

# Affirmative Biopolitics: Life, Love, and Politics in Lea Melandri

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## Abstract

In this essay, I explore some crucial themes such as life, embodied experiences, the narrative self, the thinking body, all of which characterize the position of the Italian feminist writer, thinker, and activist Lea Melandri, as they emerge in her recently translated volume, *Love and Violence*. I also address her conviction of the hidden connection between love and violence, according to which men turn aggressive against the one who has first given them life, love, care, and sexual inspiration. The current “feminization” of the public space, which seems to soften the “war between the two sexes,” is, for Melandri, an updated version of the centuries-long domination that has understood women in terms of biological life, domestic virtues, and sexual servitude. How does this “feminization” reflect on how life unfolds, and what possibilities does this entail for the creation of a different politics, named by Melandri “affirmative biopolitics” and centered on the thinking body?

*Keywords:* Melandri, Italian feminism, maternity, biopolitics, patriarchy, the body.

Lea Melandri (1941) is a prolific Italian writer, public intellectual, educator, and activist, who has been supporting feminist causes since the 1970s — a self-identified *storica del femminismo*, *storica* here indicates her role as both a historian of and a historical figure within the women’s movement. Melandri’s work is at once personal, lucid, provocative, suggestive, poetic, reflective, assertive, critical, unapologetic, timely, direct, denunciatory, and uncompromising. It includes short pamphlets, journal articles in daily newspapers and magazines, essays, and a dozen books.<sup>1</sup> Her presence

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1. See Lea Melandri, *L’infamia originaria* (Milan: L’erba voglio, 1977); *Lo strabismo della memoria* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1991); *La mappa del cuore* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 1992); *Migliaia di foglietti. Mineralogia del mondo interno* (Moby Dick, 1996); *L’erba voglio. Il desiderio dissidente*, ed. Lea Melandri (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1998); *Una visceralità indicibile. La pratica dell’inconscio nel movimento delle donne degli anni Settanta*, (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2000); *Le passioni del corpo. La vicenda dei sessi tra origine e storia* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001); *Come nasce il sogno d’amore* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002); *Preistorie. Di cronaca e d’altro* (Naples: Filema, 2004); *Il legame insospettabile tra amore e violenza*, with Stefano Ciccone, Arcidosso: Effigi, 2008; *Amore e violenza. Il fattore molesto della civiltà* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2011); *L’attualità inattuale di Elvio Fachinelli*, ed. Lea Melandri (Milan: IPOC, 2014); *Alfabeto d’origine* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2017).

in the social, cultural, and public landscape is extensive. Nevertheless and regrettably, her name is infrequently acknowledged within the academic world (especially within philosophy, which she studied at the University of Bologna).

The volume *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilization* is the only complete work of Melandri's available in English.<sup>2</sup> The book is an effective presentation of her approach — a line of thinking that, in its frequent invocation of analyses and positions from 1970 feminism, may sound outdated, some may say. Yet and unfortunately so, this line of thinking has lost none of its currency within the context of the #MeToo movement, the continuous, unacknowledged violence, assaults, and micro-aggressions against women, and the recent threats to what seemed to be irrevocable victories of the women's movements of the earlier century. Briefly stated, Melandri's approach identifies in the power relation between the sexes and the patriarchal system it generates the root of all forms of violence — against women but also in general. This position is accompanied by the belief, which Melandri upholds, in the impossibility of working against an inherently patriarchal system from within the system: the organization in fact self-immunizes by inevitably contaminating, assimilating, and neutralizing dissidence — even differences become normalized by subjecting them to rules, policies, and best practices. Embodied differences become abstract identities under the rule of law. It is the return of patriarchy under the pretension of democratic thought, which then reveals its systematizing nature in the spreading of various forms of populism, intolerance, and xenophobia. Its “dispositifs” change, but the law of the Father does not seem to pass.

Always external to the (especially traditionally academic) system, for over forty years Melandri has maintained her vivacious, exhilarating, and uncompromised voice. Through it, in public debates, encounters, and on the social media, she persuasively reminds us that when it comes to women's issues, nothing can ever be taken for granted as long as we move within the system of patriarchy. Capitalism, neoliberalism, and (I want to add) globalization and the related racisms, nationalisms, nativisms, identitarianisms, and sovereigntisms are but the most recent configurations of such ages-old patriarchal structures. The cost Melandri has not heedlessly paid for her position of exteriority is that the system she denounces has marginalized, ignored, and even obliterated her because of her non-assimilability. The advantage is that her voice is still free to express itself with the intact ingenuity of her beginnings in the 1970s, to which she has remained loyal. In that ingenuity lies her timeliness, I argue; and this is what I wish to survey

2. Lea Melandri, *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilization*, trans. Antonio Calcagno (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019). I will refer to this text as LV.

— without a thesis of my own but with a desire to bring up to focus and discussion the relevance of Melandri’s approach.

## 1. Embodied Life

*Love and Violence* confronts the reader with a peculiar form of writing that, in the sequence of chapters apparently unrelated but in fact tied together by the activity of the reflecting self, intertwines personally lived experiences (*il vissuto*) and cultural analyses from a variety of angles. Curiously enough, despite her philosophical training, philosophers rarely make an extended appearance in Melandri’s narrative; when they do (Nietzsche, Marx, Agamben, Esposito), their thinking is deployed more in a suggestive sense rather than in sustained confrontations. This deliberate practice of writing uses a technique similar to the stream of consciousness as a way to explore the most intimate, secret, unconfessed and, therefore, intricate aspects of life (both one’s own and society’s) as they leave their mark on the embodied experience, and to which the writing self is called to listen. In the language of 1970 feminism, this was called *pratica dell’autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising practices). It is a writing of and by embodied life, possibly a bio-writing in which life writes itself on the embodied experiences of the reflecting self (this is different from the autobiographical style though, which takes a distanced, detached attitude toward life, even one’s own). Melandri calls this narrative style “the salvific bilinguism of the political culture of women” (LV 129): the ability to “reason [...] with our deep memory, the intimate language of infancy, and, simultaneously with words, the language of social life, work, and institution” (LV 135). It is a way to tie together the personal and the political, the individual and the universal in a modality that does not preempt embodied individuality; rather her narrative style sees life as the nourishment, the thread, the life of thought — a genuinely living thought (to cite the title of a recent work by Roberto Esposito).<sup>3</sup> Melandri does not write *about* or *of* life, in the theoretical distance (which is also a luxury) provided by traditional philosophy; she writes life as life writes itself in her embodied existence: with passion, humility, and honesty.

In conformity with this bio-style, several passages of the volume, scattered here and there where the overarching narrative calls for them, offer a theoretical as well as a historical analysis of the trajectory of the life of Italian feminism since the 1970s. These are the years when, after “fleeing uncomfortable country roots,” an unwelcome marriage, and a profession

3. Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

as a school teacher, Melandri arrives in Milan, the “place of [her] rebirth,” a city that appears to her as a maternal body — not shielding and familiar, as some analyses would have it, but rather “dilated and anonymous” (LV III). Melandri’s attitude toward the notion of maternity or the maternal, extolled by other women writers such as Luisa Muraro and Luce Irigaray, will always remain problematic, and could be the theme of a (perhaps comparative) account of its own.<sup>4</sup>

When the Italian feminist movements of the 1970s attempt to expand in the mid- to late 1980s — from small consciousness-raising groups and collectives to an infiltration into the broader cultural and political institutions of the time — Melandri notes that a three-fold fragmentation occurs. The fragmentation corresponds to three different strategies of dealing with women’s issues.

The first approach aimed to introduce into the academic world new and equalizing epistemic contents and forms that could renovate strictly regimented disciplines and advance alternative models and paradigms for studying, learning, and producing knowledge. In the rest of the world, such transformational strategies of epistemic decanonization (or decolonization) produced so-called gender studies programs, which, however, remained almost entirely absent within the male-dominated world of Italian universities, which continued and largely continues to prevail in form and content. Melandri deliberately avoided these academic endeavors because, she argues, institutionalization means inevitably the violence of normalization.<sup>5</sup>

A second approach, Melandri’s analysis continues, preferred focusing on the creation of a woman identity through the development of a distinct symbolic order, a separate tradition of women’s authority and language upon which to found a uniquely feminine subjectivity. This is the so-called *pensiero della differenza* (thought of difference), which has been very popular in Italy even before and independently of Luce Irigaray’s own version of it, and sees some of its most renowned representatives in Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero, the latter of whom also succeeded in entering the academic world prominently. Melandri is, however, critical of this position because of what she reads as its essentializing drift, which is perhaps comforting because of the traditionally reassuring roles it assigns to women as mothers, nurturers, and care-takers, yet it is problematic, from Melandri’s

4. See especially, within Italian feminist thinkers, Luisa Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, trans. Francesca Novello (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).

5. Yet, she actively participated and still participates in mainly extra-institutional, self-regulating, anti-authoritarian educational settings — from public debates to daycare facilities to alternative journals to the Libera Università delle Donne in Milan (the Women’s Free University), to her “networking” on the social media — all initiatives that are situated outside, external to (and therefore non-supportive of) dominating structures.

perspective, because of the overall justification it allegedly provides for existing power relations, which remain basically unchallenged and unchanged.

Equality or difference are the conceptual categories under which Melandri captures the distinct overall approaches of the two feminist groups that are focused, in the mid-eighties, on effecting change and transformation. Yet the very alternative between equality, which “gender studies” wish to attain within the epistemic and then largely cultural realm, and difference, which the “thought of difference” aims at establishing as a legitimate standpoint from which to unfold an alternative model of subjectivity and feminine identity, is, for Melandri, a false option. The contrast emerges only within an already binary, dualistic way of approaching life. More poignantly, “this binary presents a false dichotomy imposed upon women by male power” (LV 67), Melandri argues. As such, the dichotomy has to be examined, unveiled, and ultimately opposed as part of the way of thinking that creates the problem of women’s subordination in the first place.

The goal, from Melandri’s standpoint, is not to emancipate women while remaining within a system of power that maintains male structures, modes, and models of thinking and behaving. As she says with respect to the thinking of sexual difference, the idea of “a specifically female ‘nature’ or gender” is “an idea deployed by men in order to confine women to a minority social, legal, and political status” (LV 67). Emancipation, based on concepts of rights and equality that are in fact male constructs, confirms the system, which allows emancipation to exist as a form of self-inoculation. As such, it is opposed by Melandri with the idea of “liberation.” The task is that of liberating oneself, whether man or woman, from complicity with the male, patriarchal way of thinking that operates through dualisms, that denies the other in order to assert itself, that asserts itself in order to deny the other, ultimately, that proceeds through a dialectic that denies the third because it considers it already implied in the one and the two, understood in an opposition for which the notions of complementarity, harmony, and fusion of the sexes are simply the more peaceful (and yet devastating) aspect. As Melandri captures in the title of the concluding chapter of her book, the goal is an “unavoidable revolution”<sup>6</sup> — not a reformation — of the male structures of power. Everything has to go for things truly to change

Thus, in the 1980s, Melandri chooses the approach of a third group of women beyond both the vindication of difference and the establishment of gender equality. This group of women remained interested in a less academic, more activist approach that intertwines thinking and doing, reflection and action and remains loyal, in Melandri’s words, to:

6. “Inevitable” is what Calcagno translates as “unstoppable” (LV III).

The practices out of which feminism had grown: examination of the connections between politics and life, between self-knowledge and the other forms of discourse that we had imbibed. They sought a self-awareness capable of interrogating traditional forms of knowledge and the established powers of public life, and they called for a “geography rather than a genealogy,” a kind of knowing able and willing to enter “disturbing landscapes” and unafraid to plumb male–female relations in all of their complexities and contradictions (LV 133–134).

This path privileges what Melandri names “the thinking body.” The thinking body expresses a self-aware and embodied subject, individual, and person that, on the one hand, rebels against abstract concepts of identity as subjectivity, individuality, and personhood and, on the other, is antecedent to, rejecting, resisting, and immune to all dualisms that are in fact imposed by the patriarchal order. As such, the thinking body is therefore capable of joining politics and life in what Melandri qualifies as an “affirmative biopolitics” (LV 129): a politics of life that is life affirming.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The Body, Geography, and Biopolitics

The theme of the body is, of course, one of the centerpieces of the 1970s feminist movements, which elevated the body, sexuality, and the bodily conditions of life that constitute the lived experience of the individuals to be one of the main points of their programs. This form of feminism made the private (the home, the family, procreative issues, the education of children, the care of the elderly) not “a women’s question” but a public, political issue. A geography of the body (that is, a cartography of embodied presence) and not a genealogy is what Melandri claims to be interested in. The body that feminists make the topic of their geography is certainly not the Cartesian body reduced to sheer, measurable, quantitative extension; but it is not even the body reduced to mere organism, naturalized, and inserted into a biochemical view of life.

With respect to the theme of the body, Melandri’s position seems particularly interesting, first, with respect to somewhat related, current analyses carried out by thinkers such as Foucault and Agamben about the reduction of the human being to a biological organism or bare life on which to exercise policing functions; and second, with respect to the emphasis on the maternal body as a positive metaphorical or symbolic model for

7. The polemical reference is, of course, to the recent popularity of biopolitical analyses inspired by Foucault and carried on, among others, by thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito.

ontological, socio-political, and ethical relations proposed by thinkers as varied as Muraro and Irigaray but also Levinas among others.<sup>8</sup>

With respect to a thinker such as Agamben, Melandri describes his thinking as a “lucid analysis of the birth of the *polis* (that is, how the abstract figure of the biological body is produced and deployed)» out of a schism that opposes thought to body and transforms the singularity of all human beings into a relation between sovereign power and life bereft of humanity. Yet, despite his lucidity, Melandri exposes also the inadequacy of Agamben’s position. His limitation lies in the fact that he:

Did not see the vehement conviction with which the son–man [*uomo-figlio*] believes himself to be different from the body that delivered him into the world — a body identified with a “lower” nature, with animality, and, consequently, a body understood as the very repository of its own heritage is imbricated with and mistaken for the process of socialization (LV 4).

In other words, what Agamben neglects to account for is, in Melandri’s reading, the fact that the exclusion of the body on which civilization founds itself is in actuality the exclusion not of the biological body or of “anyone’s” body but of the “motherly” body, an already accultured body. The “bare life” that biopolitics denigrates and controls is not simply dehumanized life but rather the domestic life, marked by the invisibility, exploitation, and alienation with which the woman’s body has traditionally been associated. The human community, for Melandri, originates in a previous power struggle between the sexes that results in the male’s alienation and escape from the female body with which the male subject was, “between the coitus and birth” (or between origin and history), in an indiscernible/seamless unity. Such unity is what he now needs to reject in order to find his autonomy but for which he nevertheless longs as the originary, primordial unity that he therefore idealizes. Briefly stated, Agamben’s analysis of biopolitical power forgets the more fundamentally sexed and gendered character of the body over which biopolitics primarily exercises itself in order to assert sovereignty, which remains male sovereignty. Agamben ignores that biopolitics is rooted in the already historical relation between sexes that plays itself out through the woman’s body as the giver of life.<sup>9</sup>

8. On some of the Italian women thinkers giving a central role to maternity, see *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*, ed. C. Casarino and A. Righi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). With respect to Levinas, see for example the role played by the figure of maternity in Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981).

9. As Melandri explains in a section of *Love and Violence* titled “The Armed Defenselessness of the Son–Man [*uomo-figlio*]”, in order to fully celebrate his autonomy, his freedom in the public sphere, man has had to “annihilate the biological chains of his birth from a female body and from all

There is an original violence that men perpetrate on women and that is intertwined with the very concept of love. Such violence between the sexes, which also explains subsequent forms of social violence against women, stems from men's perceived sense of weakness and marginality in the generative process, which men do not control. This sense of powerlessness is then covered up by men through the creation of gender roles of the kind we have known throughout history and which condemn women's bodies to their gendered role as nourishing mothers (wives, and daughters). Such reductions go hand in hand with men's attempt at distinguishing themselves from nature and animality while attributing to themselves the realms of morality and history. The reductions that successfully create the dualisms between nature and culture, biology and history, animal and human are therefore preceded by another dualism — that between the sexes — which associates nature, biology, and animality with women and culture, history, and humanity with men. The naturalization of the body is the colonization of the woman's body, which is itself a cultural operation.

For Melandri, then, gender dualism is not itself originary but rather the result of one (the male) sex's own attempt at dominating the body from which one receives life. At the origin is the body, not as difference but as possibility, ground for differentiation, of which the sexual difference understood as male–female is simply one form. In this sense, the body of the origin is the generative body antecedent to all dualisms: the dualism of the genders, because the generative body contains both unity and multiplicity, selfsameness and otherness, but also the dualism that separates the body from the activity of thinking, consciousness, and self–consciousness. Thus, the body of the origin is the thinking body, an embodied self in which one's own self–consciousness is rooted in one's own life or lived experiences. It is, one could say, the body as *aporia*, as that which contains within itself as its innermost possibilities both birth and death, love and hate, caring and aggressiveness. It is the body as “power of life,” as generative, creative ability but not thereby necessarily as a maternal body according to the role of the mother, which is gendered, that is, the socio–historical result of male predominance and subjugation of the female body for the reasons indicated above. It is the body as *chora*, as “the bottomless well” that dissolves clear representations, fixed concepts, unities, and universalities.

what that body represents for him: fragility, mortality, his early dependence on his mother. Although men exalt women in their imagination, they have projected their own weakness, guilt, and all that belongs to the heritage of our animal nature, including our limits as living beings, onto women. In order to degrade maternal and erotic power, man has forced woman to live a mirrored life, to embody and become his fears and desires, to be simultaneously glorified and subjugated” (LV 88; trans. modified).



To speak of the body in terms of maternal body, as various feminists have done and still do, is, for Melandri, still to remain captive of the rhetoric that understands the body in terms of dualisms between a male and a female sex with already specified roles. More specifically, the rhetoric of the maternal is functional to the desire of the son to both be nurtured by the mother in the unity of the womb and yet to assert his own independence by necessarily eliminating or subordinating the mother.

The privileged connection mother–son, which Melandri explores with the help of psychoanalysis, simultaneously invokes the complementarity of the sexes, from which the son derives, and asserts the necessary exclusion of the maternal principle so that the son can assert itself. Together with this exclusion is the vilification of the body, assimilated with the biological and excluded from the political realm except for its masculinized form. But the masculinized, virile body, Melandri claims, is a body that in fact is no longer a body because it has erased its connection with life, sensuality, passions, and emotions.

Melandri's criticism of the maternal model is especially timely when it is read side by side with her parallel critique of the current feminization of work and politics, *il fattore D[onna]* or the W(oman)–factor, as Melandri names it. Current appeals to the introduction of models of “feminine virtues” into the work environment as ways to render such an environment more humane are heard frequently. Yet, for Melandri, all such appeals fall into the old trap of supporting that which in fact causes subordination in the first place. The feminization of the workplace and the political realm through the invocation of notions of service, caring, mentoring, work–family balance, etc., in truth perpetuates the ancient association between woman and nature/nurture; even more gravely, it prevents actual women from developing their own, independent mode of identity and subjectivity. By duplicating and projecting onto the traditionally male world of politics and the public sphere old images of care and nourishment, the system, which persists as male-dominated, legitimizes, by giving it a political place, the traditional function of the mother, daughter, and wife, now extended to the public sphere. Thus, far from altering the current male dominated system, its feminization confirms and reinstitutes women in the traditional, stereotypical roles assigned to them by that same system of domination and subordination. Moreover, such a feminization risks duplicating the aspects of invisibility and gratuitousness of women's domestic work; care and love cannot be monetized, and the productivity of the mother in generating and raising children is left unpaid. Hence, “motherly virtues” come as cheap, highly desirable items for the capitalist, neoliberalist economy geared toward high profit at low cost or, in other words, exploitation of traditional feminine virtues presented as natural, in truth, imposed.

Analogously, the body that is present in its glamorized form everywhere in the media, in politics, in society, is not the celebration of the embodied self and the body, their return on the scene of exclusion; rather, it is the generalized exhibition of their vilification. What is displayed is, in fact, a pornographic body, a body that, under the pretense of its emancipation, has been objectified, conformed, and enslaved to match the needs, expectations, and configurations of male desire. Once again, it is a body subjugated by the patriarchal system, which has disguised its contempt for the female body under the deception of its glorification and public admiration. To emancipate the body from the puritanism of previous eras is not yet to liberate its possibilities outside of the forced roles and images that have been imposed on it. As Melandri says with respect to maternity, it is only when motherhood is liberated from the patriarchal roles that have been assigned to it, when it is not expected as natural that it can be freely chosen — both as a possibility and in the modes of its manifestation and practices.

### 3. Affirmative Biopolitics

Recurrent violence against women and both overt and unconscious misogyny is what Melandri observes as still operational at all levels of social, political, economic, and cultural life. Women are often unsuspecting accomplices of the situation because of a long-history of internalization of gendered roles that makes them appear as natural when they are instead imposed. Against this, Melandri advocates (and actively works) for a radical politics that goes to the roots of the human. At such roots, we find the complex story of the power relation between the sexes, which is what needs to be unveiled, that is, exposed and recognized, before moving forward. Such a politics is, with a term shared with Foucault and Agamben but with a radicalized content, “an affirmative biopolitics.” The beginnings of it are retraced by Melandri in the non-authoritarian and feminist movements of the 1970s, to which it is thus important to return (LV 129) and which Melandri herself has never left. In Melandri’s interpretation, an affirmative biopolitics means “a politics that accord[s] a greater role to the body, a politics that question[s] experience and underst[ands] subjectivity as located in the thinking, sexed, and plural body” (LV 129). This form of subjectivity is for Melandri based on “the freedom to be,” which is also the freedom to be different, free from imposed laws, roles, and models of behavior, feeling, desiring, thinking, and acting. Ultimately, it is the ability not to neglect any one part of oneself, to be complete as an individual “whose thought is embodied and sexed” (LV 131). It means not to have to choose between dualisms — of sex, gender, and otherwise — as if they were the only alternative, as if

they were part of an alternative, whether the alternative between the body and the mind, one's reason and one's passions, one's domestic life and the political sphere, feminine and masculine roles and virtues. Ultimately, an affirmative biopolitics is, for Melandri, one that is "capable of producing an underdetermined subjectivity and a politics not only 'based on' life but "of" life" (LV 15).