

City and Community Through Women's Eyes

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The meaning of 'politics' is not immediately transparent when analyzed from a purely linguistic point of view. Clearly, 'politics' is derived from the term *polis*: a Greek word for a particular type of community, which further developed over the course of history with concepts such as the Roman *urbs*, *civitas* and, finally, in a wide range of European languages, city. Notwithstanding the Europe of cities that, from the Middle Age to the present, has painted unforgettable scenes of culture and history, the greatest contribution of Europe to modern political lexis—that is, the invention of the word 'State' and the categorical aspect that is centered upon it—seems to be going in the opposite direction. The word politics, in its modern sense, ends up denying the original meaning of that polis which is, indeed, the founding part of its etymological history. In the words of Hannah Arendt, the political model based on State, in fact, erases the idea of shared—interactive, contextual, current and, above all, horizontal—space that characterised the polis as a community.¹

The present contribution is intended as a re-reading of the city, with Hannah Arendt's critique of the modernity of modern politics as a point of departure. A critique that is based on a re-reading—one could even say: an unbiased recovery—of the phenomenon of the Greek polis. If one wishes to rethink the educating function of the city, the ancient polis must not, in fact, be looked upon today as a sort of archeological find, but rather accord-

ing to Arendt, as well as beyond its known patriarchal and ethnocentric implications, as a *relational and interactive paradigm* of politics.

In this current time of epochal transition, recently marked by the collapse of the old order—going by a plethora of names, but which in essence all come under the umbrella of so-called "globalisation"—and by catastrophic events, a precious contribution could perhaps, above all, come from an innovative recovery of the polis model or, at the very least, from the rethinking of the original meaning of the term politics. Thus, the city belongs by right to that origin that must be removed from the state imagery and so transformed into the privileged place to rethink politics, and with that, in synchrony with the closeness the polis and *paideia* had in Greece, the education of politics.

Far from denying the concrete and historical instance of polis—which, as is known, was deeply marked by a male, patriarchal pattern—the present contribution aims to bring to light, to focus on, the central role of the city as a place of political experiences, as yet unknown and apparently undecipherable, putting it in a feminine perspective. Taking away politics from the state model in order to reposition it within the city space is not an act of good will, but it is that which the current turn of events imposes in a certain way, marked as it is by the proliferation of violence and its excess regarding any regulating aim.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1958.

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The decisive importance of the city, in other words, reveals itself when times become obscure, and when the old institutional orders seem to collapse. This was the situation at the end of the Roman Empire, in the Middle Ages, and at the dawn of political modernity. Finally arriving closer to our time, midway through last century, the fracture of continental Europe into two opposing blocks has its very place-symbol in a city, Berlin. Witness to the rending of that city, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, in a visit to Berlin in 1961, provocatively stated: "Ich bin ein Berliner", showing his solidarity with the German citizens that now lived in a city divided by the wall.

On September 11, 2001 the phrase which immediately circulated following the terrorist attack on the New York World Trade Center was 'we are all Americans.' However, from Berlin, perhaps in memory of the solidarity shown by Kennedy towards the German city, another even more meaningful phrase was echoed: "we are all New Yorkers." That phrase incisively expressed the solidarity with the victims and survivors of the terrorist attack, because, in a certain sense it was true that the heart—both symbolic and real—of the attack, at least in Western imaginary, was not—or at least not only—America, but the city of New York. It is also well known that the impact of the two planes into the twin towers and the victims that they caused were far and away greater than that of the other targets hit.

Way beyond the quantitative difference, however, was the quality of the event itself which was new. It is often said that September 11, 2001 was a day which changed the world. Every one of us, man and woman, witnessing that event in front of the television, felt part of a reality that, even if separated by many miles, seemed to be right there, present and disturbing, unforeseen and horrifying, like a kind of alien monster invading our living room and our humdrum daily lives. Something that day, above all, changed the way in

which we relate to catastrophes, to the tragedy of huge proportions transmitted by the TV. In this way, one can state without scandal, that the attack of 9/11 succeeded in every way, but especially symbolically and in its media representation. The impact on Western imagery was enormous, so much so as make us think that something in the nature of trauma itself had been transformed for ever.

In our closeness to pain and loss, we instinctively did not feel like American citizens (perhaps also in the knowledge that being an American citizen means many other things, the last of which coincides with that of being a victim) but we felt like New Yorkers, thrown together by the trauma, by the unforeseen event that put the fragility and vulnerability of an urban space and its inhabitants into evidence. It was not to the Pentagon—the main symbol of State power as holder of the monopoly on violence—that the memory of that attack was linked, but to the City of New York, and, to be more precise, to the space surrounding Manhattan Island.

The phrase 'we are all New Yorkers' is, therefore, full of meanings that go well beyond the solidarity for the victims of the unexpected and horrifying brutality. Above all, this is significant because it moves and dislocates the center of the trauma from nation to city and in so doing *localises* a new political reality in the urban space, something unheard of until that moment.

It does not have to do with an act of conscious foundation, but precisely an event which transforms—or for a brief moment transformed—the very form of political affiliation. From the debris of that delimited and urban space, read in its symbolic function constructing an imagery—which world city is more symbolic and a constructor of collective imagery than New York?—something new seemed to emerge from Ground Zero in Manhattan, an unsuspected reaction of silent solidarity, of a neighbourly and community form, in a virtuous circle of help and compassion.

This is my theory: from the imagery of hate, terror and vendetta, as the official rhetoric and President Bush pictured it, the scene that was faced in Manhattan on September 11, 2001 can be taken away to become the symbol of a different affiliation to the community that has its "ideal place" in the city to rethink citizenship and develop new ways of educating to exercise politics and participation. That event, in other words, and its backdrop, the city, can be the opportunity (perhaps not yet lost) to get rid of traditional political models, now put into crisis by the emerging processes of globalisation.

3

The political model of modernity, as is known, is founded on individualistic anthropology, according to which the individual is the *measure* of the human, considered as an autonomous and rational being that, as such, thinks and acts. This has its institutional correlation in the sovereign state, an autonomous entity, and holder of the right to govern a given territory and not have to justify its actions to any authority above itself. Getting rid of that model means gaining consciousness of its now evanescent efficacy, in force by the complex processes of globalisation; getting rid of that model, however, also means rejecting the reactive and vindictive logic (an apparently 'rational' action, based on instrumental logic) that opposes war on war, violence on violence, terror on terror. If we consider the verb 'to educate' in its etymological sense of 'to lead out,' it is clear how the current situation reflects the impelling need for a renovated political education, that is able to *lead us out* of the now obsolete categories of modernity (State, individual, sovereignty, war among states) and to orient us towards the unknown terrain of post-state configuration. "The collapse of the configuration of the modern Politics made up of identitarian obsession, defined space, theological poli-

tics, friend/enemy, Nation-state and the like" indeed, needs to be re-examined in light of the events that happen before our own eyes, that are women's eyes; that is, eyes that are used to observing male rhetoric and history with a certain detachment, or with a certain irony. To cite a brilliant female Italian thinker, "when this configuration is over, what is it that begins? It is here that the vertigo of the void is felt."²

Following some women's readings of that event, it is possible to point out how the gendered perspective is able to grasp the present changes, to have the courage to name them, and to propose new category frameworks that manage to light the way—still unknown and obscure—of the post-state configuration. In other words, I intend to analyse how the women-city-education link, if looked at starting from the trauma-event of September 11, reveals itself as unsurpassedly fruitful in bringing into focus the crisis of the present and the need to develop new interpretative instruments. 'Women's eyes' or, not metaphorically speaking, the gendered perspective, indeed makes the void visible and the vertigo which it produces palpable, above all, when compared with male readings that, following 9/11, seemed unable to cope with the 'new' that was happening and, therefore, insisted on subsuming it under known categories.

But far from pointing to a catastrophic and apocalyptic view, female eyes glean from the traumatic event the possibility to rethink the community, starting with loss, trauma, grief, and, above all, vulnerability.

4

We are all Americans, we are all New Yorkers. With what image of the city has 9/11 left us? We were faced, first of all, with witness-

² Ida Dominijanni, *Nella piega del presente*, in Diotima, *Approfittare dell'assenza*, Napoli, Liguori 2002, pp. 187-212, pp. 206-207.

ing, from that odd position of privileged spectators and “deferred victims,” the fragmentation and destruction of a compact, familiar and solid image that was incarnated by the two towers. The architectural colossus of the World Trade Center was often compared to a phallic symbol, the warning epitome of American financial power that, like a second Leviathan, drew on the geometric perfection of its lines to reassert its unquestioned superiority and unparalleled strength. The Twin Towers, however, far from simply incarnating the financial superpower of the USA and the West, are also part of another imagery, perhaps more innocent: film imagery. It is by virtue of that strange transterritorial familiarity given to us by film that we watch, with nostalgia, the images of Manhattan still showing the towers in the background. Due to a strange vortex that short circuits space and time, it is also as if that film imagery had, after 9/11, lost its innocence. Every time we see a film or TV series that shows us a New York with the towers still standing, the image of their destruction is immediately brought to mind. An image that, despite having all the characteristics of a spectacular fictional event, was cruelly real. In virtue of that cinematographic imagery, New York, after the trauma, took on the semblance of an ‘ideal city,’ even more so than it was before. The trauma has changed it just like it has changed our way of seeing and imagining it: now New York is an icon that lives on from its wounds, that continues to attract us because in it we have the mix of the familiarity of the television and film imagery and the equally familiar sensation of destruction, fear and vulnerability.

5

Familiar and yet unknown is what that vulnerability amounts to, for those New Yorkers who experienced 9/11. That day they lost their ‘first-world invulnerability,’ they themselves living sudden and unforeseen violence in the first person. That, which is on the one hand familiar, and on the other unknown, is what Freud defined as ‘uncanny,’ *unheimlich*.

In the uncanny hides the monstrous face of what is otherwise familiar. For many Americans, and above all for the US government, 9/11 represents an uncanny spectre, a kind of ‘dark side’ of violence that has been inflicted on others for many a year. This was perhaps the reason for the almost immediate reaction to the attack of a calling to overcome the trauma, to react and go forward. The exhortation to react in one’s own personal way, continuing with one’s everyday life, was shortly followed by the organisation of the ‘ordinary’ state reaction, that is the use of violence and war: the ‘everyday life’ of the state.

Distant from state rhetoric and justifications for war, what happened in the vicinity of the urban space of Manhattan was a curious and spontaneous community reaction: people went around the city with photos of their lost loved-ones, beneath which was often written ‘missing.’ Who was lost or missing, who literally ‘was missed’ in the affections and presence of their own family members or friends had a name and a face; to put it in the words of Hannah Arendt, was a ‘who,’ a person in flesh and blood with his/her own irreplaceable quality of unique being. The insistence of the New Yorkers in crying and remembering, as ‘missers,’ their loved-ones, remained ingrained in our minds precisely because it reinforced the familiar, routine and intimate side of that tragedy. The media impact on Western public opinion of the search for those lost, or ‘missing,’ was extraordinary.

But to read into that grief is a difficult task, above all, because immediately after the event, the rhetoric of state and war took over, portraying the American victims as a sort of inviolable shrine that had to be avenged with maximum force. The felt and lamented vulnerability experienced by New Yorkers, in fact, was immediately followed by the proud assertion of a programmed invulnerability, ready to declare ‘never ending war’ on those who caused the victims.

It is not by chance that taking on the task of reading into that difficult situation were

women thinkers, first among others Adriana Cavarero, who, in an article published in autumn 2001 wrote: "The walls of New York have first of all reminded us that the thousands of deaths of September 11 died one by one, and are missed one by one by their families and by those who, looking at their faces, share that loss. Apparently, it was an emotive response, and however, from another point of view, did not only deal with a political response far more effective than the call to the national flag, but was perhaps more political than any other response given so far."³

Immediately echoing her views was Ida Dominijanni, in an essay in 2002 in which she analysed, with exquisitely female eyes, two major events in 2001 that had two cities as protagonists which are now asserted as symbols of an era—Genoa and New York. The 'turn of the present,' lived and interpreted through feminine eyes, revealed how the New York catastrophe, far from hitting the heart of global capitalism—like the attackers perhaps intended and like many, also in the West, hoped—had absolutely new characteristics compared to those of the past. What happened, before the definitive collapse of the two towers, and what we continue to see on TV in a sort of *reality show* of massacre, was a never before seen 'multi-ethnic holocaust': "bodies ripped from their clothes and skin fall from high stories, thousands of men and women from sixty-three different ethnicities imprisoned among the flames in a sort of multi-ethnic holocaust, that sentences to death not the globalisation of capitals managed from above by the powers that be, but the cosmopolitan lives lived in common from below."⁴

It is exactly this perspective from below of life in common that women's eyes observing that event pay their attention to, and it is that event that they draw on to reassert

the importance and centrality of feminine reflection on politics. It is, in truth, a reflection that for some time has criticised the false neutrality of the models and ontology of modern politics, tied to the State, to the nation, to the liberal form of individualism. However, the emergency of the present, its unforeseen turn—and the void which it has placed before us—seem to confirm that it is indispensable, now more than ever, to put the critical and imaginative feminine thought into action, as Virginia Woolf would have put it, reasserting its centrality and its importance in identifying the errors, omissions, the symbolic and material violence of a still too male and patriarchal civilisation.

6

Beyond the vertigo of the void, therefore, there is more. There is first of all, a thought, which is the thought of sexual difference that for years has moved outside that traditional (male) model and re-declared politics beginning with new terms: "difference, relation, singularity/community" terms which take the place of "identity, friend/enemy, individual/state." The challenge is to make the gendered political perspective valued, not only 'in theory' but also in practice, from the "trust that on this basis, something which could be called 'politics' can really be born, the identification of a new anthropological figure able to bring it into the world and make it walk,"⁵ that is, able to educate it, make a path for growth that emerges with determination from a horizon that now finds difficulty in making sense out of reality. However, it is not the need to invent, ex-novo, a sound formula to decipher the times that pass, but rather to be able to see "that this anthropology and these politics have already been born: in the practice of sexual difference, of singularity in relation, of a social pact that is no longer Oedipal and sacrificial."⁶

³ A. Cavarero, *Il locale assoluto*, in "Micromega. Almanacco di filosofia", 5/2001, pp.64-73, p. 71.

⁴ Dominijanni, op. cit., p. 203.

⁵ Ibid, p. 207.

⁶ Ibid.

The novelty consists in the development of new categories of reading and interpretation of reality, because reality is constantly exposed to the new and unforeseen, we are the ones who have difficulty in recognising it.

It is not by chance that the perception of such a novelty, that still proves difficult to be assumed, has, I reiterate, been made by women. In underlining the concrete, material, detailed (the typically feminine attention to detail) aspects of the tragedy of 9/11, the feminist perspective is on that which the large schema, on both sides, have difficulty seeing. Who is dead? Who has been mourned? While Adriana Cavarero underlined how the city had immediately remembered its dead, 'one by one,' and Dominijanni how the multiethnic holocaust had suffocated the 'globalisation from below of life in common,' the American theorist Judith Butler—whose line of thinking happens to coincide with her Italian counterparts—proposes to take the opportunity to rethink the human condition starting from the centrality of grief and loss due to the experience of vulnerability and offence to which New Yorkers were subjected.

In the text she writes on the morrow of 9/11, *Precarious Life*, Butler maintains that the fundamental error following the trauma was precisely that of reading the whole event as a first person narration, with the giant of the United States—wounded in its presumed invulnerability—as the sole protagonist. Invisibility and inexpressibility, however, became the characteristics of all that which did not find space in that self-centered and self-celebrating narrative of incommensurable, unjustifiable and unexplainable pain, and as such had to remain.⁷ Butler became the critical voice of the State rhetoric that wished to restore its own sovereignty and invulnerability, realising how, also from within the commemorative rhetoric of the victims, an identifying perspective was favoured, taking out of

public discourse someone else's victims, or those that had no place in state rhetoric (immigrant, clandestine, or homosexual, and, not far from these, the victims of the bombings in Afghanistan, the faces or the bodies of the fallen soldiers in Iraq, the Palestinian victims in the Israeli violence).

Butler proposes to dislocate the account of those happenings from the 'first person' perspective, taking away the event's suffering and offence from state logic. There is, Butler suggests, another possible account, that takes note of the loss and concentrates on a shared elaboration of mourning, making it become an integral part of its own individual, social and political identity. We are not, even here, dealing with an emotive or commemorative reaction of suffering: the collective trauma can find an answer which is different from that of vendetta. It consists in taking on the full understanding of the inescapable condition of vulnerability as a human measure, a condition that was traumatically unveiled in Americans precisely by 9/11.

That path has perhaps been taken by the people that had plastered New York with pictures of their dead, mourning them and celebrating them 'one by one,' with name and surname, single faces that 'were lost' to equally singular lives. In that moment—ephemeral if compared to the immediate violent reaction of the State—the 'political community of loss,' outlined and wished for by Butler, was perhaps for a short period configured.

New York, if read through women's eyes, is therefore configured as the 'ideal city,' not in the traditional, architectural and Renaissance sense of the word, but in that most current sense of a symbolic place in which it is possible to rethink community, not starting from the nation-state, but from that which Adriana Cavarero has called the 'absolute local': "The view of the absolute local is not the direct

⁷ J. Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London and New York, Routledge 2003.

fruit of the global, but that which globalisation [...] indeed permits to open."⁸ A place—perceived before being thought of—as untied, loosened from its belonging to a state, which becomes the limited space able to welcome a new type of community, a community which 'comes about' by the force of a traumatic event, and which *sticks inside* the event, the trauma of the loss to the heart of the community itself.

The crucial event of 9/11 reshaped, in New York, the confines of the city that, if on the one hand were narrowed and focused around the debris of Ground Zero, on the other were widened and broke out of national borders. It is true that we all have a bit of New Yorker in us because we know, more or less, where Central Park and 5th Avenue are, and we immediately recognise the Empire State Building and the Twin Towers. However, the event of 9/11 has heightened this familiarity. We are also New Yorkers in the sense that the experience of the trauma, the loss, the mourning, touched us closely, not only because we participated directly in the attack, but also because, since then, an escalation of violence has begun that has still not ceased to make us perennially traumatised spectators of continuing massacres and horrors which are now part of daily life and yet incomprehensible. It is as if, in being secondary victims of that event, we are obliged to politically reflect not only upon its consequences but also on its possibilities: to rethink citizenship, the shared space, the relation among differences (ethnic, economic, cultural, of gender) in a new way is what the everyday trauma pushes us to.

It is precisely in the light of Judith Butler's reflections that it is possible to think that the code for this new way of conceiving citizenship is vulnerability: this presents itself, in the first place, as a new universe that does not allow the assimilation of the diversities into the (self-centered) model of the individual. We are all vulnerable in the sense that we

are all human. Vulnerability as a distinctively human trait—however, different from the category of 'mortality' celebrated by philosophers—is not founded on an escape from the body but is rooted within the body, in the constant exposure of the body to the care and violence of others.

There is a constituent ambiguity in humans in this view of vulnerability that must, however, be maintained. It deals with that ambiguity embedded in the duplicity of the possible response to vulnerability: reacting to vulnerability through the perception of a union that can become politically productive, through the refusal to inflict further violence in response to the offence suffered. One can otherwise react via a response that stubbornly tries to remove vulnerability by strengthening instruments of coercion and offence. Being aware of this duplicity represents a new way of reading the phenomena of the present.

The universality of the category of vulnerability, however, allows the regard for 'local,' in the singular that is indispensable in order to come outside traditional models (still Eurocentric) of humanity and citizenship. Through this, in fact, it is possible to distinguish the different degrees of vulnerability felt, while keeping the human familiarity of vulnerability in place. We are all New Yorkers, meaning that, at irregular and unforeseen intervals, we can in turn become victims ourselves. The community of vulnerability, however, does not imply a glorification of the home country and a de-humanisation of the enemy—as happened in America after 9/11—but is, on the contrary, a rethinking of the human condition starting out from a togetherness that must be transformed into a political resource. Pain as a political resource is what the photos and faces of those lost at Ground Zero represent, it is the understanding of what was hit that day—and since that day ad infinitum until today. It is the possibility of an interaction of singular existences taken in their radical uniqueness: not as in friends or enemies, nor

⁸ Cavarero, *A più voci*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2003, p. 223.

as in Arabs or homosexuals, but as in unique beings, with name and surname. The immediate reactions to the multiethnic holocaust that occurred on 9/11 in New York are an embryonic example of a political experience that finds, in pain and vulnerability, a (founding) moment of community. Only women's words, however, were able to mention this event in a new way, giving it its proper and innovative quality.

After all, it is not by chance that the feminine perspective is more able than the masculine view to *seize* and to *receive* the vulnerability. Women have always been privileged subjects of a vulnerability that takes on many forms: from domestic violence to workplace exploitation, from reducing their bodies to saleable goods to the law determining their decision to procreate. Women, however, are more familiar with vulnerability from the other side as well, that of care: they have, at heart, been and continue to be the main custodians of vulnerability by definition, the child. Thus, women's eyes are able to grasp vulnerability from their positioned perspective: both as vulnerable victims and custodians of vulnerability. The political centrality of vulnerability is thus better and more clearly seen from the gendered feminine perspective. The universality of the vulnerable cannot be such without the original sexual difference that is given to vulnerability.

7

Education of vulnerability, in light of the feminist reading of 9/11, therefore leads to a theoretical and imaginative effort that is placed within the city, instead of in the nation or State, the political space and community affiliation. It deals with, in other words, imagining another story, alternative to that—masculine and of state—belligerent, reactive and apocalyptic one of the 'war on terror.' A story that has, at the center of the narrative scene, the city as the space of a common and shared experience. This, however, in the emblematic case of 9/11, does not refer to

the lightness and harmony of the Greek *paideia*, but to the vertigo of the void caused by the trauma. Only in the experience of trauma read through women's eyes, alive to the singular, to the unique being and its vulnerability, is it possible to transform the vortex of the void and the senseless into an opportunity to reestablish the community starting out from loss. Woman by woman, man by man, in their irreplaceable uniqueness—and also in their multiethnic diversity—the dead of the World Trade Center remind us that there is no flag, there is no national identity that can and must celebrate them by transforming them into symbols and the justifications for further violence. However, the common experience of loss is there, which goes beyond state, ethnic and religious affiliations, which opens the curtain to the possibility of a local sharing of mourning that links vulnerability and dependency. Far beyond State logic, enemy and war, the horizon of vulnerability inserts into the scene that which Cavarero calls the politics of the "absolute local," that "after being finally liberated from the cartography of nations, does not in fact fall into the error of placing identity affiliations above the unrepeatable uniqueness of every human being. It dares, instead, to put into play uniqueness without affiliations and entrusts it with the sense of relation." What was it that came into being in the experience of the trauma and loss immediately following 9/11 if not an "absolute local," a delimited space, untethered and loosened from state and national rhetoric, where taking center stage, more than the flags, were the faces and the names of people in flesh and blood; and those who were there to mourn them were equally people in flesh and blood. But in virtue of the symbolic force of the city of New York, we like to imagine that the absolute local does not have traits of localism, of partiality, but rather it pushes beyond the confines of the city itself and can recreate itself wherever unique beings are able to recreate the conditions of community and liaison starting from the perception of a shared vulnerability. "The local, indeed, for the contagion that essentially pertains to the symbolic, has the power

to multiply. One, one hundred, one thousand 'absolute locals' could be, slightly ironically, but certainly not nostalgically, the slogan. Once also unchained from the logic of territory, that masked it behind the concept of the individual, the ontology of uniqueness can extend globally. The politics of the local can be found everywhere: unpredictable and

intermittent, uncontrollable and astonishing."⁹ Thus, we like to imagine—although even our women's eyes still struggle to see it— that also elsewhere, in other spaces torn apart by violence, mourning and loss, unique beings, out of pain and suffering, strive to reestablish their most vulnerable ideal city.

⁹ Cavarero, *Il locale assoluto*, op.cit., p. 72.