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Chapter

The Female Body as Sites of Power

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Abstract

The female body was and is involved in politics. The idea of the so-called femininity, including the female body, has political implications. In the past, the weakness of the female body was justified, among other things, by the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Today's unrealistic ideal imposes on women the (self-)discipline of caring for physical appearance. Your own body becomes a tool of social oppression. Therefore, the emancipation of women requires the unmasking of the alleged naturalness of the female body model. The body can even become an instrument of political struggle.

Keywords: femininity, body, feminism, power, emancipation

1. Introduction

The starting point for my further reflections is Kate Millet's claim that sex is a status category with political implications ([1], p. 58). Sex, and corporeality in certain respects (sexual characteristics, susceptibility to diseases, physical strength, predisposition to perform given professions, etc.), has political significance. Having a body identified as a female body affects one's position in political reality, condemning its owner to a status of subordination. For Millet, the most significant consequence of being a woman is being on the losing side in an unequal distribution of political power. Therefore, in a patriarchal society, the relationship between men and women should be described with such terms as rule, domination, and subordination.

However, involving the body, especially the female body, with politics is even more profound. Legislation and social policies have a direct or indirect effect on women's ability to make decisions about their bodies. Millet draws attention to US regulations of her time that prohibited abortion. She believed it was the way in which patriarchal legislation denied women the right to decide on their own bodies and forced them to undergo backstreet abortions ([1], p. 64). In addition to the prohibition of abortion indicated by Millet, we might also mention the availability of various methods of contraception (including the financial method that involved reimbursement for contraceptives) or regulations on in vitro fertilization, which directly interfered with corporeality. Indirect influence, on the other hand, is exerted by, for example, demographic policies, such as incentives on childbearing, or conversely, pressures to reduce fertility. In this context, I believe, the male body proves much less susceptible to the influence of politics, and any attempt to subject it to such regulations is strongly opposed. In Poland, for example, the over-the-counter sale of EllaOne day-after pill
has been prohibited, justified by concern for the health of women who might over-
dose the product (although no such cases have been reported). On the other hand,
the purchase of potency pills intended for men does not require a visit to a doctor,
and more than that, these substances are widely advertised on radio and television. A
man would feel embarrassed having to explain his problems. Female body and female
sexuality have long been under control.

The body thus determines political status, and politics affect certain aspects
of corporeality. This is the reason why feminists question the distinction between
private and public. Political philosophers assume that alongside the public sphere,
there is a private sphere, protected from outside interference, at the heart of which
lies the intimate sphere. Meanwhile, when analyzing the situation of women in the
context of the aforementioned legal regulations, we note that this division is illusive.
Jane Mansbridge and Susan Molle Okin note that questioning the above distinction
means: “... perceiving all action as potentially bearing public significance. It means
noticing that the force which constitutes much of politics goes all the way down to
the tiniest gestures that express domination between people, and begins with them.
(...) Challenging the dichotomy of the public/private sphere means emphasizing
the non-triviality of domestic issues and demanding that they be included in public
discourse. It is emphasized here that whatever happens between a man and a woman
at home, even in the bedroom, is conditioned and, on the other hand, itself conditions
whatever happens in legislation and on the battlefields.” ([2], p. 359). The binding of
both spheres turns out to be reciprocal: politics regulate many private matters, and
patriarchal relations that prevail in the private sphere cannot remain unaffected by
political decisions.

Changing the status of women from that of subordination, therefore, requires
making the issue of sex, together with its corporeal aspect, the subject of analysis,
and public discourse. It is necessary to bring them out of a closed private space
into the light of day. Otherwise, it is impossible to address the question of how the
domination of men over women came about and why it has endured. Traditionally,
the subordinate role of women is explained by referring to so-called natural differ-
ences. The role and place of women in society and politics came to be determined by
the body. The body build and its frailty manifested by the deficiencies of physical
and mental strength necessary to perform many activities, susceptibility to specific
diseases such as hysteria and swing of moods resulting from the monthly cycle—all
of this justified the patriarchal model. Germaine Greer describes a disease called
“green sickness,” or more academically chlorosis ([3], p. 41), which was attributed
exclusively to women. Such ailments were supposed to effectively exclude women
from professional and political life. In more “modern” times, however, it was argued
that women’s brains are organized differently and do not allow them to succeed in sci-
ence and technology, areas where knowledge now translates into power. Therefore,
women are unable to fully understand the mechanisms that govern the modern world,
which is symbolized by the engineer.

1 “The descriptions of the condition are vivid, and although some of them incorporate symptoms arising
from other causes generally we can observe the same hypochondriacal syndromes that are put down to hys-
teria these days: epilepsy, asthma, breathlessness, flatulence, sensus globi in abdomine se volventis, lassitude,
convulsions, and painful menstruation.”

2 Greer cites Otto Weininger’s book “Sex and Character;” a similar type of argumentation is presented by
Anne Moir and David Jessel in their work “Brain Sex: the Real Difference between Men and Women.”
2. Gender differences—Nature or culture?

The belief in the natural differences between sexes was questioned in the early days of feminism. John Stuart Mill, in “The Subjection of Women”, in his fight for granting women the right to vote, seeks to refute the argument of women’s natural and inalienable otherness invoked by opponents of their participation in politics. He asks: “What are the natural differences between the two sexes? In the present state of society, we cannot get a complete and correct answer to this; yet almost everybody dogmatizes about it, hardly anyone attends seriously to the only source for even a partial answer. (...)”

Because however great and apparently ineradicable the moral and intellectual differences between men and women might be, the only evidence we can have for there being natural differences is negative” ([4], p. 308). As an example of such seemingly natural differences, Mill mentions specifically female health ailments and notes that: “we see from the almost total disappearance of ‘hysterics’ and fainting-fits since they have gone out of fashion.” ([4], p. 344). It, therefore, turns out that it is not the corporeal constitution that has a decisive influence on women’s behavior and health, but customs and fashions. Femininity is not determined only by nature but also shaped by culture.

Second-wave and contemporary feminists are far more radical in expressing this view. “From the outset, our observation of the female is consciously and unconsciously biased by assumptions that we cannot help making and cannot always identify when they have been made. The new assumption behind the discussion of the body is that everything that we may observe could be otherwise” ([3], p. 5)—Greer concludes. Magdalena Środa, on the other hand, states: “Until recently, it has been a popular opinion, not questioned by many, that a woman is by nature destined for domestic and family life and a man for public and creative life. This conviction, supported by the category of ‘nature,’ never actually required justification but still had been justified a lot” ([5], pp. 295–296). Citing Sherry B. Ortner, she lists three types of such justifications. First of all, the female body is involved in the process of species reproduction, for which reason it is closer to nature than the male body. Secondly, a woman’s body, especially its maternal function, assigns her to the home, thus greatly limiting her social mobility. Last but not least, women “by nature” have a different mental predisposition. These arguments show that the (female) body, to paraphrase Millet’s thesis quoted at the beginning of the article, has political implications. This very body excludes her from the sphere of politics, deprives her of the opportunities to exert influence on political decisions, and thus deprives her of the ability to protect her interests, as: “the private world of women is nearly everywhere and always subordinated to the public (socio-political) world of men” ([5], p. 298). Even if there are currently no legal obstacles preventing women from participating in political life, the stereotype mentioned by Professor Środa still prevails to effectively discourage them from engaging in activities within the public sphere.

3. (Self) disciplining the female body

Questioning the division between public men and domestic women, feminists make a distinction between biological sex and cultural gender. They argue that: “the male or female roles are determined by extra-natural factors, regardless of the anatomy and physiology of the external organs” ([1], p. 60). It turns out that it is not
the body that determines sex, but it is sex that shapes the body. This is because many aspects of corporeality are part of gender identity, that is, that aspect of femininity that is shaped by social and cultural pressures. Greer points out that even something seemingly as tough and durable as a skeleton is susceptible to deformation under particular circumstances, like wearing corsets or performing the job of a typist or a secretary, which requires a person to constantly bend.

Pierre Bourdieu in his conception of habitus, defined as a “system of dispositions,” shows how historical and social conditions determine our beliefs and practices. He uses the term social class, but I think it can also be applied to gender. It proves, among other things, that the aesthetic taste of an individual is closely related to his social position. Aesthetic preferences are the basis of social judgment and determine belonging (or exclusion) to a given group [6]. Our physicality, body shape, hairstyle, and clothing, is also a way of presenting these preferences. According to Bourdieu, physical appearance is also an element of cultural capital. According to Naomi Wolf, the body itself, not just clothing or hairstyle, is an object of fashion [7]. Therefore, the female body is not arbitrarily shaped by its owner but is given to practices consistent with the habitus. “Everything related to habitus, body language, gestures, and postures, are internalized by individuals so strongly that they seem natural” - also internalized image of the female body is considered its own. They also fail to notice that: “the image of the ideal and legitimate body (such qualities as beauty, youth, vitality, vigor, grace, and harmony) are far from reality and the real body” ([8], p. 94).

Sandra Lee Bartky also points this out, when she refers to Michel Foucault's concepts and his descriptions of disciplinary procedures, and argues that it is this type of practice that produces a body that is recognized by its appearance and characteristic gestures as feminine. Thus, we are not women because we have female bodies. Conversely, our bodies become feminine because we adopt this gender role.

Lee Bartky presents three types of practices that shape the female body:

- those that aim at creating bodies of a certain shape and size;
- those that bring out particular gestures, postures, ways of moving, etc., from the body; and
- those that treat the body as a surface for decoration.

Practices of the first type impose a certain model of the ideal body. Today it is the ideal of a slim, almost boyish figure. In order to achieve it, women undergo very strict diets and work out, performing exercises that shape various muscles. They often become anorectic or bulimic, which are the present-day conditions equivalent to hysteria. Practices focused on gestures, on the other hand, lead to the development of a submissive attitude in women. Hence the effort to appear small and harmless take up as little space as possible or express their subservience by lowering their eyes or averting their gaze in response to the gazes of men. Decorating the female body also requires a lot of effort. It is necessary to take care of the skin and complexion, proper make-up, well-groomed and stylish hair, and waxing. All these practices are aimed at one goal—transforming one's body into the body of an ideal woman and into a body that is properly trained and shaped by power relations that give it a subordinate status. However, this is an effort that is doomed to failure. The ideal turns out to be unattainable, and chasing it unsuccessfully results in feelings of guilt and
shame. It opens the way to a conviction that our body is imperfect and defective. As Lee Bartky argues: “To have a body felt to be ‘feminine’—a body socially constructed through the appropriate practices—is in most cases crucial to a woman’s sense of herself as female.” ([9], p. 68).

This body does not belong to her. As a woman, she “must make herself ‘object and prey’ for the man.” ([9], p. 61). Disobedience to disciplinary procedures is punished by the denial of patronage, this means low social status. The feeling of guilt is an equally severe punishment for rebel women. This is because patriarchal standards become internalized, making women extremely effective at conforming to them. Therefore, the freedom that they have now achieved is proving to be only illusive. In fact, they have been almost completely subjected to a new, anonymous, and diffuse disciplinary authority that has taken control over their bodies. In the model described by Lee Bartky, the body is a product of disciplinary procedures of power, which is thoroughly imbued with politics. The woman’s body, by involving its owner in a regimen of practices that shape it, even becomes an instrument of oppression.

Since their bodies have been taken away from them, women mostly do not feel comfortable in them. Millet saw it when she wrote that: “Patriarchal conditioning and convictions seem to poison the women’s attitude to their own bodies until it actually becomes a promised source of anguish” ([1], p. 89). In this way, the politicization of bodies leads to their peculiar alienation. One’s own body turns out to be alien and hostile. Anyway, it can hardly be called one’s own anymore since it is the product of disciplinary procedures and the result of patriarchal relations of domination. The subordinate status of women means that the most intimate sphere, as it may seem, corporeality and how it is felt, is shaped by power relations. It is impossible to escape from being drawn into this arrangement because: “for the sake of feeling oneself as an existing entity, one can now only exist as a man or as a woman” ([9], p. 68). Patriarchal power is holding on tight—what has changed is perhaps the form of exercising it. It has become more modern and less visible, but because of that perhaps even more effective. What is now effectively holding patriarchy in place is a rigid, polarized division into two sexes and the need to be assigned to one of them with all its consequences. “It is an essential part of our conceptual apparatus that the sexes are a polarity and a dichotomy in nature. Actually, that is quite false” ([3], p. 17)—says Greer. Therefore, putting the naturalness of traditional gender roles into question requires going much deeper and challenging the very foundations of gender classification.

Wolf believes that the myth of beauty oppressive the female body is the last remnant of the old ideologies of femininity ([7], p. 27). Therefore, it must be exposed and rejected. Confronting this myth requires asking about power relations. It is necessary to ask who it serves and who derives profits from it. The appearance of the female body (or rather constant concern for it) is a political matter ([7], p. 347). Without overcoming this oppression, we will not create truly egalitarian relationships.

Biology and nature, as suggested by feminists, do not unequivocally delineate the male–female dichotomy. This is because they leave a lot of room for interpretation. However, this area of freedom has been appropriated by authority. That is why it is so important to unmask the apparent naturalness and show the political entanglement of gender categories. “The ‘normal’ sex roles that we learn to play from our infancy are no more natural than the antics of a transvestite. In order to approximate those shapes and attitudes, which are considered normal and desirable, both sexes deform themselves, justifying the process by referring to the primary, genetic difference between the sexes.” ([3], p. 22)—says Greer. It is important to be aware of this in order to try to oppose the ever-present patriarchal power.
4. Beyond the male-female dichotomy

Can the gender dichotomy be completely discarded? What could it be replaced with? Liberal feminists propose the replacement of polarized gender roles with the concept of androgyny, that is, recognizing the entire spectrum of gender identities individually chosen by each individual. “Androgyny does not eliminate gender differences but is built on the understanding that we are capable of both transcending polarized gender roles and creatively developing aspects of our personality that have been ‘neglected’ in traditional upbringing. If we are all socially encouraged to develop both feminine and masculine qualities (which are equally important both for society and for the good life of an individual), all discriminations will disappear” ([5], p. 322)—as Professor Środa describes the ideal of androgyny. Androgyny abolishes the traditional rigid division into men and women, replacing the polarized identification of males and females with a whole spectrum of individualized gender identities that are combinations of what has traditionally been considered masculine and feminine in various combinations and proportions. This ideal is supposed to depoliticize the body, as far as possible. This is because sex here is stripped of its political significance, blurred in the multiplicity of individual experiments, and transferred entirely to the private sphere. Gender identity freed from social pressures to become a “normalized” woman or man becomes a matter of individual preference. At the same time, androgyny does not question the existence of biological differences, it only assumes that no clear determination of those differences exists. The same set of physical characteristics may be the basis for different variations on gender roles. Corporeality is largely an area for individual experimentations, the results of which cannot be fully predicted. This means the end of the rigid framework of masculinity and femininity that individuals must be forced into with the use of disciplinary strategies. In line with the general liberal trend, the sphere of individual freedom is broadened and the influence of authority is reduced—the body is definitely freed from the scope of political influence.

However, for some, this is still an inadequate solution. A concept is emerging that completely challenges the distinction between a given biological sex and a constructed gender. Judith Butler is trying to address this issue: What other foundational categories of identity—the binary of sex, gender, and the body—can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable?” ([10], p. 35). Therefore, the goal is to overthrow the last bastion of proponents of natural sex characteristics—biological sex. Its illusive invariability and political neutrality are to be exposed, for biological sex, which was given by nature, could not be impinged upon by power. And yet Butler tries to demonstrate that she too is a product of certain power relations—male domination and compulsory heterosexuality. Thus, politicizing the body goes even deeper than Lee Bartky showed—it is not just about the body’s shape, dimensions, and appearance. The body is recognized as a cultural mark, while the order of constructing gender identity so far is reversed.

It is not gender that is formed on the foundation of biological sex (in a way more or less determined by the latter), it is our perception of biological sex and perception of bodies that is the product of cultural regulatory practices. Three fictions need to be rejected: the belief in the unequivocal nature of biological sex, the alleged internal consistency of gender, and the binarity within the two categories. This is because they only serve to uphold the existing order of power. Therefore, with reference to the

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concept of Monique Wittig, Butler reflects: “Is there a ‘physical’ body prior to the perceptually perceived body? An impossible question to decide. Not only is the gathering of attributes under the category of sex suspect, but also the distinction of these ‘characteristics’ as such. That penis, vagina, breasts, and so forth are named sexual parts is both a restriction of the erogenous body to those parts and a fragmentation of the body as a whole” ([10], p. 215). The body is, therefore, not a given, something ready-made. We create it by distinguishing and giving names to its various parts. It is also up to us what significance we assign to its various elements. We are the ones who have completely arbitrarily selected a certain set of so-called gender characteristics. Our body is, therefore, a complete construction from the very beginning. Even if there is an objective body, which is independent of linguistic categories, it is inaccessible to us. When describing one’s body, one inevitably enters the perimeter of the cultural and social system. Our corporeality is always politicized. We may at best not realize it. Therefore, using categories taken from psychoanalysis, Butler states that: “The sexed surface of the body thus emerges as the necessary sign of a natural (ised) identity and desire” ([10], p. 153). We thus find only the naturalized, instead of what was supposed to be natural. The alleged naturalness is meant to conceal the political involvement of gender identity at the biological level and create the appearance of its invariability. The category of nature is once again exposed as a tool that sustains the system of power.

Should we thus assume that: “... the body is not a ‘being’, but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality”? ([10], pp. 250–251). If so, the traditional division between the private sphere and the public sphere is untenable. For the very core of the private sphere, that which is most intimate to us — our own body — turns out to be shaped by culture and power. How has that come about? In her explanation, Butler refers to Michael Foucault’s claim that the entire sphere of sexuality (including, of course, the category of gender) is saturated with power, and that our bodies only make sense in the context of power relations. Therefore, sex is not only a category with political implications, it is political “from the very foundations.” Categories of sex and compulsory heterosexuality: “are not natural but political categories ([10], p. 231), as Butler underlines. Citing Foucault, she stresses that: The category of sex is thus inevitably regulative, and any analysis that makes that category presuppositional uncritically extends and further legitimates that regulative strategy as a power/knowledge regime” ([10], p. 189). Until we expose the power relations that hide behind the naturalized sex category, we will not be able to change them or free ourselves from them. This is not easy, as the naturalization strategy effectively masks the matrix of gender dichotomy and compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, if we want to change, if we want to abolish male domination and oppression associated with the social organization of sexual reproduction, we need to expose this apparent naturalness.

The awareness of politicizing gender identities paves the way for making a change. However, this is not an easy task. Butler notes that the authority that shapes our perceptions of body, sex, and desire does not fit into the liberal model of the social contract. We cannot negotiate the terms of how it functions, because it is not exercised by a group of specific, identifiable individuals in an intentional manner. It is an anonymous and dispersed power, within which: “power relations establish and limit the very possibility of will. Therefore, power can neither be taken away nor rejected, but only deployed differently.” ([10], p. 228). Neither revolution nor anarchy is possible. There is no escape from being involved in politics. However, one may question
and challenge the categories imposed by it and destabilize whatever forms the basis of power relations—the dichotomy and unequivocality of gender identities. This is served, for example, by parody practices that treat the surface of the body as a space for free staging. Such activities are intended to provoke reflection on the naturalness of masculinity and femininity. The proliferation of various configurations of gender identities is expected to destabilize this category. However, the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated.” ([10], p. 263). Thus, the right strategy is not an attempt at depoliticizing sex and the body, which is doomed to failure; but quite the contrary, treating one’s body as a “tool for political struggle.” This is the only way it is possible to reinterpret the practices that define gender identity and create new possibilities that transcend and break the binary matrix. Thus, this is the approach that stands in opposition to the idea of androgyny discussed early on. It is not a matter of excluding corporeality from the political sphere; quite the contrary, the body should be properly handled in the political sphere.

5. The chapter conclusion

Feminist discussions on gender address the politicization of the body in two ways. On the one hand, they point to the need to expose the involvement of corporeality in politics, which is hidden under the pretense of naturalness. They reveal that our body, the way we perceive it and the way we seek to change it, is not politically neutral but is the result of power relations. On the other hand, feminists do not wish in any way to remove gender issues from the political sphere. On the contrary, they indicate the need to bring sex and corporeality into the public debate. They argue that leaving these issues within the private sphere effectively sustains the patriarchal model. Of all the concepts that are the most radical, it is the body that becomes a tool. However both of these perspectives underscore one thing: what seems private, or even intimate to us, that is our own body, is, contrary to appearances of so-called naturalness, strongly (and according to some positions indelibly) entangled in politics.
The Female Body as Sites of Power
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.109680

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