

## Gendered body in Europe: between constraint and emancipation (The)

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### Abstract

The fruit of both a social and cultural context, the body is permanently under the yoke of normative representations and discourses. Simultaneously relating to the biological, social, and the intimate, it is a mediator between an individual and society. It personifies the individual, and is controlled by social norms that govern its appearance and attitude. For a long time, it was accepted that one could only be a man or a woman, and that this binary was also reflected in the body, appearance, and social behavior. Any circumvention of the norm was disapproved of as a manifestation of sexual, cultural, or racial alterity. The gendered body is therefore an object of manipulation that serves strategies for excluding or dominating certain categories of people (non-Europeans, women, homosexuals), or on the contrary carries within it calls for a person's equality and rights. Binary gender classification has been called into question today, in a society that struggles to recognize the difference.

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### Article

## Body determines gender

Up through the eighteenth century, it was the unisex model that prevailed. The male body determined the canonical model; women were simply seen as a variation, with their genital organs as proof: the internal organ of the clitoris was simply an imperfect penis, which led to women being defined as "lesser males."

Advances in medicine and new knowledge of anatomy provided doctors with elements for distinguishing between genders: the ovary and the testicle, the vagina and the penis, sperm and menstruations confirmed gender difference, and explained distinct morphological characteristics. In the nineteenth-century context of normative obsession, two ideal and entirely opposed types were established: the man, who is muscular, hairy, and has a deep voice; and the woman, who has a high voice, a more developed chest and hips, and is clean-shaven and smaller. She is also more passive, including with regard to sexuality. According to the norm, which could only be heterosexual, the man dominates, playing the role of the penetrator. His sexuality is asserted and his desires are expressed, contrary to those of women, which are underestimated. These different natures justify gender inequality in society, with the sexes being opposed but complementary.

Any deviation would subsequently be explained by a disfunction of reproductive organs. Impotent men thought to have feminine characteristics, while women who were nuns, sterile, or menopausal had “hair on their chins”, in the words of the French doctor Étienne Pariset (1770-1847). Excesses of a sexual order (hysteria, nymphomania) could be physical in origin, and some gynecologists did not shy away from “therapeutic” surgery. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Briton Isaac Baker Brown (1811-1873) practiced clitoridectomy to treat hysteria or masturbation, while the German Alfred Hegard (1830-1914) preferred bilateral oophorectomy. And while there were fears that the ablation of healthy ovaries would make patients more virile physically, it would nevertheless contribute to re-feminizing them on the behavioral level. Such mutilating operations were rarely practiced on men.

Society thus did everything it could to control the body and make it conform to gender norms. Identity was simultaneously visible on the body, as well as based on it.

## European versus indigenous bodies

In the colonial context of the nineteenth century, the body was also an indicator of civilization that contributed to the collective construction of European identities. Doctors and ethnographers provided a typology in which the European body personified normality, doing so through the prism of the indigenous body, which was necessarily deviant, thereby justifying the colonizer’s domination. The story of Sawtche, or Saartjie Baartman (circa 1789-1815), is one example. This Khoikhoi slave, who was nicknamed the “Hottentot Venus,” drew the curiosity of scientists such as Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844) and Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), for in their eyes she had an abnormal morphology, namely steatopygia (prominent buttocks) and macronympha (elongated labia). She was therefore part of an inferior racial type. She was exhibited and prostituted as a funfair attraction in England, Ireland, Holland, and France, and was considered a specimen upon her death, with her sexual organs being conserved, and a cast of her body being presented to the Parisian public until 1974. Men were also the subject of curiosity, for whether they were black or Arab, they were attributed with hypertrophia of the penis.

Furthermore, the hot climate of the colonies was said to also produce unregulated sexuality and lascivious races of indecent women and feminized men, for instance the effeminate Bengali or the Arabic men who were said to engage in homosexual practices. These representations of the gendered body served the colonial hierarchy and the superiority of European identities, and continued despite the fall of empires, as fantasies surrounding the hypervirility of black men, the “Beurette” (colloquial term referring to a young woman of North African ancestry in France), the submissive Asian woman, or the “feline” black woman still persist at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as do the scars of profoundly internalized stereotypes.

## Deviant bodies

In a binary vision of society, gender confusion is not tolerated, and is inevitably seen as monstrous and pathological. Bearded women, for example, learned to take advantage of the curiosity they sparked, and sometimes even became celebrities who exhibited themselves in European funfairs, such as the Swiss woman Joséphine Clofullia (1827-1875), or the Frenchwomen Clémence Lestienne (1839-1919) and Clémentine Delait (1865-1939). In addition to being a funfair attraction, they disturbed the social order. However, it was intersex people, who were referred to as hermaphrodites at the time, that concerned and alarmed authorities and doctors, such as the Polish gynecologist Franz von Neugebauer (1856-1914). It was believed that the perfect androgynous person was a myth, for only “pseudo-hermaphrodites” could exist, who suffered from “anatomical flaws” and always fell under a “true” gender that it was the doctor’s task to define through a physical and moral examination. These attempts to determine a gender were considered indispensable to many observers, for whom allowing these individuals to live under an “erroneous” identity exposed society to disruption, notably sterile and immoral unions between people of the same sex. This research could sometimes lead to an annulment of marriage or a change in civil status with serious consequences. Herculine Barbin (1838-1868), for example, did not bear being reassigned as a man at the age of twenty-one, and committed suicide. While non-conformity could be the expression of a problem of an organic order, it could also be seen as the scar of psychopathological deviance. Many doctors, such as the psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902), believed that in certain cases the body could provide evidence of abnormal sexuality; “*hommages*” (women with male builds and behavior), effeminate men, or people with a hypertrophied clitoris or certain deformations of the penis, were seen as signs of sexually deviant behavior.

## The confusion of appearances

The norms of Western society were just as exclusive with regard to clothing: men wore pants, and women wore lace or skirts. Abandoning these feminine attributes helped to redistribute roles. For example in England or France, female husbands such as Harry Stockes (1799-1859), born Harriett, or François Desvaux (1780-1854), born Marie Jeanne Catherine, could live with their female spouses under the cover of men’s clothing and a male identity, of which all were aware; in the Balkans (essentially Albania and Macedonia), customary law allowed “sworn virgins” (*burrneshë*)—who refused an arranged marriage or were forced to take the place of a brother—to adopt a man’s clothing, identity, and prerogatives. This transformation nevertheless forbade them from marriage or having offspring. Playing with laws connected to gender exposed one to marginalization and social rejection, and limits were sometimes established. In 1800, for instance, the Paris police prefecture required women to declare when they wore pants, in order to combat transvestism or the usurpation of a male identity. In 1887, the feminist Marie-Rose Astié de Valsayre (1846-1939) addressed a petition to members of the French congress and the prefecture in order to have the law repealed,

albeit in vain. A woman who wore pants was an emancipated woman, including combatants (Louise Michel, 1830-1905), journalists (Dorothy Lawrence, 1896-1964), activists (Madeleine Pelletier, 1874-1939), adventurers (Isabelle Eberhardt, 1877-1904), and artists (Colette, 1873-1954).

At the same time, the expression “to wear the trousers,” which exists in a number of European languages (*porter la culotte, llevar los pantalones, die Hosen anhaben, viseli a nadrágot*), undermined identity. But clothing was just one issue among others, such as the highly erotic subject of hair. When long, must it be worn in a bun? Was going out “*en cheveux*” (in one’s hair), without a hat or a headscarf, frowned upon by society? Cosmetics, a promising market in nineteenth century Europe, was equally disapproved of because it was too gaudy and carnal, and for some was a genuine call to sex. On the contrary, the advertisements of large department stores promised to help women suffering from hairiness, gray hair, or small breasts, thanks to miraculous products.

During the twentieth century bodies became freer. After the First World War, the corset was rejected, women cut their hair, skirts became shorter, and heels grew longer starting in the 1930s. While the two-piece swimsuit appeared during the interwar period, Brigitte Bardot (born 1934) caused a scandal at Cannes in 1953 by daring to wear a much more revealing bikini. Twentieth-century women finally experienced the freedom of appearances, and now had all of their leisure time to choose. During the 1960s they could not only wear a mini-skirt and tights—which appeared at precisely that time—but could also wear pants or a tuxedo, for which Yves Saint Laurent created a feminine version in 1966. This revolution that redrew the lines of fashion also disturbed society. Finally, in the 1970s, people were surprised by the development of nude beaches, a practice that nevertheless dated back to the late nineteenth century in Northern Europe.

At the same time, male clothing began to include colors. Pink became a part of wardrobes, as elegance and style were no longer the sole domain of dandyism. Some also played at blurring genders, such as the avant-garde androgynous person David Bowie (1947-2016), who became an icon. For all that, the skirt has not yet become a part of male wardrobes, despite repeated efforts on the part of the fashion designers Jacques Esterel (1917-1974), Jean-Paul Gaultier (born 1952), or Alejandro Gómez Palomo (born 1992). There are nevertheless exceptions, in which the skirt worn by men is a symbol of virility, including within the ranks of the army, for instance with the Scottish kilt or the Greek fustanella, a soldier’s uniform whose four hundred folds represent the years of resistance against Ottoman occupation. The cassock, however, marginalizes those who wear it in the city, but without being associated with femininity. For some priests the repeal of the obligation to wear one (Vatican II, 1962) was a liberation and a step toward modernity, as pants are seen not only as more discrete and practical, but also more virile.

The late twentieth century saw the sculpting of the body. Bodybuilding enhances masculinity (chest,

biceps), whereas the bodies of female bodybuilders are shocking. Plastic surgery also contributes to gender stereotypes, with a large chest and flat stomach for women, and a prominent chest and abdominal muscles for men. The tyranny of appearances even interfered with more intimate aspects, as penoplasty and labiaplasty became so many ways of remodeling the body and affirming gender differences. While men's bodies are rarely pilloried, those of women are disdained for excessive hairiness or weight.

## The feminine body at the heart of nationalist issues

Women's bodies are also a central issue for national communities, as they bear within them the nation's identity and future. In order to counter any risk of degeneration or decadence, they must be made sterile to prevent any undesirable descendants. In 1913 Great Britain tried to issue a law in favor of forced sterilizations on the grounds of mental or racial hygiene; Switzerland was already practicing them in the late nineteenth century, as were Germany under the Third Reich, and Scandinavia from 1929 to 1970. Similarly, the sterilization of Romani women in Czechoslovakia from 1973 to 1990 and in Slovakia during the 2000s, in addition to the forced pregnancies of Bosnians as a tool of ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian War, bear witness to the use of women's bodies in the service of nationalisms.

In the context of the migratory crises affecting Europe since the late twentieth century, women's bodies show the extent of Europeaness for some people. Under cover of the defence of women's rights, some nationalist discourses have denounced the behavior of immigrants toward them, in order to legitimize xenophobia and the refusal of cohabitation. Wearing the Islamic veil has sparked many debates, with it representing female inferiority for some, and a choice emanating from individual liberty for others. Finally, the events from New Year's 2016 (Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Sweden) have served nationalist discourses, for whom sexual aggression toward European women is a symbol of immigrant invasion— primarily Muslim ones—and the loss of Western values.

## The body in activist struggles

In the second half of the twentieth century, during second-wave feminism, women mobilized to reappropriate and demand freedom of control over their own bodies, with their primary demand being the right to an abortion and contraception. In this context, artists such as the Frenchwoman Orlan (born 1947), or the Austrian Birgit Jürgenssen (1949-2003), pushed this demand to the extremes. They dramatized their bodies, which subsequently became both artistic expression and political message, and thereby questioned the role and representation of women in society. In the early twenty-first century, women's bodies are once again being used for activist purposes. The bare breasts of the Femen (movement created in Ukraine in 2008) have become a medium for political demands. The Swedish Bara Bröst (group formed in 2007) also bears mentioning; they visit pools

topless in order to excoriate the hypersexualization of society, which only sees women through their bodies and gender. Finally, the question of the dispossessed female body became a part of public debate, as obstetrical violence has been denounced: the Catalan Gynepunk movement advocates a reappropriation of the body through “do it yourself” gynecology.

Bodily fluids are also gendered, although indicators that were once highly dividing are starting to be challenged: tears no longer discredit masculinity as they once did. However, urinating while standing, sometimes in a group and in public, remains a demonstration of domination. Menstruation remains a source of shame, although during the 2010s, when certain governments wanted to raise the VAT on tampons, women did not hesitate to protest in the street with bloody tampons in their hands, in order to denounce the measure. Menstrual blood hit the pavement in France in 2015 and the United Kingdom in 2017, driven by the “Free Periods” movement.

The bodies of women have also been forbidden from being present in certain spaces and at certain moments. In the Monastic Republic of Mount Athos (Greece), cats and chickens are the only females allowed despite a denunciation on the part of the European Parliament in 2002. Since the 1970s, nocturnal, single-sex feminist marches were held in Europe against rape and to “recapture the night” (France, 1974; Belgium and Italy, 1976; West Germany and England, 1977). Women set out to conquer cities, which they consider to be male fiefdoms that perpetuate physical exclusion and male domination: in 2011, a first Slutwalk was held in Cardiff (Wales), and the recent concept of manspreading—sitting in public transportation with one’s legs spread and with no concern for the neighbor’s comfort—has become the subject of debate. For example, in 2017 public transportation authorities in Madrid launched a campaign on its buses to raise awareness of this phenomenon.

## Gender under recomposition?

Inequality isn’t the only thing that is being fought and challenged, for biology—the foundation of gender binarism and the inequality that flows from it—has helped to dismantle certainties on the subject since the twentieth century. The discovery of sexual chromosomes in 1905 by the American Nettie Stevens (1861-1912), and the diversity of their arrangement—for example that of the gene SRY in 1985 (gene that determines gonadal sexual differentiation, which can result in XX males and XY females)—in addition to research showing the masculinizing effects of so-called feminine hormones (and vice versa), demonstrate a continuum more so than a distinct border between the sexes.

Science has shown that the definition of gender is complex, and that the binary conception is insufficient. However, this questioning process most often remains activist in nature. Intersex persons continue to be seen as pathological, although since the 2000s associations have endeavored to make this more a matter of defending fundamental rights rather than a medical field. In 2011 the first International Intersex Forum was held in Brussels, and the following year saw the founding of the OII

Europe (Organisation Intersex International Europe) in Stockholm, which used the Malta (2013), Riga (2014), and Vienna (2017) declarations to position itself in favor of the right to physical integrity and self-determination of intersex individuals. Despite the repeated opinion of the Council of Europe in favor of revising legislation that causes them harm, as well as advances in certain countries (Maltese law of 2015 forbidding sex “normalization” treatments and operations without the informed consent of patients; possibility in Denmark, Malta, or Ireland to proceed with a gender change in one’s civil status by way of a declaration; addition on December 13, 2018 of the mention “other” in the Germany civil register...), most European countries continue to recognize only two genders, and to legislate exclusively based on this binary.

Similarly, transidentities are at the center of struggles for the right to self-determination, and against imposed surgical treatments. Despite the affirmation, via the Yogyakarta principles relating to international law in matters of sexual orientation and gender identity (UN, 2008), that “no one shall be subjected to invasive or irreversible procedures [...] as a condition to the legal recognition of their gender identity,” legislation has been slow to evolve. While Germany, Greece, Ireland, France, and Belgium decided between 2015 and 2017 to eliminate the obligation of surgery or sterilization in these processes, Finland and Romania still require sterilization for those who make the request. The emergence of the notion of gender fluidity, as well as terms such as cisgender (person whose sense of gender corresponds to that of their birth), which was heretofore considered the norm and therefore did not need to be named, reveal the disruption of certainties with regard to the gender binarism predominantly accepted since the nineteenth century.

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