

EDITORIAL: Women's Bodies, Between Biology and Social Construction

Ramona Păunescu

Analyze Journal carries on its inquiry on women issues by approaching a topic that constitutes a hallmark of gender studies: controlling women's bodies. The current number sets out to explore the theme of women's bodies from an interdisciplinary perspective and thus manages to bring to the fore a series of relevant analyses that contribute towards including this niche themes into the field of academic reasoning as well as to unveiling this major research topic for the feminist literature.

I think it is very important to mention from the beginning that I will employ a distinction between two facets of the **women's bodies** concept: the biological dimension (anatomical), on the one side, and the social construction of the body, on the other side. From the anatomic point of view, all that matters is the functional aspect of women's bodies. When we turn to the political sciences though, women's bodies, beyond being simple functional anatomic systems, represent social constructs, part of the cultural system that is continuously de-constructed and reconstructed. Acknowledging this dimension is mostly due to feminist writings and movements that have made a significant contribution towards a feminist interpretation of history, a perspective that had been mostly neglected. The analysis of history from women's perspective has always been closely linked

with contemporary feminist politics as well as with evolutions in the academic subject of history itself. When women sought to question social inequalities in their contemporary lives, history turned out to be a starting point in unveiling the roots of their oppression. By analogy to the social construction of women's roles in specific historical contexts, rather than considering roles natural and universal, one could argue that not only their social roles, but also their more tangible characteristics, that are their bodies, are also social constructs and thus open to changing the perspective the society approaches them.

The social construction of the body is embodied in the assumptions about the way it works, it should look like, the functions it should accomplish. These assumptions are historically developed and vary both in time and across cultures. Between these assumptions may persist substantial differences between male and female roles, between the scientific and common knowledge accounts of women anatomy and women's reproductive capacities. The physiological assumptions are corner stones of the belief systems that define the moral, social and emotional characteristics of maternity.

The analyses on women's bodies from the political sciences perspective aim at identifying different social constructs associated to alternative cultural models and views of the body. In this perspective, we refer to analyses of the maternal body and the motherhood issues that raise identity questions from the own perception of the body and self-awareness to the relation between the self and its representation in society. The complexity of being a woman has always been the major difference between the genders. While the male identity has never been reduced to its paternal function, on the contrary, the female identity had been, for a long time in history, synonymous with either its maternal function or its social status as a wife, lover, prostitute or servant, but never as a subject of history and citizen. What we know and think about conception, pregnancy, delivery, breastfeeding, motherhood in a nutshell, not only describes what women

actually are, but shapes our expectations of what women as mothers should be and thus leads to moral judgements on what is good and bad, natural and artificial. These judgements then constitute the grounds of political decisions on maternity and fertility. More than that, the motherhood is not primarily a natural or biological function, but is a socially constructed behavior, constantly changed depending economic and social evolutions. A detailed analysis on the political control of women's bodies through controlling their reproductive functions and pro-natality policies in communist Romania is to be found in Adriana Iordache's article ***Regulating Reproduction in Communist Romania (1966 - 1989)***. The issue of excessive medicalization of the pregnancy and delivery, but also of controlling the body through medical technologies are mentioned in almost all feminist accounts on motherhood. In the current issue we find an analysis of these issues from an alternative perspective - **Lesbian Families Planning for a Biologically Related Child** analysis carried out by Alexandra Gruian.

The state's interference with the most private sphere of the women's bodies is also analyzed in Ulaş Sunata's article **State policies and the women's bodies: The Turkish case**. The focus of the article is on women whose symbolic presence in political discourses and policies can be problematic for various reasons: who takes the governmental decisions and actions to strengthen women's position in society; what are the purposes? What is the women's role in the policy making process? The author argues that the design, adoption and implementation of policies targeting women mostly by men reproduces a peripheral role of women in the society.

On the other had, there are multiple other social pressures on the body, beyond the state and even more powerful than the state – cultural norms and expectations. The current issue of *Analyze Journal* also includes interesting analyses on women's bodies that originate beyond the European context thus revealing the huge differences between cultures when it comes to body self perception, understanding and managing pregnancy. An ethnographic material of Eastern

Cameroon realized by Erica Van der Sijpt and called *Pregnancy pragmatics unveiled: on bodies, bellies, and power in Cameroon* shows that, although forces like patriarchy, biomedicine, and the state shape the field within which Cameroonian women give meaning and direction to their reproduction, women themselves have considerable leeway to circumvent existing powers or to use them to their own advantage.

Analysing the Muslim world, Dr. Abeer Al-Sarrani and Dr. Alaa Alghamdi argue that „western feminists have not succeeded in their assumed mission to ‘rescue’ third world women.” Writing in response to in response to Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1988, 1991), the article „Through Third World Women’s Eyes: The Shortcomings of Western Feminist Scholarship on the Third World” analyzes the problems that Western scholars face when struggling to call for third world women’s rights. The authors argue that „there is a tendency to universalize values such as freedom and agency, coupled with a misunderstanding of the meaning of social and religious conventions such as the wearing of the veil or headscarf. Furthermore, investigation of issues facing Muslim women is complicated by the fact that Western feminists are consistently seen as a threat and an indirect way to colonize this part of the world”. The article concludes that the key to building new understanding is to avoid the tendency to essentialize or totalize the experience of women of an unfamiliar culture.

Though most commonly the studies on women’s bodies are related to pregnancy, state control, societal norms and expectations as regards the women’s role in reproduction and thus the alienation of their own bodies, the studies on body’s changes are in no way limited to pregnancy. The current issue provides a valuable analysis on the image of female teens’ bodies, taking into account the mechanisms that shape the attitude toward body image and exploring how messages from media and significant others are received and internalized. The analysis realized by Cristina Nanu, Diana Tăut, Adriana Băban and titled *Why adolescents are not happy with their body*

image? proceeds from the idea that adolescent girls are highly aware of their appearance and invest significant cognitive and emotional resources in their relation with the physical body. Several studies show that girls become worried with weight and shape at quite young ages and thus become vulnerable in adopting unhealthy living and eating habits. The article aims at investigating the characteristics of body image in adolescence as well as the factors that contribute to body image concerns.

Moving forward the path of body image and its social implication, the article of Elena-Larisa Stanciu and Bjørn Christensen, **Controlling Women's Bodies: the Black and Veiled Female Body in Western Visual Culture. A Comparative View**, sets out to investigate the black and veiled female body within particular regimes of power and visibility. The two types of bodies are considered cultural artifacts, the products of social norms and normative imperatives. The article builds on a theoretical framework centered on the notion of embodiment and on how the human body shapes the social interactions.

The volume thus gathers quite diverse perspectives and analyses on women's bodies and their social contingencies, ranging from pregnancy and state control to powerful teenage norms related to the ideal image of female body. This issue is very rich analytically as it features contributions that adopt both established perspectives such as Western feminism as well as alternative perspectives such as Muslim women approach towards the topic of women's bodies. The volume has thus a very strong theoretical thrust as well as empirical grounding in studying the consequences of the social and political control of the women's bodies.