

Paradoxes of Political Bodies: Cavarero's Voices and Their Challenges to Political Discourses

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Abstract

This essay examines Adriana Cavarero's critique of the exclusion of women from politics and the paradoxical relationship between rationality and voice. It explores the possibility of rethinking politics from bodies and uniqueness, highlighting an erotic relational ethics. Connecting Cavarero's ideas with Lynne Huffer's concept of the lips as an emblem of queer female difference offers potential for constructing embodied, pluralistic relations beyond dialectics.

Keywords: Adriana Cavarero, exclusion, paradox, embodied politics, political philosophy

Biography

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The distinction between a corporeal level and, so to speak, a “spiritual” level of identity, nonetheless has its justification only within the polemical limits to which the dichotomic obsession of philosophy restricts us. Philosophy, of course,

loves to separate – within the subject – the body from the soul.

In spite of philosophy, appearance – and the primacy of the visible with which it embraces phenomena – are nonetheless always and everywhere rooted in the materiality of the context.

(Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*)

Adriana Cavarero's words take us directly to the heart of the challenge that women's political thought brings to philosophy and its discourses, a paradoxical challenge that starts from an exclusion in order to look at the centre, and interrogates it from precisely that exclusion. Reflection on the relationship between bodies and politics has been at the core of philosophical debate since its beginnings, and has been constitutively intertwined with the concept of citizenship and the possibility of participating in political life. In the Greek world, the body becomes a symbol of all the spheres and dimensions of life that are considered biological, and that, for that reason, are excluded from politics and its spaces: politics is concerned with reason and the *soul*, banishing bodies from its view, and considering them pure matter without substance of their own. At the same time, however, the metaphor of the body becomes the paradigm for defining systems of government and images of society. This representation of society as a *political body* finds its fullest realisation in modernity – consider the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan* – but it already had its roots in the political thought of antiquity, and extends its branches into today's world and lexicon. Theognis, in the sixth century B.C., speaking of Megara, writes: "this city is pregnant and I am afraid she will give birth to a man who will set right our wicked insolence" (Theognis, 1999: 181). In the same vein, Menenius Agrippa, in the most famous of his speeches reported by Livy, emphasises that "thus Senate and people, *as one body*, with discord perish and with harmony flourish" (Livy, 1919: 325),¹ comparing societies to human and organic bodies. This movement of a body that is constantly excluded and welcomed back is a

¹ "[S]ic senatus et populus *quasi unum corpus* discordia pereunt concordia valent".

paradox, revealing some of the contradictions and structures that are central to Western political reflection (Greblo, 2000; Kantorowicz, 2016).

In fact, as Adriana Cavarero points out, the exclusion of the body becomes above all the exclusion of women, who are considered more bound to biological materiality, and therefore less endowed with rationality:

this constitutive impoliticity, or rather anti-politicity, of the body as opposed to the *logos* is ultimately revealed to be founded on the basic opposition of female nature to male nature. [...] In thinking the body as woman and woman as body, the *polis* of masculine foundation thus comes to synthesise in a single idea all that it considers its fearful *other*, and which then symptomatically corresponds to what the *polis* itself has, on a historical level, already liquidated and defeated (Cavarero, 1995: 9).

The exclusion of the body and bodies becomes in this sense a vehicle for denying citizenship and the possibility of political action primarily to women, who often become a metaphor for the nature and materiality of the biological. Even the *political body* takes on guises that are increasingly distant from the concreteness of individual bodies. Theognis is one of the few cases in which the body referred to is that of a *pregnant* woman; in the course of modernity, an adult body is more often described as neutral insofar as it is male and without any reference to biological dimensions.

At the same time, however, bodies – and women's bodies in particular – in the course of modernity are analysed and invested by the political gaze interested in the possibility of controlling the capacity to generate. Women's bodies thus become *public places* (Duden, 1993) to be guarded and controlled; they are central to the reproduction of society but still excluded from the possibility of political action. Moreover, from the 18th century onwards, women's bodies are exposed to the medical gaze, which begins to recognise their specificity without considering them as anything but a negative cast of the male body, and which begins to observe pregnancy and childbirth with greater attention to the foetus and the possibility

of *seeing it* inside the mother's womb, first through palpation and, two centuries later, ultrasound. Women's bodies, therefore, become the crossroads of a series of knowledges and powers that establish their boundaries and shape, and contribute to the process of subjectifying and subordinating women. The same process occurs for all bodies that appear to deviate from a reproductive sexual norm; they are studied in order to construct a normative ideal of *nature* to correspond to what ends up excluding them.

In the pages below, I will strive to retrace the reflections that Cavarero, especially in *Relating Narratives*, offers on the body in general and the female body in particular in order to analyse the role that the body plays in the interpretation of difference. I will conclude by seeking to relate Cavarero's thought to some reflections proposed by certain queer theorists to highlight the critique of the dialectic that is posed precisely by starting from bodies, and sexed bodies in particular.

Voiceless bodies

Going back to the origins of philosophical thought, Nicole Loraux emphasises the extent to which Greek politics is concerned with conflict, civil war, and *stasis*, the origin of which is also traced in female difference (2002). The identification of the *political* with the One excludes from view and, thus, from the public space, anything that might undermine the image of a homogeneous society, anything that might expose the city to the risk of *stasis*. This exclusion, however, is never unambiguous but always circular: the politician excludes but at the same time narrates and defines what he distances, always recomposing it in a discourse with which he also defines himself. The first exclusion – in both a temporal and ontological sense – from the Greek *polis* is that of women, in the name of a sexual binarism that becomes hierarchy and creates and delineates other dualities, such as the pairs of body and reason, nature and culture, and disorder and order, in which the negative pole is always the representation of the feminine.

Alongside these reflections, Cavarero emphasises a fundamental element that emerges with the mythical figure of

Pandora. Greek mythology assigns the birth of civilisation to fire, which Prometheus steals from the gods to give to human beings. Zeus's reaction is merciless, and Prometheus is condemned to be chained up on the Caucasus with an eagle that eats his liver every day, only to have it grow back every night. Humans, however, must also be punished, and this is where Pandora comes into play: a woman created by Hephaestus upon whom each deity has bestowed a quality — beauty, virtue, skill, grace, cunning, wit. Pandora has a box with her, which Zeus has ordered her not to open. Unable to resist her curiosity, the woman disobeys, and by opening the vase releases all the evils that afflict humanity: old age, jealousy, sickness, pain, madness and vice. As Cavarero points out, through this myth “a reversal has taken place: the *expelled, the feminine, is what is considered guilty and the origin of its own expulsion process*” (2007: 34). That is, the myth of Pandora makes it possible to read the exclusion of women as the result of their own guilt, of an original error which makes them guilty in a trial they have undergone and which frees men of all responsibility.

The need for the exclusion of women, whose overly-present bodies generate disorder in the city, is also made clear by the figure of Athena: a goddess who is born a fully grown and fully armed adult from the forehead of her father Zeus. She is thus a woman who presides over the city because she takes on all the elements of the masculine – from weapons to the independence guaranteed by adulthood – and because “Athena is a woman against women. In the tragedy, the Furies are taken and put under the earth: democracy can subsist because it has driven the *deinón* that are the Furies, the feminine, under the earth, and the political order has been built against a very dangerous and anti-democratic feminine power” (*ibid.*: 37). The only woman who can be in the political sphere is a woman who loses the characteristics that make her different and, as such, dangerous, to the unity of the community. Indeed, the community itself is constituted precisely through the exclusion of the feminine and could not exist without that founding gesture. As Cavarero points out, the only representations of the feminine that are accepted as political, even when they are explicitly hostile, are those of “an aggressive and feminine warrior”, like the Amazons who “in order to draw their bows,

cut off their breasts. Here is the monstrosity of war that deforms the female body defending the city in the form of a goddess, but dressed as a soldier. Here is the functioning of the representation of the feminine that is displaced within the symbolic scenario, in order to reinforce the tightness of the symbolic scenario itself" (*ibid.*: 40). The women the city opposes, therefore, are also women who have modified their bodies so that they are not fully recognisable as such, while other women remain invisible and excluded.

The construction of Greek politics as constitutively male goes hand in hand with the construction of citizens as independent and rational beings and, as such, capable of detaching themselves from their bodies. Cavarero, however, gives this separation of mind and body a particularly interesting nuance when she notes the paradox at its foundation: rationality can only express itself in a discourse – an eminently political and philosophical element – that finds its highest moment in the assembly, in public discourse. Political discourse, therefore, is a discourse that necessarily needs the voice, an expression that needs others and thus marks the public and collective character of politics. But the voice, Cavarero reminds us, is an intrinsically corporeal element that resonates in the throat, in the vocal cords, in the diaphragm, in the movements of the tongue. And therein lies the paradox: we must deny this corporeal character of the voice in order to affirm the rational character of discourse.

This is a paradox that is evident, once again, when observing the role that myths, the founding narratives of the political sphere, assign to women. The archetypal figure in this case is that of the Sirens, who enchant, not by chance, but with incomprehensible, unintelligible, but still unimaginably beautiful, sounds, which for this reason create both malice and disorder. As Cavarero points out, in the development of the figure of the siren, we can see how

the descent of the Sirens into the water, their metamorphosis into fishlike creatures, is in fact accompanied by their transformation into very beautiful women. This process corresponds, in a rather significant way, to one of the most stereotypical models of the female

sex – namely, the stereotype according to which, in her erotic function as seductress, as an object of masculine desire, the woman appears first of all as a body and as an inarticulate voice. She must be beautiful, but she must not speak (Cavarero, 2000: 107).

Women are thus given a bodily voice that enchants but does not reason, while men are given a rational voice that somehow exists without the body. Once again, a paradox is dissolved by the exclusion of women, this time from the field of the rational.

Exclusion from the possibility of being rational subjects also means exclusion from the possibility of being part of a universal subject; in fact, “it is interesting to note the way in which the tradition removes the corporeal realm of the voice assigned to woman from the political sphere of universal subjects (which are modelled on ‘man’) assigned to man” (*ibid.*: 208). Thanks to the idea that rational discourse can be expressed by an abstract, incorporeal voice, it is possible not to avoid recognising as rational the particular voices that emerge from bodies: “in other words, in the (notoriously dichotomous) symbolic patriarchal order, man is conceived as mind and woman as body. The division of *logos* into a purely feminine *phone* and a purely masculine *semantikon*, finally, accomplishes and confirms the system” (*ibid.*: 107), a system that is founded, let us repeat, on the possibility of imagining universal subjects as equal, as interchangeable. In order to establish this universality, it is essential to exclude bodies as bearers of differences, of irreducible uniqueness. And we again find a paradox: Cavarero highlights how the claim of universality grounds metaphysics, which is based on postulating a One that erases all embodied uniqueness. We are therefore faced with a One that denies the very possibility of uniqueness – and here Cavarero echoes Arendt’s critique of metaphysics and Plato (Arendt, 2005). Interestingly, starting with the woman–body association and the exclusion of the political sphere that follows, it is possible to question the very foundation of Western political thought and its metaphysics.

This critique is, however, immediately also the possibility of imagining different forms of relation and thought which do not involve the opposition of one universal to another universal

but instead aim precisely to question the necessity of universality understood as homogeneity. As Cavarero notes,

in the devocalisation of logos that accompanies the history of metaphysics, the repression of vocal pleasure is above all a repression of the pleasure that characterises resonance as the primary, spontaneous rhythm and drive of the reciprocal communication of unique voices (2000: 199).

The abstract, universal rational discourse is in fact a discourse that denies the possibility of finding pleasure in the voice, in the communication that also passes through the tones, the uniqueness of an accent, of an intonation, of a way of speaking that requires us to think about the meaning not only through the content of what is said, but also through the way it is done and the timbre with which we communicate. In this reciprocal recognition of uniqueness lies a pleasure, a sharing that starts in the body and resonates there, in a form that goes beyond rationality but is not political. For Cavarero, this type of communication has been experienced particularly by women – and, we might add, by all subjects excluded from the rational – who have communicated not so much in argumentative form, based on syllogisms valid always and everywhere, but in narrative mode, through particular and situated narratives:

through the split between “body” and “soul” that characterises the subject, women have an easier time approaching the experience of the narratable self. In other words, their so-called sentimentalism is the coherent aspect of a gathering of uniqueness, which, in the amorous scene as well, confirms itself through the familiar indistinguishability of embodied existences and life-stories. As poets of both sexes know well, love is too complex a phenomenon to leave to the advocates of autarchic eros (*ibid.*: 115).

The accusations levelled at women – of only talking about love, of having relationships that are too intimate, of not arguing enough – actually become signs of their strength, of the possibility of thinking otherwise, and of building embodied

relationships that are not based on the claim of recognising ourselves in a universal One. On the contrary, even through the complex phenomenon of love, it is possible to rediscover a uniqueness starting from bodies, a relationship that “finds its height in the orgasm” and in which “lovers therefore come to repeat the beginning of their existence” (*ibid.*: 111), not because they return to the womb but because they appear to each other as unique, as at the moment of birth.

This possibility of rethinking discourse and politics starting from bodies, for Cavarero, marks not a destruction but a re-signification: “it is not a matter of overcoming or erasing speech, but rather of keeping the primary sense of speech in proximity to the relational plurality of voices that originate speech, or that materialise it, as it were, by making it sing” (*ibid.*: 210). And it is in this re-signification that she sees the fullest fruit of Italian feminism and its practices:

Italian feminism responds to the binary economy of the patriarchal order – which catalogues man in the sphere of thought and women in the sphere of the body – by making speech the reciprocal communication of women in flesh and bone who communicate themselves contextually “starting with themselves”. It is thus not a communal belonging – in the sense of identity politics – to the feminine sex that determines the political quality of this communication. It is not Woman, which is just as fictitious as Man, which is here expressed and represented. Rather, this politics consists in the relational context or, better, the absolute local where reciprocal speech signifies the sexed uniqueness of each speaker in spite of patriarchal prohibitions – even before signifying something (*ibid.*: 206).

It is a question here of constructing a collective subject, a woman, who does not reproduce the male subject’s claims to universality but who makes her own history of exclusion in order to start from the body to rethink discourses and politics: a capacity to feel together through radical difference, in the sense of having no initial model to which to adhere. It is necessary to recognise that “in the history of the West,

difference is difference-from: there is the adult man, male, free, and in relation to him the woman 'differs' from him in that she is non-male; she is therefore inserted in a hierarchy, at the lower level; just as the non-free differs from the free, the non-Greek from the Greek. In other words, a central identity is created and, through a strategy of exclusion, differences are named as differences-from" (Cavarero, 2007: 76) and, as a result of this recognition, break this mechanism of dichotomous differentiation in order to hear the plurality of voices and the bodies that emit them.

Sexed bodies

Cavarero's reflection in *Relating Narratives* allows us to link the exclusion of women from the public sphere, their identification with the body, and their lack of rationality in a vicious circle that should lead us to criticise the very foundations of politics. Moreover, this critique allows us to question the forms of political philosophical thought, starting from the supremacy accorded to rational argumentation, in order to propose ways of relating that pass through the connection with the body. Finally, Cavarero reminds us that it is possible to postulate a difference that is not dialectical, that is not posited as the overcoming of a previous stage but that creates a gap. The difference that emerges from the voice, from uniqueness, from the denied female body is not the overcoming of this negation; it does not lead to a universal synthesis but opens up unexpected possibilities precisely by refusing dialectics.

In this sense, Cavarero's reflection can be useful for reading some queer theories, and highlighting their feminist genealogy. In particular, it is interesting to link her reflection to that of Judith Butler, with whom Cavarero has been in dialogue (Guaraldo and Bernini, 2009). Butler, in fact, continually proposes defiance against Hegelian theories and in particular the master-servant dialectic to understand not only the mechanisms of recognition but also the extent to which they are inscribed in the body. As opposed to language that wants Butler's thought disembodied, the body is in reality constantly present as an element that is not immediately given but is rather

constantly interpreted. This interpretation passes through power relations, through exclusions and through what from time to time is brought to the fore. Since publishing *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), Butler “has thematised a notion of ‘self’ as essentially ‘excessive’ or ‘beyond oneself’, thereby meaning that the sphere of agency and subjectivity cannot be accounted for in exclusively constructivist terms” (Guaraldo, 2012: 101). This is a notion of the self as never fully accessible but, as such, never merely constructed, as the very status of the body makes clear.

Butler, precisely on the basis of this awareness, criticises the notion of autonomy, not least for what it produces in the body:

To disavow one’s body, to render it “Other” as an effect of autonomy, is to produce one’s body in such a way that the activity of its production – and its essential relation to the lord – is denied. This trick or ruse involves a double disavowal and an imperative that the “Other” become complicit with this disavowal. In order not to be the body that the lord presumably is, and in order to have the bondsman posture as if the body that he is belongs to himself – and not be the orchestrated projection of the lord – there must be a certain kind of exchange, a bargain or deal, in which ruses are enacted and transacted. In effect, the imperative to the bondsman consists in the following formulation: you be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body you are is my body (Butler, 1997: 35).

As in Cavarero, a paradox emerges: the need for a body that denies the body itself. As Catherine Malabou notes, “the ‘properly human’ is identified with that which is other than the body: the ‘concept’ or the ‘meaning’ as detached from any empirical content and therefore universal. Meaning is precisely what may be detached from any kind of context” (Butler and Malabou, 2001: 613). We find here the critique of the abstract universal that passes through the realisation that universality is only possible without bodies. Cavarero proposes to overcome this universality that dispossesses us of our bodies in a dialogue with others through narrative, which restores a relational sense of self. Butler, emphasising how “*to be a body, it must be bound to*

another body" (*ibid.*: 631), believes that not even the body, not even the voice, can be an anchor which protects us against dispossession, the awareness that my body is never really mine, but is enacted with others and in a set of norms and expectations that precede me. If, for Cavarero, then, sexual difference is a possibility of evading norms, of making sense of oneself, for Butler it remains a dialectical construction. Butler, after all, exposes us to an almost tragic dimension (to which, not surprisingly, she responds with the political use of parody) in which not even our voices really emerge from our bodies.

Interestingly, however, Cavarero offers a relational space that is possible and to which she also attributes characteristics of authenticity. As Guaraldo notes,

Cavarero instead aims, more subtly, at providing a provocatively creative account of orgasm that is one with her effort of rethinking the subject: exposed and relational, profoundly dependent upon a bodily materiality that cannot be removed. Orgasm results in relationality at its purest, an instant of pleasure that does not include death or annihilation. This way of casting the body, its nakedness and exposure as orgasm, entails the claim that to experience one's unique being in relation to another uniqueness is a pleasurable, erotic, and empowering experience that as such must not necessarily entail appropriation (John Locke), control, or domestication (Carla Lonzi) (Guaraldo, 2021: 102).

There is thus an erotic dimension of relationality which is expressed in the orgasm as a symbol of a possible relationship that excludes the dialectic of the struggle for life and death but also distances itself from any fantasy of fusion. It is an entirely political choice to read the erotic dimension as a heterotopic space, stripped of its ambivalences and death drives, in order to use pleasure rather than desire as a guide to imagining different social relations.

And it is in this sense that Cavarero's reflection can be related to Lynne Huffer's (2013) attempt to question the lips of the vulva as a possible political element. Huffer uses the labia to propose a theory linking feminism and the constructs of queer

subjects, sex, and gender. Even in her title, Huffer combines a reference to Bersani's (1987) famous essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" with Irigaray's (1985) *Quand nos lèvres se parlent* ("When Our Lips Speak Together"). By replacing the figure of the rectum with the labia, Huffer seeks to draw our attention to the gender and sexual difference that tends to be forgotten in the anti-social male strand of queer theory, which focuses on an autonomous and free subject in the pursuit of pure sexual pleasure and "reverse[s] common conception of ethics as relational moral norm into a negative ethics that is non-relational and anti-social" (2013: 29). She also wants to overcome the *tragic* sense of the impossibility of relationships that allows one to tell a truth about oneself that appeared in Butler's earlier work. Huffer thus wants to start from the lips in order to again question the autonomous and independent subject and to construct an erotic relational ethics: "all depending, of course, on the definitions given to *eros* (eroded according to Huffer by the biopolitical) and to ethics (associated by Huffer with the genealogical analysis of this erosion)" (Deutscher, 2016: 235). For Huffer, "eros is not a timeless form of expression delimited by genre or discursive form. Nor is it a libidinal, Marcusean energy waiting to be liberated – either through the talking cure or through literary language – with a promise to transform the conditions of work, the economy, and social institutions. Rather, eros is the name we can give to an ethical practice of embodied subjectivity in relation to truth" (Huffer, 2010: 269).

Huffer's eros appears to be a relational dimension similar to Cavarero's orgasm, in which a truth about oneself emerges, made possible by the encounter with another. Once again, we are faced with a radical critique of the presumption that it is rationality that grounds the subject. On the contrary, it is in this instance the paradoxical loss of self given by the erotic dimension that allows one to regain one's sense of self. And this sense of self also passes through a difference that is rooted in the body, a body not understood as biological destiny but as a field of possibility. Interestingly, Huffer quotes Irigaray and her presenting "the feminine in her 'function as the negative'" as "the power in reserve for the dialectical operations to come", and accuses the dialectic of "being 'phallotropic'" (2013: 47).

Along similar lines, Huffer emphasises the difference between a Hegelian dialectical negativity and her own use of the negative as a way “to maintain [the] irreducibility of the *you* with respect to the *I*” (*ibid.*). This ability to maintain the *you* in the *I* is fundamental for Huffer, and links her reflection to Cavarero's.

Furthermore, by choosing the lips as the emblem of a possible difference, Huffer proposes the idea of an immediately queer female difference: the lips are in fact two in one, non-reproductive and expressing a negative that un.masks and dismantles the violence of subjectivity as an ethical ideal and at the same time produces subjectivity as possibility. The lips, despite their name, do not speak; they remind us of the story of the Sirens, but at the same time they are lips that allow us to express ourselves beyond rational language: “for it is in their catachrestic, heterotopian attempt to speak otherwise that the lips are simultaneously here and elsewhere, now and not now: not a pinned-down figure of the Other of the Same, but a hovering, catachrestic Other's Other. The lips name a heterotopian *ethopoiesis*, an ethical remaking of the erotic relation” (*ibid.*: 43). The lips, then, are not only a symbol but also a concrete bodily element that allows us to maintain a *you* in the self; that is, to build relationships that are based neither on appropriating the Other nor on the Others's inevitable death.

The lips again reveal how, starting from a paradox, it is possible “ethically and politically, that we take seriously both our (narrative) boundedness and our (performative) capacity to engage in practices of freedom that unravel that which binds us” (*ibid.*: 106) and that, in this link between narrative and performance and between their respective boundaries, it is possible to construct erotic, corporeal, embodied, singing practices of freedom.

Conclusion

This journey through Cavarero, juxtaposed with Huffer's intervention on the lips, has allowed us to understand how the body is the paradoxical place *par excellence*. It is a body excluded from the sphere of rationality and therefore from politics, which is read in a circular fashion as feminine and therefore

used to exclude women, a body that must disappear in its differences in order to guarantee the possibility of constructing a universal and neutral subject. At the same time, the body can be the place to rethink precisely the political sphere, avoiding any dialectical overcoming in the name of a difference that is to come and is not yet given. Starting from the body, from its unique voice and its equally unique lips, it is also possible to rethink ethical relations in an erotic key in which eros is politically interpreted as positive.

Thus, it is clear that accepting this reading and understanding of bodies and politics is a real choice, a taking of sides in a normative manner. It is, however, a normativity anchored in experience, which is capable of not constructing absolute models, but is always *uniquely embodied*. Anchoring political choices to bodies makes it possible to escape the very metaphors of homogeneity applied to the body politic and to start instead from the individual organs of a body in order to build relationships. And it is this awareness that can allow us, today, to weave dialogues between feminism and queer theory that know how to rethink bodies in their multiple differences and in the possibility of narrating them in an equally multiple manner, but outside any solipsism. Or, in the words of Carla Lonzi, in a text notably entitled *È Già Politica* (“It is already politics”), accepting the void, the absence from which the body emerges together with the living flesh of the labia (or clitoris), because

the identity that stems from the clitoris starts from a “nothing”, a cultural void, and progressively constitutes itself through an acceptance of oneself that becomes one’s own destiny but cannot fix itself in a role, lest it risks falling back into vaginality. And it cannot reveal itself in the cultural word, but in the identity that stems directly from the assumption of a non-compliant sexual identity which, alone, enables the authentic and complete utterance of the word “I”. This “I” as cultural void is the premise for a rediscovery of our body, and therefore of a culture of our own (Lonzi, 1977: 21–2).

A culture that continues to disrupt philosophical and political thought.

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