

ONE

Lecture One The Body, Capitalism, and the Reproduction of Labor Power

There is no doubt that the body is today at the center of political, disciplinary, and scientific discourse, with the attempt in every field to redefine its main qualities and possibilities. It is the sphinx to be interrogated and acted upon on the path toward social and individual change. Nevertheless, it is nearly impossible to articulate a coherent view of the body on the basis of the theories most accredited in the intellectual and political arena. On the one hand, we have the most extreme forms of biological determinism, with the assumption of the DNA as the *deus absconditus* (hidden god) presumably determining, behind our backs, our physiological and psychological life. On the other, we have (feminist, trans) theories encouraging us to discard all “biological” factors in favor of performative or textual representations of the body and to embrace, as constitutive of our being, our growing assimilation with the world of machines.

A common trend, however, is the absence of a standpoint from which to identify the social forces that are affecting our bodies. With an almost religious obsession, biologists circumscribe the area of significant activity to a microscopic world of molecules, whose constitution is as mysterious as that of the original sin. As far as biologists are concerned, we come into this world already tainted by, predisposed to, predestined to, or spared from disease, for all is in the DNA an unknown god has

allotted to us. As for the discursive/performative theories of the body, they too are silent concerning the social ground from which ideas about the body and body practices are generated. There is perhaps the fear that searching for a unitary cause may blind us to the diverse ways in which our bodies articulate our identities and relations to power. There is also a tendency, recuperated from Foucault, to investigate the “effects” of the powers acting on our bodies rather than their sources. Yet without a reconstruction of the field of forces in which they move, our bodies must remain unintelligible or elicit mystifying views of their operations. How, for instance, can we envisage “going beyond the binary” without an understanding of its economic, political, and social utility within particular systems of exploitation, and, on the other hand, an understanding of the struggles by which gender identities are continuously transformed? How to speak of our “performance” of gender, race, and age without a recognition of the compulsion generated by specific forms of exploitation and punishment?

We must identify the world of antagonistic policies and power relations by which our bodies are constituted and rethink the struggles that have taken place in opposition to the “norm” if we are to devise strategies for change.

This is the work I have undertaken in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), where I have examined how the transition to capitalism changed the concept and treatment of “the body,”¹ arguing that one of capitalism’s main projects has been the *transformation of our bodies into work-machines*. This means that the need to maximize the exploitation of living labor, also through the creation of differentiated forms of work and coercion, has been the factor that more than any other has shaped our bodies in capitalist society. This approach has consciously contrasted with Foucault’s,² which roots the disciplinary regimes to which the body was subjected at the beginning of the “modern era” in the workings of a metaphysical “Power” not better identified in its purposes and objectives.³

In contrast to Foucault, I have also argued that we do not have one but multiple histories of the body, that is, multiple histories of how the mechanization of the body was articulated, for the racial, sexual, and generational hierarchies that capitalism has constructed from its inception rule out the possibility of a universal standpoint. Thus the history of “the body” must be told by weaving together the histories of those who were enslaved, colonized, or turned into waged workers or unpaid housewives and the histories of the children, keeping in mind that these classifications are not mutually exclusive and that our subjection to “interlocking systems of domination” always produces a new reality.⁴ I would add that we also need a history of capitalism written from the viewpoint of the animal world and of course the lands, the seas, and the forests.

We need to look at “the body” from all these viewpoints to grasp the depth of the war that capitalism has waged against human beings and “nature” and to devise strategies capable of ending such destruction. To speak of a war is not to assume an original wholeness or propose an idealized view of “nature.” It is to highlight the state of emergency in which we currently live and to question, in an age that promotes remaking our bodies as a path to social empowerment and self-determination, the benefits that we may derive from policies and technologies that are not controlled from below. Indeed, before we celebrate our becoming cyborgs, we should reflect on the social consequences of the mechanization process that we have already undergone.⁵ It is naive, in fact, to imagine that our symbiosis with machines necessarily results in an extension of our powers and ignore the constraints that technologies place on our lives and their increasing use as a means of social control as well as the ecological cost of their production.⁶

Capitalism has treated our bodies as work-machines because it is the social system that most systematically has made of human labor the essence of the accumulation of wealth and has most needed to maximize its exploitation. It

has accomplished this in different ways: with the imposition of more intense and uniform forms of labor as well as multiple disciplinary regimes and institutions and with terror and rituals of degradation. Exemplary were those that in the seventeenth century were imposed on the inmates of the Dutch workhouses, who were forced to pulverize blocks of wood with the most backward and backbreaking method, for no useful purpose but to be taught to obey external orders and to experience in every fiber of their bodies their impotence and subjection.⁷

Another example of the debasement rituals employed to break people's will to resistance were those imposed, since the turn of the twentieth century, by doctors in South Africa, on Africans destined to work in the gold mines (Butchart 1998, 92–110). Under the guise of “heat tolerance tests” or “selection procedures,” African workers were ordered to strip naked, line up, and shovel rocks and then submit to radiographic examinations or to measurements by tape and weighing scales, all under the gaze of medical examiners, who often remained invisible to those thus tested (94, 97, 100). The goal of the exercise was supposedly to demonstrate to future workers the sovereign power of the mining industry and to initiate Africans to a life in which they would be “deprived of any human dignity” (94).

In the same time period, in Europe and the US, Taylorism's time and motion studies—later incorporated into the construction of the assembly line—turned the mechanization of the workers' bodies into a scientific project, through the fragmentation and atomization of tasks, the elimination of any decisional element from the work process, and, above all, the stripping of the work itself from any knowledge and motivational factor.⁸ Automatism, however, has also been the product of a work life of infinite repetition, a life of “No Exit,”⁹ like the nine-to-five in a factory or office, where even the holiday breaks become mechanized and routine, due to their time constraints and predictability.

Foucault was right, however: the “repressive hypothesis” is not sufficient to explain the history of the body in capitalism.¹⁰ As important as what was repressed have been the “capacities” that were developed. In *Principles of Economics* (1890), the British economist Alfred Marshall celebrated the capacities that capitalist discipline has produced in the industrial workforce, declaring that few populations in the world were capable of what European workers at the time could do. He praised industrial workers’ “general ability” to keep working continuously, for hours, on the same task, to remember everything, to remember, while doing a task, what the next one should be, to work with instruments without breaking them, without wasting time, to be careful in handling expensive machinery and steady even doing the most monotonous tasks. These, he argued, were unique skills that few people worldwide possessed, demonstrating, in his view, that even work that appears unskilled is actually highly skilled (Marshall [1890] 1990, 172).

Marshall would not say how such wonderful, machine-like workers were created. He did not say that people had to be separated from the land and terrorized with exemplary tortures and executions. Vagabonds had their ears cut. Prostitutes were subjected to “waterboarding,” the same type of torture to which the CIA and US Special Forces subject those they accuse of “terrorism.” Tied to a chair, women suspected of improper behavior were plunged into ponds and rivers to the point of near suffocation. Slaves were whipped until the flesh was torn from their bones and were burned, mutilated, left under a blazing sun until their bodies putrefied.

As I have argued in *Caliban and the Witch*, with the development of capitalism not only were communal fields “enclosed,” so was the body. But this process has differed for men and women, in the same way as it has differed for those who were destined to be enslaved and those who were subjected to other forms of coerced labor, waged work included.

Women, in capitalist development, have suffered a double process of mechanization. Besides being subjected to the discipline of work, paid and unpaid, in plantations, factories, and homes, they have been expropriated from their bodies and turned into sexual objects and breeding machines.

Capitalist accumulation (as Marx recognized) is the accumulation of workers.¹¹ This was the motivation driving the slave trade, the development of the plantation system and—I have argued—the witch hunts that took place in Europe and the “New World.”¹² Through the persecution of “witches,” women wishing to control their reproductive capacity were denounced as enemies of children and, in different ways, subjected to a demonization that has continued into the present. In the nineteenth century, for instance, advocates of “free love,” like Victoria Woodhull, were branded in the American press as satanic, pictured with devil’s wings and all (Poole 2009). Today as well, in several US states, women who go to a clinic to abort have to make their ways through masses of “right-to-lifers” screaming “baby killers” and chasing them, thanks to a ruling by the Supreme Court,¹³ as far as the clinic’s door.

In no place has the attempt to reduce women’s bodies to machines been more systematic, brutal and normalized than in slavery. While exposed to constant sexual assaults and the searing pain of seeing their children sold as slaves, after England banned the slave trade in 1807, enslaved women in the US were forced to procreate to fuel a breeding industry with its center in Virginia.¹⁴ “As the power looms of Lancashire sucked up all the cotton that the South could grow,” Ned and Constance Sublette have written, “women’s wombs “were not merely the source of local enrichment, but were also suppliers in a global system of agricultural input, enslaved industrial input, and financial expansion” (Sublette and Sublette 2016, 414). Thomas Jefferson approved, going to great lengths to have the US Congress limit the importation of slaves from Africa in order to protect the prices of the slaves that women

on the Virginian plantations would procreate. “I consider,” he wrote, “a woman who brings a child every two years more profitable than the best man on the farm. What she produces is an addition to the capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption” (416).

Although in the history of the US no group of women, outside of slavery, has been directly compelled to have children, with the criminalization of abortion, involuntary procreation and state control of the female body have been institutionalized. The advent of the birth control pill has not decisively altered this situation. Even in countries where abortion has been legalized, restrictions have been introduced that make access difficult for many women.¹⁵ This is because procreation has an economic value that in no way is diminished on account of capital’s increased technological power. It is a mistake, in fact, to assume that the interest of the capitalist class in the control over women’s reproductive capacity may be diminishing on account of its ability to replace workers with machines. Despite its tendency to make workers redundant and create “surplus populations,” capital accumulation still requires human labor. Only labor creates value, machines do not. The very growth of technological production, as Danna (2019, 208ff) has recently argued, is made possible by the existence of social inequalities and the intense exploitation of workers in the “Third World.” What is vanishing today is the compensation for work that in the past was waged, not the work itself. Capitalism needs workers, it also needs consumers and soldiers. Thus, the actual size of the population is still a matter of great political importance. This is why—as Jenny Brown has shown in her *Birth Strike* (2018)—restrictions are placed on abortion. So important is for the capitalist class to control women’s bodies that, as we have seen, even in the US, where in the 1970s abortion was legalized, attempts to reverse this decision continue to this day. In other countries, Italy for instance, the loophole is conceding to doctors the possibility of

becoming “conscientious objectors,” with the result that many women cannot abort in the localities where they live.

However, control over women’s bodies has never been a purely quantitative matter. Always, state and capital have tried to determine who is allowed to reproduce and who is not. This is why we simultaneously have restrictions on the right to abort and the criminalization of pregnancy,¹⁶ in the case of women who are expected to generate “troublemakers.” It is no accident, for instance, if from the 1970s to the 1990s, as new generations of Africans, Indians, and other decolonized subjects were coming to political age, demanding a restitution of the wealth that Europeans had robbed from their countries, a massive campaign to contain what was defined as a “population explosion” was mounted throughout the former colonial world (Hartmann 1995, 189–91), with the promotion of sterilization and contraceptives, like Depo Provera, Norplant, IUDs that, once implanted, women could not control.¹⁷ Through the sterilization of women in the former colonial world, international capital has attempted to contain a worldwide struggle for reparations; in the same way that, in the US, successive governments have tried to block black people’s liberation struggle through the mass incarceration of millions of young black men and women.

Like every other form of reproduction, procreation too has a clear class character and is racialized. Relatively few women worldwide can today decide whether to have children and the conditions in which to have them. As Dorothy Roberts has so powerfully shown in *Killing the Black Body* ([1997] 2017), while white, affluent women’s desire to procreate is now elevated to the rank of an unconditional right, to be guaranteed at all costs, black women, for whom it is more difficult to have some economic security, are ostracized and penalized if they have a child. Yet the discrimination that so many black, migrant, proletarian women encounter on the way to maternity should not be read as a sign that capitalism is no longer interested

in demographic growth. As I previously argued, capitalism cannot dispense with workers. The workerless factory is an ideological sham intended to scare workers into subjection. Were labor to be eliminated from the production process capitalism would probably collapse. Population expansion is by itself a stimulus to growth; thus, no sector of capital can be indifferent to whether women decide to procreate.

This point is forcibly made by the already-quoted *Birth Strike*, where Jenny Brown thoroughly analyses the relation of procreation to every aspect of economic and social life, convincingly demonstrating that politicians today are concerned about the worldwide decline of the birth rate, which she reads as a silent strike. Brown suggests that women should consciously take advantage of this concern to bargain better conditions of living and work. In other words, she suggests that we use our capacity to reproduce *as a tool of political power*.¹⁸ This is a tempting proposition. It is tempting to imagine women openly going on a birth strike, declaring, for instance, that “we won’t bring any more children into this world until the conditions that await them are drastically changed.” I say “openly” because, as Brown documents it, a broad-based though silent refusal of procreation is already taking place. The worldwide decline of the birth rate, that has peaked in countries like Italy and Germany since the post-World War II period, has been the sign of such a reproduction strike. The birth rate has been declining for some time in the US as well. Women today have fewer children because it means less housework, less dependence on men or a job, because they refuse to see their lives consumed by maternal duties, or have no desire to reproduce themselves and, especially in the US, because they have no access to contraceptive and abortion.¹⁹ It is hard, however, to see how an open strike could be organized. Many of the children born are not planned or wanted. Moreover, in many countries, having a child is for women an insurance policy toward the future. In countries where there is no social security or

pension system, having a child may be the only possibility of survival and the only way that a woman can have access to land or can gain social recognition. Children can also be a source of joy, often the only wealth a woman has. Our task, then, is not to tell women that they should not have children, but to make sure that women can decide whether to have them and to ensure that mothering is not costing us our lives.

The social power that mothering potentially gives women is plausibly the reason why under the guise of fighting infertility and giving women more options, doctors are striving to reproduce life outside the uterus. This is no easy task. Despite much talk of “test-tube babies,” “ectogenesis” remains a medical utopia. But in vitro fertilization (IVF), genetic screening, and other reproductive technologies are paving the way to the creation of artificial wombs. Some feminists may approve. In the 1970s feminists like Shulamith Firestone hailed the day when women would be liberated from procreation, which she considered the cause of a history of oppression.²⁰ But this is a dangerous stand. If capitalism is an unjust, exploitative social system, it is worrisome to think that in the future capitalist planners might be able to produce the kind of human beings that they need. We should not underestimate this danger. Even without gene editing we are already mutants, capable, for instance, of carrying out our daily lives while aware that catastrophic events are occurring all around us, including the destruction of our ecological environment and the slow death of the many people now living on our streets, whom we daily pass by without much of a thought or an emotion. What threatens us are not only that the machines are taking over, but also that we are becoming like machines. Thus, we do not need any more robot-like individuals produced by a new breeding industry, this time located in medical labs.

As the generation of feminists to which I belong has struggled to establish, maternity is not a destiny. But it is also not something to be programmatically avoided, as if it were the

cause of women's misery and exploitation. No more than possessing a uterus or a breast is the capacity to give birth a curse—one from which a medical profession (that has sterilized us, lobotomized us, ridiculed us when we cried in pain giving birth) must liberate us. Nor is maternity a gender-performing act. Rather it should be understood as a political, value-positing decision. In a self-governing, autonomous society such decisions would be taken in consideration of our collective well-being, the available resources, and the preservation of the natural wealth. Today as well, such considerations cannot be ignored, but the decision to have a child must also be seen as a refusal to allow capital's planners to decide who is allowed to live and who instead must die or cannot even be born.

Notes

- 1 I place the "the body" in quotation marks to indicate the fictional character of the concept, as an abstraction from different, unique social histories and realities.
- 2 See Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979).
- 3 It is worth mentioning here the critique of Foucault's analysis of the "political economy of the body" made by Dario Melossi in *The Prison and the Factory* (1981), 44–45. He writes:

This bourgeois *construction* of the body in the school, the barracks, the prison and the family remains completely incomprehensible . . . unless we start from the capitalistic management of the labour process (and *at this moment* in the history of capitalism). This had to set itself the task of structuring the body as a machine inside the productive machine as a whole, that is, we must understand that the organisation of work does not treat the body as something extraneous, it *steps through* the body into the muscles and into the head, reorganising simultaneously with the productive process that fundamental part of itself constituted by the labour-power of the body. In sum, in this age the *machine* constitutes a compound invention in which there resides a dead, inorganic, fixed element and a live, organic variable one. (italics in original)
- 4 I take the concept of interlocking systems of domination—central to intersectionality theory—from bell hooks (1990), 59. Also hooks (1989), 175.

- 5 My reference here is to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991), which I find theoretically and politically very problematic.
- 6 On the carceral and surveillance use of technology, see R. Benjamin ed., *Captivating Technologies* (2019).
- 7 See Melossi and Pavarini (1981).
- 8 On this topic see H. Braverman (1974), above all chap. 4, "Scientific Management," and chap. 5, "The Scientific-Technical Revolution and the Worker."
- 9 The reference is to the 1944 play by Jean-Paul Sartre, in which hell is described as the self-imprisonment to which we are condemned when we cannot free ourselves from the constraints placed on our lives by our past actions.
- 10 By the "repressive hypothesis" Foucault refers to the tendency among historians to describe the effects of capitalism on social life and discipline only in terms of repression. He has argued, instead, that a major development in the capitalist treatment of sexuality has been a "veritable discursive explosion" about sex, indeed the transformation of sex into discourse, by means of which "legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied." *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 17, 36–37. While I consider Foucault's emphasis on the "discursive turn," by means of which sex was transformed into an immaterial good, brilliant but reductive, I agree with his insistence on the productive character of social discipline and even social repression. Psychic dynamism seems to be governed by a law similar to that of the conservation of energy, whereby the prohibition of particular forms of behavior does not produce a vacuum, but substitutive, compensatory responses of which the translation of repressed desire into "discourse" is one.
- 11 See, e.g., *Capital*, vol. 1, pt. 7, chap. 25, p. 764: "The reproduction of labour-power which must incessantly be re-incorporated into capital as its means of valorization . . . forms in fact a factor in the reproduction of capital itself. *Accumulation of capital is therefore the multiplication of the proletariat.* (italics mine)
- 12 Federici (2004), especially chap. 4.
- 13 In June 2014, the Supreme Court unanimously struck down a Massachusetts law forbidding protesters from standing within thirty-five feet of the entrance to a reproductive health care facility. As a consequence of this decision, now women who go to a clinic for an abortion must be escorted, as protesters have the right to follow them up to the entrance door, creating an extremely tense and threatening situation.
- 14 See Sublette and Sublette (2016) and Beckles (1989), especially chap. 5, "Breeding Wenches and Labor Supply Policies." While in the US the center of the slave breeding industry was Virginia, in the Caribbean

- Islands it was Barbados, “the only sugar plantation colony that by 1807 succeeded in eliminating an economic need for African slave imports as a result of a positive natural growth in the slave stock” (Beckles 1989, 91). Beckles adds that by the eighteenth century, slave “breeding” “emerged as a popular policy, and the term became commonplace in managerial language concerning labor supply” (92).
- 15 In the US restrictions have been introduced over the years, in several states, that reduce the time period in which abortions can be allowed and make the procedure conditional on parental consent. There is currently a drive to ban abortion altogether. The measure passed on May 14, 2019, by the Alabama Senate that prohibits abortion at every stage is but one example.
 - 16 This is the term Lynn Paltrow, the founder and executive director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women, and Jeanne Flavin have used, in a 2013 study, to describe policies introduced in the US to regulate pregnancy, which affect especially indigent black women (Paltrow and Flavin 2013, 299–343). Such is the present legal situation—they wrote—that by deciding to have a child, poor black women place themselves outside the boundary of the constitution, becoming vulnerable to charges that would never be considered crimes under different circumstances. Women, for instance, have been arrested and jailed for being in a car accident when pregnant and for using legal drugs possibly affecting the fetuses. A turning point in this process has been the conviction for homicide and child abuse, by the South Carolina Supreme Court, in 2003, of a woman who had a still birth, presumably after having used drugs during her pregnancy. Following that decision, scores of women have been charged with child abuse for having used illegal drugs while pregnant, as fetuses in several have been legally defined as persons. On this subject, see also the website Feminist Research on Violence / Plataforma Feminista sobre Violencias <https://feministresearchonviolence.org>.
 - 17 See again on this subject Hartmann (1995) especially chap. 3, “Contraceptive Controversies,” and Connelly (2008).
 - 18 Jenny Brown (2018), 153, and on the same subject see chap. 11: “Controlling the Means of Reproduction” (143–60).
 - 19 Jenny Brown (2018), 144. Brown argues that difficult access to birth control and abortion is the true reason for the fact that until recently women in the United States had a higher fertility rate, adding that, in 2011, 45 percent of birth in the United States were unplanned, in the sense of unwanted or mistimed.
 - 20 In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Firestone advocated the “freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by every means,” as a project however to be realized in a postrevolutionary society. (206) For a discussion of “Feminist Concerns about

Ectogenesis,” see Murphy (1995), 113–33. Murphy argues that ectogenesis is the medical practice that poses the most direct threat to women’s reproductive rights and most devalue women’s contribution to reproduction. She also mentions the fear that the construction of artificial wombs could lead to “femicides” (125).