

THE WEIGHT OF THE BODY ON THE SCALES OF JUSTICE

GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE

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The study of power relations in political theory and political science typically ignores any consideration of the role of the body. The public space is inhabited by rational and disembodied actors. In the Western philosophical tradition, this “somatophobia” can be traced back to a Platonic influence, and more specifically, in modern political thought, to Cartesian dualism. In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993), Susan Bordo describes modern mind/body dualism not only as a philosophical position centered on the rejection of our embodied nature, but also as a “practical metaphysics” that informs our perceptual schemes and more generally our culture¹. The aim of transcending our creatural condition in order to achieve an objective, universal condition of bodiless independence and transparency in which one remains deaf to the demands of one’s animal needs, passions and desires, so as not to fall into the “error of the senses” and to be able to obtain clear and distinct ideas, produced a radical rejection of the body that translated itself into a set of practices to control the body and especially those social groups that historically have been identified with the body, such as women.

The rediscovery of the body by contemporary philosophy has had important theoretical consequences in different fields that now appear profoundly intertwined, such as epistemology, social and political philosophy².

The abandonment of the idea of a universal, abstract and unencumbered condition, along with the adoption of standpoint theory and the inevitable withdrawal from individualism and the vision of a self that is transparent to itself, capable of

¹S. Bordo, *Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1993 (I 1992).

² See J. Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance. Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York, 2013.

immediate self-knowledge and of grasping universal ideas through their direct intuition, led to the emergence of social epistemology. This is a theoretical perspective by which the subject's agency is determined by its position within the complexity of the social structure. The subject's social identity and particular experience, which stem from his/her social position, inevitably inform his/her point of view and perspective on the world. Self-knowledge no longer gives access to self-evident truths, but to how the discursive practices constitute the subject and his/her perceptual schemes.

There is, though, a further important implication that can be drawn from a critique of epistemological individualism, i.e. the idea of a conception of knowledge that is valid in so far as it is detached and impartial. Feminist social epistemology, in particular, postulates not only the knowing subject's inevitable and unavoidable positioning, but also the value of attachment to the known object, because of the very strength of the motivation, drive, worry and concern, all summable in *care*, that lead to concerning oneself with an object. Along with this it postulates the inevitably political nature of knowledge and the existence of a link between epistemology and justice³. Social epistemology thus distances itself both from a conception of knowledge as a matter of mere perception of universal elements publicly and equally accessible to everyone, as long as one is capable of reasoning in an impartial and detached way and of properly forming one's beliefs, and from a representation of the knowing subject as indifferent to the known object. On the contrary, social epistemology listens seriously to the many stories of witnesses who have a different access to the world, seeing the world from variegated perspectives, also by virtue of their different positions in terms of power and privilege.

If important consequences ensue from conceiving of our body as a specific point of view on the world, no less do implications ensue from the body's being at the same time an object in the world and an unavoidable interface in our relationships with each other. In its interface dimension the body makes us vulnerable to others, both — as Butler and Cavarero maintain in their writings⁴— as injury or violence and as caress or love. In our exposure to another, our visible appearance plays a decisive role. The moment we look at the world, we perceive our body as a possible target of another's gaze that coldly fixes us as separate from itself in a stereotype or reifies us, turning us into a scientific object to be exhibited as a curiosity or freak, as something residual and destined to disappear. This may be considered the portrait of the mod-

³ Cf. L. Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006; Ead., "Ignorance, Injustice and the Politics of Knowledge", *Australian Feminist Studies*, 29, 80 (2014), pp. 148-160; Ead., "Care, Concern and Advocacy: Is There a Place for Epistemic Responsibility?", *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 1, 1 (2015), pp. 1-20.

⁴ Cf. J. Butler, *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, New York 2004; Ead., *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?*, Verso, New York, 2009; A. Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011 and Ead., *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto (California), 2016.

ern scientist, who works with bodies considered as monstrous, abnormal, pathological. This was also the way in which public opinion once looked at non-conforming bodies, staring at them exactly how we are told from an early age it is impolite to do⁵. Corporeal variants vis-à-vis race, gender, disability and sexuality functioned as features of an irreducible and inferior otherness establishing a hierarchy of bodies and reserving for them a differing access to power, status and privilege. At the apex of the hierarchy was the white, able-bodied, heterosexual male, identified with rationality, and toward the bottom all those groups for whom it was impossible –as Young says⁶– to forget their corporeality, all those bodies fashioned “imperfectly” and thus functioning as living examples of the most diverse social anxieties about what a body should not be or do.

The political return of the embodied subject has moved our theoretical concerns away from the metaphor of the body politic to the politics of the bodies, the relationship between bodies and power, the material consequences of oppression and domination. These are the very concerns that got the attention of the social movements of the 1970s, from Blacks to the disabled, women and sexual minorities, and that then became the focus of Foucault's thought, from which authors such as Bartky, Butler and Bordo later drew inspiration⁷.

Aware of the reifying power of a gaze, Iris Marion Young criticizes contemporary theories of justice and offers a reflection on justice that rejects *theories* as a starting point, rejecting the idea that we must learn to “contemplate the object” by abstracting ourselves from our particular, situated context:

Reflective discourse about justice

[...] should not pose as knowledge in the mode of seeing or observing, where the knower is initiator and master of the known. [...] The sense of justice arises not from looking, but as Lyotard says, from listening [...]”⁸.

Comparing her critical reflection on social justice to Rawls's theory of distributive justice, Young does not just oppose listening to looking. In line with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and with the American pragmatist tradition, she emphasizes also how the social theorist's motivation cannot be guaranteed by the “veil of ignorance”, and how it grows out of a passion for justice and the very desire to put an end to injustice, a desire to realize the unrealized potentialities for a just society already present in social reality⁹.

⁵ R. Garland-Thomson, *Staring. How We Look*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York, 2009.

⁶ I. Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford (1990), Paperback reissue, with a new foreword by Danielle Allen, 2011, p. 4.

⁷ Cf. S. Threadcraft, *Embodiment*, in Lisa Disch e Mary Hawkesworth (ed. by), *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, pp. 207-226.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

The contrast between looking and listening, around which Young works following Lyotard, may however not be as clear and distinct as she presents it. Judith Butler, for example, in *Frames of War* observes:

[...] The tacit interpretative scheme that divides worthy from unworthy lives works fundamentally through the senses, differentiating the cries we can hear from those we cannot, the sights we can see from those we cannot, and likewise at the level of touch and even smell¹⁰.

Our listening to the victims of injustice may be hampered by the same mechanisms that make them invisible to our eyes, or by frameworks of interpretation that unconsciously condition both the objects of our perceptions and our emotions toward them. Hence the importance of paying attention —as suggested both by Sophie Bourgault's and Alessandro Pratesi's essays in this issue— to bodily interaction, to the conditions that make effective listening possible and those that hinder it, and to the processes that may be required to unlearn our prejudices, those same prejudices that may prevent our communication with each other.

The question evokes a problem that has to do with the two forms of epistemic injustices identified by Amanda Fricker¹¹: testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice. We speak of testimonial injustice when the word of a victim of injustice is not trusted, believed and even listened to. In contrast, we speak of hermeneutic justice when we do not have at our disposal the hermeneutic resources that could allow us to interpret and identify as injustice the social experiences of particular groups: for example, society long considered disability as a personal misfortune, and thus it was insensitive to the disadvantages it imposed on the disabled by the very fact that the social space was conceived and designed exclusively for the able-bodied. In both cases, it is crucial to give voice to the victims of injustice and then leave space to hear them, but this can only happen to the extent to which we are able and willing to change the direction of our overall perception of the other, thus allowing the other's body to free itself of the stereotypes that we have projected on it, so that the other can rebel against our desire to reduce him/her to normality or dismiss him/her as a pathological abnormality.

In this light it is important to appreciate the work on the body and through the body that takes place via the various forms of artistic performance or political activism¹². From gay pride events to the classic performances of drag queens and kings, the more recent bearded lady performances, and theatrical performances by the dis-

¹⁰ J. Butler, *Frames of War*, cit.

¹¹ A. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethic of Knowing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.

¹² B. Shepard, L. M. Bogad, & S. Duncombe, "Performing vs. the Insurmountable: Theatrics, Activism, and Social Movements", *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 4, 3 (2008), pp. 1-30: <<http://liminalities.net/4-3/insurmountable.pdf>>

abled, such as *Sins Invalid* or *Bed in, Bed Out*, to name just a few, we see—as Alberto Pinto shows in his reading of Judith Butler's recent works (see here)—oppressed, marginalized, pathologized bodies challenging stereotypes often rooted not only in mainstream culture, but among the outcast minorities themselves, speaking up, and taking on a new, autonomous form of visibility.

While the new means of mass communication contribute to enhancing the visual and theatrical dimension of politics, we should not underestimate the importance of politics in itself for enabling all those groups whose members are "frozen into being marked as Other"¹³ to show themselves in a different light. It is very important for those groups to emphasize the vulnerability that resides in each of us, by bringing from the margins to the centre of the political debate the public role of emotions and affections, in an attempt to counter the shame and disgust that are often associated with anomalous bodies as defensive barriers that allow so-called 'normal people' to maintain their claim to normality.

The essays collected in this issue touch in various ways on the topics discussed in this short introduction. It is no coincidence that they take as their starting point the situation of historically discriminated groups, such as women with disabilities, sexual minorities, women of the aboriginal peoples of Canada¹⁴, refugees and asylum seekers, groups whose bodies—as Maria Giulia Bernardini observes speaking of disabled women—have been made silent, invisible, and fixed in a stereotyped view. The first difficulty that all these groups have encountered historically has been to recognize themselves, and then be recognized, not as deviant individuals or freaks or victims of fate or bad luck¹⁵, but as a collective agent victim of social injustices. This became possible only when they were able to see as shared political and social problems a whole range of experiences that they had lived as failures or personal and private problems for a long time before. This reminds us of the complex and collective nature of the political action needed to change or redefine the social norms that determine the spaces (in some cases stuffy and uninhabitable) within which bodies move.

We all know, for example, Rosa Parks's exemplary act. However, many of us ignore that her action was not the action of a lonely and isolated heroine and that, in some sense, her gesture was possible only by virtue of a co-participation of many activists who supported and prepared her action, creating the right social and material environment¹⁶. Rosa was able to leave a mark in history only because she was followed by a social movement that was ready to intervene and mobilize. Before her other Black women had refused to move to the back of the bus in order to leave their

¹³ I. Marion Young, *The Politics of Difference*, cit.

¹⁴ Only in August 2016 has the Canadian government finally decided to open a "National inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls".

¹⁵ Cf. J. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London, 1990.

¹⁶ H. R. Krause, "Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics", *Political Theory*, 39, 3, 2011, pp. 299-234.

seats to white passengers and had been arrested. Virtually ignored, today, for example, is the story of Claudette Colvin, the young woman, who on March 2, 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on the bus. The main exponents of the battle for civil rights decided not to support Colvin when they came to know that she was pregnant and unmarried. They decided she could not be the right symbol for their national battle, but only a negative symbol and non-credible representative of the Black people's cause¹⁷. Rosa's case was different: she was a respectable married woman, a serious worker, and an active member of the NAACP. As such, Parks was recognized as a credible victim, someone who could be trusted, of whom there was no reason to be ashamed, who could have a voice and be listened to. Claudette, on the contrary, seemed to represent and condense a whole set of stereotypes associated with the Black female population, and so she seemed able to provoke only negative emotions such as disgust—an emotion that was very much involved in the othering process that led to the marginalization and stigmatization of single Black mothers dependent on public assistance¹⁸. The example of Claudette Colvin explains how emotions act as socially active forces which determine the attraction/repulsion between bodies and their position in the social space. The social injustice committed against Claudette could be considered not worth of fighting for, because, after all, as a young single mother she appeared to be a “problematic victim” in the very eyes of the Black community. This story can be considered exemplary of the weight of the body on the scales of justice. It shows how emotional currents circulate around bodies and determine how they are perceived and evaluated within hierarchies of value, by activating or inhibiting our feelings, our concern, our care or lack of care for someone. The higher a body is placed in the social hierarchy of the bodies, the safer it is from moral and physical violence and discrimination, and the more it will be able to control its social image, the more decision-making power it will have and the more attention and care it will receive. This hierarchy of bodies is supported by an affective economy that can hardly be countered by a single individual's action.

If – as Susan Bordo writes – mind/body dualism has had in modernity and continues to have the status of a “practical metaphysics” that can be embodied in many different areas of life, such as law and medicine, and if mind/body dualism (like other dualisms related to it, such as reason/matter, male/female) does not refer to a mere distinction, because in its polarizing structure it reiterates a radical separation between two worlds that appear incommunicable and mutually exclusive, in the very articulation of this separation affections and emotions play a crucial social role. Not surprisingly, the rediscovery of the body in contemporary social and political theory

¹⁷ Cf. J. Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, cit., pp. 234-249.

¹⁸ See A.-M. Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*, NYU Press, New York, 2004.

has gone hand in hand with the so-called "affective turn"¹⁹, i.e. a philosophical perspective in which affections and emotions do not seem reducible to individual experiences, but have to be explored in their economic, social, historical and cultural context. Our socially embodied life is surrounded by an atmosphere of emotions we are not always conscious of and that, if unquestioned, can lead us to accommodate new injustices or perpetuate old ones. These affective shades also condition our democratic life and signal the importance of communicating in such a way as to take into account the interactions that take place in its bodily and gestural dimension, including silences, glances, postures, tones of voice, styles of behavior, etc., a communication that is not, therefore, limited to rational deliberation²⁰. If this is true of our democratic life, it is equally true, if not even more so, in the teacher's communication with his/her students—as Sophie Bourgault suggests in her essay, discussing the increasingly widespread tendency in many academic institutions to substitute teaching by bodily presence in real classrooms with virtual classrooms or massive open online courses (MOOC). In teaching, indeed, forgetting the body means (as bell hooks states) resigning ourselves to the very idea that "passion has no place in the classroom", that teaching can do without the erotic²¹.

¹⁹ For a general introduction to this subject, see: Marianne Liljeström, *Affect*, in Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (ed. by), *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, cit., pp. 16-38.

²⁰ I. Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002. On this matter see also: D. Coole, "Experiencing Discourse: Corporeal Communicators and the Embodiment of Power", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9 (2007), pp. 413-433.

²¹ Bell hooks, "Eros, Eroticism and the Pedagogical Process", in Ead., *Teaching to Transgress*, Routledge, New York, London, 1994, p. 192.