

Lea Melandri

*Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilization*

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Reviewed by Marcela González-Barrientos, 2019

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Quote: The author shows how the narrative of the original excision from what is human--through the intervention of language--that opposes thought and body overlooks the violent rupture with which men have believed and wanted to differentiate themselves from the body that brought them into the world, devaluing it as pure materiality.

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This text is especially relevant for philosophers interested in discussing the concept of ontology and the problem between essentialism/materialism, from a feminist standpoint such as Lea Melandri's, that highlights the relevance of a position located and contextualized in the body, and sexuality itself. This becomes significant if we follow the line of thought of the contemporary feminist philosophical debate between, on the one hand, a gender deconstruction philosophy (Butler), and, on the other hand, a materialist philosophy of becoming that focuses on the centrality of sexual difference (Braidotti). Likewise, *Love and Violence* makes a significant contribution to the explanation of one of the key aspects of feminism: the problematic role of love (sexual, maternal) with respect to the perpetuation of dominant and violent relationships against women.

Melandri points out that the relationship of dependency between women and the "dream of love," learned since childhood and reproduced generation after generation, is preserved as a captivating promise of *complementarity*, which sustains the belief that only through the union of men and women can ultimate life satisfaction be achieved. Melandri highlights that not even the claims for freedom, autonomy, and equality of rights demanded by feminism seem to touch the hard core of this romantic yearning.

As a protagonist of the Italian feminist movement that emerged in the 1970s, the author emphasizes how this "shifted to the demand for an end to patriarchy and an analysis of male domination, understood as the expropriation of female existence itself: the identification of women with the body, the objectification and commodification of women, the conflation of sexuality with maternity, the circumscription of female sexuality to obligatory reproductive services" (80).

Feminists focused on analyzing the relationship between the sexes through issues related to the body, sexuality, and personal experience. Thus, they became aware not only that the body is always regarded as sexual and not neuter, but also that, based on this difference, the most lasting power relationship was built, that is, the division of sexual roles and the identification of women with the body and nature.

### **The Body and the Polis**

The author shows how the narrative of the original excision from what is human--through the intervention of language--that opposes thought and body overlooks the violent rupture with which men have believed and wanted to differentiate themselves from the body that brought them into the world, devaluing it as pure materiality. Melandri refers to how women have embraced the world view of the dominant sex, speaking the same language, confusing love and violence, and putting into effect adaptations, assimilations, and painful resilience.

In this regard, the author proposes creating a political culture that considers the complexity of life: “we need to interrogate our own experience, to see subjectivity as belonging to a thinking body that is sexed, plural, capable of being recognized in its singularity while simultaneously recognizing what it shares in common with others” (16). Hence, the need that feminists from the 70s pinpointed, which focused their political practices on the body and described it as the essential place for the construction of feminine individuality: a body shaped by the fears and wishes of men that have ultimately invaded their identities; a body that has been violated, taken advantage of, controlled, and reduced to sexual and reproductive functions.

### **Loving Mothers**

If love is the dream of fusing and complementing what we were taught to desire and expect, Melandri warns us about its consequences for the dependency of women: “As long as love remains chained to the dream of two beings melting into one, as if they were two halves of a single whole, it cannot be lived except as a terrible necessity: for women, constrained to alter their reason to live in order to justify the position of men as the sole protagonists in the world, love becomes the condition of survival” (38). The author argues that the retaking of the body involved the exploration of all the internalized rules of male domination that permeated a certain view of the world and life, according to which women were not only judged and controlled, but also were judging and controlling themselves.

Certainly if love involves the possibility of being “chosen,” the fulfilled promise of the loving dream, it is not difficult to think that gender roles will spread rapidly regarding the *must be* imposed by the social rules. A woman will want to please, make herself indispensable, be wanted, and become the dream of femininity that would make her man proud. Moreover, considering the contributions of Bourdieu (1998), Melandri claims that love, far from being an exception to the rule of male domination, is the supreme and most subtle form of symbolic violence.

Thus Melandri argues that the violence involved in both the male ownership of the female body, and this *dream of love*, would represent the temptation to ease all struggles and, thus, life itself:

Much like the repetition of the original breath of life, violence is contained within eros itself; in love and violence we find the *logic of war*--the undeclared war between the sexes that encompasses the male's appropriation of the female body, the fixation of women on the role of motherhood, women's expulsion from the historical community of men, which regards itself as homogeneous with its own genealogy. We can speak here of "sexual cleansing," that is, the negation by males of their heterogeneous origin. (50)

In this sense, love is experienced, on the one hand, as the gathering, the long-awaited harmony, and, on the other hand, as the loss of self with respect to the individuality of each one of the lovers. If the idea of reunion is the basic expectation of the love experience, both sexes together would only falsely overlook the opposing places that they have taken throughout history, in order to pursue this impossible dream of unity.

### **The Circle of Men**

The author highlights the power that the concept of "neutrality" has held until today, by which men tend to think about themselves and talk as if they were a unique prototype of the human species, and, at the same time, the sudden way this neutrality can be thwarted, as if it were a mask that could be put on and off at will, when traversing the public and private sphere in a way that appears in its discourse as an unquestionable truth.

Notwithstanding the progress of our civilization, the rationales of love and violence that sustain sexism still operate and are still disregarded by men, removing the relationship between sexes from political analysis and stubbornly defending an apparent neutrality. Melandri highlights how male domination over females is different from all other historical power relationships due to its profound and inconsistent implications. This is particularly evident in the confusion between love and violence, developed at the core of intimate relationships such as sexuality and motherhood, where love and rejection and lack and excess are mixed, all of which transforms what is closest to us, what is really known to us only because it is familiar, into something unbearable.

The author claims that men have had to devalue and even eliminate their starting dependence on women in order to establish their autonomy and freedom: "Through the image that men have forged of the other sex, they have erected an internal conflict between *helplessness and power*, between dependency on and annihilation of all connections, between embodiment and thought, feeling and reason" (88). Thus Melandri claims that the removal of women as people and their subsequent devaluation operate as a cause of physical, emotional, and sexual violence against women.

However, the author highlights how hard it is for women to allow themselves to have their own lives and not resort to the care of others as a "natural" fate linked to femininity. Thus, as she mentions ironically, "the tiresome obligation of living for themselves" is surely one

of the most persistent contradictions faced by the heirs of feminism who are confronted, even today, by the dream of love. In this sense:

The domination of women by men is distinguished from all other historical relations of power by its profound and contradictory implications: first, the *confusion of love and violence*. We encounter here a domination that arises out of the intimate relations of sex and motherhood. Many prefer not to recognize the most ancient and enduring relation between love and hate, tenderness and rage, life and death--a relation expressed in the claims that one must destroy in order to preserve, that one kills out of excessive love, that one's group, nation, or culture is superior to, even the enemy of, another's. (77)

In this sense, falling in love and offering oneself entirely to others indeed involves sacrificing the self, a renunciation that our own individuality can later assign to a betrayal of the self, of personal projects or plans; however, it is a renunciation paradoxically protected and welcomed by women, who look at love as the guarantee of their happiness and their safeguard in entering the world of the *dream of love* that they expect.

### **The Disquieting Slumber of the West**

The author takes the issue to a social level by analyzing the wars, invasions, and xenophobia that characterize the history of peoples. She analyzes how the need for an identity, for answering "who we are," depends on acknowledging our belongings (sex, language, nation, and so on) and also acknowledging "who we are not" or "who we are against." Thus, the tendency to differentiate ourselves accentuates and becomes violent every time the threat of being absorbed and assimilated appears: "The temptation to sever, with one clean cut, the 'we' from the 'you' (*voi*) appeals to a collectivity that feels threatened by the approach of the distant, that fears familiarization with the foreign and the erosion of the precise confines of its borders" (96).

Thus, the primary form of social and subjective bond, the original closeness of a body with respect to another during pregnancy, is an intimate belonging close to indistinction, which is violently separated adopting a fearsome and threatening diversity between sexes that only domination seems to appease: "It is as if all of the successive relations that humanity created in order to guarantee its survival carried with them that initial offensive and defensive exclusion of women" (97-98).

### **The Unstoppable Revolution**

Melandri finishes by analyzing the contexts, conditions of possibility, and hopes that prompted feminist groups during the 70s and other social movements that arose from them. She notes their configuration regarding the essential condition of overcoming passivity and fear, considering the presence and participation of all those excluded from power, exercising power among equal and autonomous individuals:

This practice, and the discoveries to which it led, necessitated our abandonment of dualism; seeking *connections* between sexuality and politics, sexuality and the

symbolic, we came to recognize that sexuality belonged to both the private and public spheres. Likewise, in economic terms, we unmasked the free labor performed by women, which passed under the guise of love and care. We exposed the gaps between so-called objective reality and personal, lived experience. (126)

From there, Melandri analyzes the current consumption society and the atomization of the masses it entails, pointing out the need for questioning once again the lives of individuals and the experiences of the growing intersection of powers, wisdoms, and institutions of the public sphere. In her opinion, the women's movement from the 70s could have blazed a trail to work toward this goal:

One forgets, or perhaps wishes not to recognize, that the non-authoritarian and feminist movements marked the beginning of an "affirmative biopolitics," a politics that accorded a greater role to the body, a politics that questioned experience and understood subjectivity as located in the thinking, sexed, and plural body rather than as belonging to the abstract figure of the citizen. This thinking-body subject would simultaneously be able to recognize its singularity and its community with others; it would be able to access a more general horizon while, at the same time, penetrating the deep layers of the individual's memory. (129)

I agree that in order to develop "freedom starting from the inside," we should not forget how the experiences of women regarding power and domination share a complex area with men, in which the dominated and the dominator have spent millennia speaking the same language, and where the alienation of a few has not been without cost for the humanity of others.

In this aspect, it is pertinent to highlight the promising horizon Melandri suggests regarding the growth of women's freedom and autonomy, despite all the hardships in terms of bonds and relationships between the sexes it entails, which could also imply a resource that enables men to experience a new self and a new body, opening a way out of violence as the only way to separate themselves from the perceived threat to their sexual identity.

In conclusion, and with respect to the problem Melandri suggests regarding the impossibility of separating love and violence, perhaps a subjective, social, and political approach might enable us to reconsider violence as the extreme expression of an aggressiveness at the core of the relationships between the sexes that appears when these relationships perpetuate the model of perfection that casts fault aside, an approach that might encourage the expression and questioning of some of these experiences regarding violence as a way of establishing relationships with others.

## Reference

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.