and, as we read in these pages, that politics of liberation lacked the originating power, the foundation of female freedom. Here this foundation is located in a conscious and binding belonging of woman to her sex: 'A woman is free when signifying her belonging to the female sex is what she chooses to do, knowing that it is not really an object of choice.' It is a necessary foundation, not abstract: if the cause of female lack of freedom lies in being woman, in the tie with an anatomical destiny, we must turn this cause of non-freedom – which we cannot eliminate, as we cannot eliminate the fact we are born women – into a principle of liberty.

But freedom, as always, has a price, and feminism in the seventies was mistaken in thinking that it did not, or that women could obtain

freedom just by claiming it from society as a denied right: society is founded on female non-freedom and therefore constitutionally has no need of female freedom and will not grant it. The price which every woman has to pay for her own freedom has to be paid not to society but to other women, first of all the mother. The price of female freedom is the 'payment of the symbolic debt' towards the mother: to put it another way, the recognition of the relationship between women. This simple gesture – visible, public, made through relationships of entrustment which in this sense reveal themselves as social relationships – removes female transmission from the invisible and the insignificant, frees woman from the over-powerful image of the mother, authorizes her to feed on the mother without betraying her, establishes a symbolic economy of exchange between women. It is the founding gesture of a female social pact: 'freedom gained in the relationships between women is for a woman her own freedom, and the social pact with which she ties herself in her freedom to other women ties her to the whole world.' So this gesture is the foundation of a new social pact: women being excluded from the constitutive and ordinary act of the current social pact.

This social pact is presented, in *Don't Believe You Have Any Rights*, as a social pact clearly divided into two: sexed: that is, one for men – what we are used to seeing as the universal pact – and one for women – the one which puts an end to the 'wild state of relationships between women'. It interrupts the register of female survival based on relationships between them of simple solidarity and mutual help, and inaugurates the register of female freedom. That we have here a real social pact can be seen by the consequences the authors see in terms of justice and social responsibility.

On responsibility, for example: 'A woman is responsible for the world insofar as she has to account for herself to her peers, and she has no social obligations which cannot be derived from her obligations towards her peers.' It is true, the authors add, that these affirmations are 'unjust' with regard to justice as we know it; but it could not be otherwise, because they come from something – the social value of relationships between women, and female freedom – which that justice has not considered. So for women, thinking justly cannot come first, but only after fidelity to themselves and their experiences, interests and desires:

the value of female difference is not inscribed in the system of social relationships, and nothing of what needs to be done to bring it about

appears with the guarantee of justice. We, in flesh and blood, must put ourselves in the place of the missing guarantee, of the justice which is yet to be done, of the truth which is yet to be known. It is an inevitable step.

But is what is constituted thanks to a 'flesh and blood presence', to a willer and reasoned 'putting oneself in the place of that symbolic order which does not exist, a *strong* symbolic? Is it not a gesture which is still too closely tied to the day-to-day business of politics, the temporality of women's politics and the physical persons of those who engage in it, here and now? It seems to me that here this book does not resolve fully that continual movement from the register of the symbolic to the factual register, which is the point of friction, the other face of the richness and originality of this thought and in a way of all the thinking about sexual difference.

One more point about the question of a sexed social pact. The Libreria of Milan is often accused, and from many directions, of wanting finally a society which is divided and non-communicating between men and women. The book gives an answer which is paradoxically soothing:

It is clear that things will no longer be the same, neither for women nor for the whole of society, if the help we gave each other in order to survive becomes an alliance which guarantees our social existence. But it will not be the end of the world. Dividing into two a social pact which already functioned of its own account in a divided manner – the bargaining between men, the solidarity between women – will not give rise to chaos.

6

I Centri Culturali delle Donne

The second half of the 1970s marked the birth of a new type of feminist association, one which had its roots in the experience of the *autocoscienza*, but also moved away from it in search of a more definite structure. For about a decade small groups of women all over Italy had got together to investigate their lives. In the process they had acquired a clearer awareness of themselves as women and of the need for change; they had also created an informal network of political action; a 'movement' with a nationwide identity in spite of its fragmentation and its inner differences. The stress on togetherness, and on the similarities of women's experience, a dislike for hierarchies and an extreme diffidence towards all forms of organization had characterized this phase; also a diffidence towards the traditional forms of politics and a reluctance to engage in any transaction with the institutions. There was, finally, also a mistrust of 'culture', of the so-called objectivity of research, of the misrepresentations handed down by the cultural tradition.

Obviously, these were tendencies, not dogmas, and they often resulted in the invention of new forms of political action and of new ways of cultural production. The Centri are an instance of such a process of continuity and modification. Since the first was founded in 1976, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of groups which have constituted themselves as separate and autonomous sites of sexually connotated research, in order to preserve, transmit, produce culture as/for women. In 1986, when their first nationwide conference took place in Siena, there were about a hundred of them spread all over Italy. More than a third had also assumed a formalized legal structure, and these are listed in the 'Table of Women's Centres', with the geographical location and the date of foundation.