Italian Feminism and the Actualization of Libertà in the 1970s: The Role of Women in the Reproductive Landscape

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Italian Feminism and the Actualization of Libertà in the 1970s: The Role of Women in the Reproductive Landscape

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies from The College of William and Mary

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Italian Feminism and the Actualization of *Libertà* in the 1970s: The Role of Women in the Reproductive Landscape

Cody Mills

Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies Honors Thesis

Professor Claire McKinney

May 6, 2020
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Introduction

Into the night they went, ready to share their message with the government, the papacy, and the citizenry of Rome. They worked fast and before dawn the walls of the city, barren only hours prior, were papered with a manifesto that would soon inspire an entire generation of feminist activism. The manifesto of the Italian women’s liberation group known as the Rivolta Femminile was long and detailed in its calls for something more than equality for women. Rather than utilizing their doctrine to uphold that men and women were inherently the same, they took great care in providing a plethora of cases to support their charge: that women’s liberation could only be achieved through the foundation of their difference from man. The group claimed that “equality is an ideological attempt to subject woman even further” (Manifesto Rivolta Femminile, 1970). Their manifesto set the boundaries for a world in which women are free from patriarchal structures through a dismantling of the political system and a highlighting of women’s voices in women-centered spaces, rather than a general inclusion or support of women to participate alongside men in already-established social and political settings.
The Rivolta Femminile was a complicated branch group in that it was divided into multiple localities and directed to meet the differing needs of the women in these settings while also being united in its dedication to the principles set forth by its manifesto (Manifesto Rivolta Femminile, 1970). The purpose of the group was not direct political transformation or structural resistance but, rather, to foster consciousness raising and create a space where women could deconstruct their socialized expectations and come to understand themselves as individualized beings (Manifesto Rivolta Femminile, 1970). For the entirety of the group’s existence, it strayed from being directly involved in social and political struggles but its work and the work of its founder, Carla Lonzi, in particular, were foundational to the ideological establishment of feminist sects across Italy. The Manifesto was an all-encompassing document in that it criticized and highlighted a wide range of oppressive aspects present in the daily lives of Italian women. More so, it denounced traditional institutions for constraining women and limiting their potential. It condemned marriage and maternity and highlighted the importance of the feminist movement in shaping a just world (Manifesto Rivolta Femminile, 1970). More than this, it went beyond calling for specific transformations within current society and instead established that the only true means for the liberation of women is to tear down all preconceived notions of gender and allow women, and only women, to restructure themselves in their own image (Manifesto Rivolta Femminile, 1970).

The core tenets of the Rivolta Femminile conceptualized a notion of freedom that rests
on the development of individual women beyond their restrained expectations by the state, society, and their families and were crucial to the unique rise of Italian feminism. The Rivolta Femminile was working under a newfound theoretical framework that permeated the entirety of the feminist movement in the 1970s and found some success in the transformation of Italian abortion politics, including the legalization of abortion in 1978. While the Rivolta Femminile found its purpose through inward-focused feminism that sought to unpack complicated external issues through consciousness raising, many feminist groups that followed took these inward frustrations and utilized them to fight against established institutions that dominated their identities and daily lives. These groups, though different from the Rivolta Femminile in practice and principle, were acting on something more than a passion for equality or liberation. They were utilizing their voices to actualize a complicated web of desires they believed would free them from gendered oppression and allot them true autonomy. The Manifesto of the Rivolta Femminile is important for a plethora of reasons beyond feminist scholarship and activist principle, namely in that it captured the essence of a unique ideology that was transmitted throughout Italian feminism in the 1970s.

Scholars have long thought about the similarities and differences of varied feminist sects arising in the late 1960s and 1970s, with particular emphasis given to their organizational composition and social, political, or personal objectives. I will be taking a different approach in that I want to utilize texts as well as various other documents detailing the methods, beliefs, and experiences of feminist groups in Italy to argue for a new theoretical device through which
the Italian feminist movement of this time period can be given historical significance and understood as unique in defining itself through a new strain of feminist philosophy. In forming this theoretical basis for my argument, I will be focusing on and expanding the Italian notion of libertà as it is expressed in the theoretical texts of the Italian feminist movement and understood through their actions. Looking at libertà broadly offers less opportunity for comparative discourse and historical context so I will be focusing on the actualization of this concept through the lens of the Italian feminist movement’s struggle to legalize abortion and conceptualize its significance to their ideological foundation.

For the sake of my arguments, I will keep libertà untranslated. libertà, as it was concentrated and utilized in the feminist movements of the 1970s, means something distinct from the American notion of “freedom.” The two concepts have distinct histories, definitions, cultural attributions, and ability to ground collective organizing. The English word, freedom, is a capacious term that encompasses non-coercion, enabling conditions, free will, collective organizing, etc. By contrast, libertà is most closely associated with a kind of cultivation of inner consciousness that is related to but distinct from these other meanings. I turn to abortion politics, in part, because as it is conceptualized and centered in the feminist movement of the 1970s, libertà is closely tied to the moral, political, and social battle to legalize abortion. As the manifesto of the Rivolta Femminile defines; “La negazione della libertà d’aborto rientra nel veto globale che viene fatto all’autonomia della donna” (Lonzi, 1974, 2). In English, this means “the denial of freedom of abortion is part of the global veto that is done to women's autonomy” (Lonzi, 1974, 2). In the Italian text, libertà is intrinsically connected to abortion in
that the two are semantically tied together through the language of the Rivolta Femminile. The importance of this goes far beyond simple wording, however, as the expression clearly indicates that access to abortion is not the central concern or question of feminist movements of this generation. Rather, libertà, as it is framed in the case of the Rivolta Femminile and Italian feminism more broadly works to define reproductive freedom and autonomy in a complicated relationship with abortion access. In this framework, libertà centers the experience of the woman and her body in relation to itself, rather than in relation to the body politic or the dominant social setting. While “autonomy” may be closely understood as something connecting the individual body to the rules and expectations of the state and society as a whole, libertà operates through the ability of the individual woman to make decisions free from these external influences. libertà defines the feminine body as the subject rather than the object of power and seeks to establish a reciprocal relationship connecting her desires and needs with the actions that she is capable of achieving and comfortable with acting upon.

This unique concept, though definite in its relationship with centering the female experience, is versatile and fluid in that it was utilized by numerous feminist subsets to define differing goals and methods of action. I will be examining multiple divisions of Italian feminist ideology that approached reproductive freedom and abortion through different applications of libertà in order to specifically define its importance for the Italian feminist movement as a whole and to the distinctive ways in which it served as a cornerstone for
consciousness-raising, grass-roots organization, political activism, and feminist philosophy in the 1970s.

**Literature Review**

In analyzing feminist movements across time and space, scholars have attempted to understand theoretical, political, and structural similarities and differences in feminist thought and action. One set of theoretical connections are found in distinct and overlapping approaches to freedom, bodily autonomy, and gender subjugation. My project is related but distinct: I introduce a theoretical principle that defines and contextualizes the Italian feminist movement as a unique and progressive grass-roots effort concerning freedom, bodily autonomy, and gender subjugation. This concept illuminates the innovative nature of the Italian feminist movement while also offering us a useful tool for considering existing relationships between activism, individual consciousness raising, and exertions of power at the level of the state. I will be calling this term *libertà*, based upon the use of the term in the manifesto of the feminist coalition that sparked the rise of consolidated feminist groups in the Italian context, the *Rivolta Femminile* and their claim that “*libertà* for women does not mean accepting the life man leads, because it is unlivable; on the contrary, it means expressing her own sense of existence” (Manifesto Rivolta Femminile, 1970). It is through a utilization of feminist scholarship and a restructuring of our understandings of the Italian feminist movement that this term can be given functionality so that we may use it as a tool to reflect on the unique and intricate place of the 1970s Italian feminist movement in the grand history of feminism.
Scholars of Italian feminism have attempted to situate the movement as either historically significant because of the movement’s distinct use of individualized consciousness raising and radical involvement with political organizations or as fundamentally similar in practice and principle to other feminist collectives across the globe. Through theorizing *libertà*, I contend that neither perspective does enough to adequately situate the movement as both influenced by global trends and uniquely inventive of a new social philosophy. That philosophy was specific to Italian women and reflective of a radical thinking that went beyond what had been conceived by previous or concurrent global feminist sects. As Teresa de Lauretis claims, Italian feminists’ separation of consciousness raising from direct engagement with the state presented a “double militancy...with distinctive contradictions and difficulties” (de Lauretis, 6, 1990). This militancy was found in women being engaged in political groups for the sake of achieving legislative progress while also believing that true change occurred through close-contact with other women in consciousness-raising. There was a push to be engaged in both for the sake of the movement, though they presented very different struggles to the women involved. Lauretis defines this distinctive push of dual engagement in the formation of the “woman as a social subject.” For de Lauretis, the transformative aspect of Italian feminism was its approach in defining relationality between the woman, the state, and the patriarchy (de Lauretis, 1990, 5). While this theorizing certainly encompasses an important aspect of Italian feminism, *libertà*, as a philosophical root, pushes us further into addressing the “double militancy” which Lauretis specifically targets. We cannot focus on relationship between women, the state, and the feminist movement without first understanding the individual’s relationship with her own body.
and mind, to which *libertà* allows us access to the radical duality of Italian feminism in defining the personal as functionally important to an inward mindset and individual understanding rather than a tool for primary political action.

Similar accounts of Italian feminism have plotted its growth through a comparative lens that gives it little independence from transnational perspectives. As Dorothy McBride claims, “initial discussions of abortion reform were part of a more general process of modernization of social relations” (McBride, 2001, 186). She continues to say that “the growing debate on abortion [in Italy] was quite similar to what was occurring in other European countries in the 1970s” (McBride, 2001, 186). She explains that movements for abortion law reform across countries are linked because of their unique ability to connect “varied experiences” to a central cause or motive (McBride, 2001, 187). Though this analysis of a national or European feminism is functionally important for understanding the massive scope of the larger feminist movement at play in Italy, it avoids directly addressing the ideological foundations of the Italian feminist movement. In order to adequately distinguish the movement and address its ideological roots, I will be primarily focusing on the Italian feminist movement to legalize abortion in the 1970s in constructing *libertà*. The 1970s reveal the complexity of Italian feminism’s construction of abortion, the state, autonomy, and freedom, all of which are central to defining and manifesting libertà.

While Dorothy McBride largely ignores the ideological impetus for Italian feminist
abortion politics, Lesley Caldwell and Andrea Hajeck focus extensively on the ideological roots of the feminist movement in conceptualizing liberty, freedom, and autonomy. These authors fail to recognize that these principles were uniquely articulated by Italian feminists. By contrast, I find libertà to be a novel innovation of Italian feminists that served as a unifying framework for the complexities of the Italian feminist movement. Namely, the uniqueness of libertà reveals the deficiency of a state-centric understanding of Italian feminist activism. Furthermore, the grand puzzle of Italian feminist scholarship exists on a plane of defining activism and liberation in relation to the state and addressing the problem of how one can logistically free themselves from the constraints of society, policy, and religious principle. For Lesley Caldwell, the struggles of the feminist movement in relation to abortion legalization were centered on “the reality of inscribing the needs of women within the law” (Caldwell, 1981, 58). Caldwell’s work, which is considered foundational in its exploration of feminism in 1970s Italy, specifically within its approach to legalizing abortion and divulging the differing strands of the movement, falls into a cycle of consistently situating the women of the movement in the context of the state while also constructing the state to be the primary target of the movement. Yet Italian feminists often rejected legislative changes that aligned with their priorities of recognizing women’s needs within the law. The gap between assumed state-centered tactics and the reality of Italian feminists organizing requires a theoretical explanation. In utilizing libertà as my starting point, it becomes clear that these historians and theorists rely on a model that denies the specificity of the ideological motives of the feminist
movement. *libertà* theorizes beyond the state as the site of political and social transformation in favor of individual feminine understandings of self-power. Furthermore, *libertà* allows us to see the fluidity of Italian feminism in that its consciousness raising was satisfied with liberty at the individual level while its politics was one of state structuring from this place of individual sovereignty rather than one that sought to achieve independence through a restructuring of the state. *libertà*, as it functions in Italian feminism, goes beyond the power relationship of a woman and her body to the state. While this dynamic is important, *libertà* seeks to define power from the individual woman’s personal relationship with her body, mind, and experience and translate this into liberation.

**Background:**

In order to fully explore the nature of *libertà* as it applied to Italian feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, it is important to dissect the unique social, political, and religious setting around which it came to hold salience for the Italian feminist movement. It is due to a distinctive cultural backdrop that the case of Italy’s feminist movement, and the individualized conceptualizations of *libertà* that accompanied it, could not be easily applied and understood through the lens of other Western experiences with feminism and reproductive justice. Italy’s unbalanced economic and political experiences post World War II meant that its social and political landscape were deeply unstable in terms of formal legitimacy. This instability was accompanied by newfound economic opportunity in the late 1960s that meant there was an expansion in labor, education, and social opportunities for both men and women that
transformed daily life for many in the Italian nation-state.

Immediately following the war, Italy’s political infrastructure was in shambles. Benito Mussolini, the leader of the Italian Fascist Party during World War II, had intended for his leadership and his party to be central to the functioning of the Italian state (Ascoli, 1946, 321). The one party system of Italy meant that after Mussolini’s demise and Italy’s surrender, the state had no governing body to fall back on and was thrown into political turmoil (Ascoli, 1946, 322). With no formal governing institution and a crushing amount of debt owed to the United States, Britain, and France due to Italy’s defeat in the war, the country experienced mass unemployment and low wages (Balbo and May, 1975, 84). In 1948, the United States passed the European Recovery Program in response to growing fears that poverty and economic stagnation would lead to an increase in the ability of Communist governments to take power in Western Europe (Esposito, 1994, 1-2). According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the program, informally known as the Marshall Plan, “distributed over the next four years some $13 billion worth of economic aid, helping to restore industrial and agricultural production, establish financial stability, and expand trade” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). Through the help of the Marshall Plan, Italy rebuilt many of its fallen industries, including steel, and began production for the Korean War (Esposito, 1994, 3-5). Following these involvements, Italy was established
as an economic world-leader in what is often described as the “Italian Economic Miracle.”
(Ornati, 1963, 520). As Oscar Ornati describes of Italy’s economic circumstances, “a rate of
economic growth unpredictable on the basis of previous economic history and, further, one
which, irrespective of precise dimensions places Italy among the three nations with the highest
growth rate in the world, cannot be explained in terms of a single or a simple variable” (Ornati,
1963, 521). Italy’s rapid growth and economic expansion meant that there were greater
opportunities for education and labor. Despite Italy’s status as an economic leader among
Western countries and the world, the government, following a growth in power and influence
by the Italian socialist party started printing more money in order to provide higher wages and
establish basic welfare programs (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). This practice led to severe
inflation and a general slowing of the economy.

Italy’s economic fluctuation was accompanied by the fluctuating prominence of
women’s rights organizations. The two primary women’s oriented organizations that arose
following World War II were the Centro di Iniziativa Femminile (CIF) which was organized
by the Christian Democratic Party and the Unione Donne Italiane (UDI) organized by the
Communist Party (PCI) and the Socialist Party (PSI) (Ergas, 1982, 255). These groups were
intended to be a space for women to come and discuss what they expected or desired from
their corresponding parties and their government as a whole. But in the midst of the Cold War
these groups experienced a change in function and purpose. The Cold War forced Italy’s leftist
parties, specifically the Communist and Socialist parties, to rethink their ideological foundations and, eventually, to restructure their party purpose around the idea of the family as a “cell of resistance for the left against a hostile world.” (Ergas, 1982, 257). This restructuring was due to a negative perception of communist and socialist parties by many in Italy due to their perceived association with Russia. A new emphasis on the traditional family unit with prescribed gender roles was expected to be a party platform that would invite a more welcoming response from the general public (Ergas, 1982, 258). This restructuring led to a withdrawal of the UDI as a means of engaging women in the party, as their new purpose became highlighting the role of women in the family unit, rather than the executive sphere (Ergas, 1982, 258). Furthermore, the party became interested in utilizing its social advocacy groups to advance their own policy-oriented agenda rather than allowing them to autonomously construct their own needs and expectations of the party (Ergas, 1982, 258).

The CIF, on the other hand, faced a different threat to its legitimacy in that the Christian Democratic Party’s means of recruitment through rural networks were drastically weakened by the rapid urbanization following the Italian economic revitalization of the 50s and 60s (Ergas, 1982, 260). As women’s participation in the Christian Democratic Party dropped by roughly 66% from 1963 to 1969, the CIF became little more than a small gathering of women with little power to advocate or change anything in the policy of their party or their country (Ergas, 1982, 267). In the wake of these groups fluctuating in prominence, the Catholic Church remained constant as a dominating force in the definition of gender roles and the ability of
women to exist in specific political and social spaces (Ergas, 1982, 267).

Beyond a rather unstable recent economic and social history, Italy’s religious and political standards were focused on tradition and following conventional ideas about marriage, sexuality, and gender. The Church’s ability to influence decision makers meant that legislation was imbued with the guidance and forethought of Church leadership in the period leading up to the legalization of abortion. Laws surrounding abortion were dictated by the view of life beginning at conception. Articles 545-551 of the penal code of 1931 made “abortion a crime punishable by sentences from two to five years for the women concerned and for the person performing the operation (Caldwell, 1981, 54). These existed alongside Article 553 which, similar to the Comstock laws in the United States, made it illegal to sell or advertise contraceptives in Italy, making them almost impossible to find and leading to a lack of information surrounding how to use them if they could be procured (Caldwell, 1981, 54). This complex relationship between laws restricting sexuality meant that there were few, if any, legal options other than having unprotected sex and, if pregnant, giving birth or procuring an illegal abortion. Data shows that a great number of women opted for the latter with studies showing a range from 800,000 to 3 million women receiving illegal abortions in a year (Caldwell, 1981, 56). In a 1974 survey by Panorama, a periodic Italian magazine, it was found that every woman who responded had experienced at least one abortion or were aware of someone who had (Panorama, 1974). These numbers show an alarming rate of women receiving illegal abortions, especially considering recent data indicates that Italy’s abortion rate has stabilized at around 80,000 in the past year (Johnston’s Archive, 2020). The need for abortion in Italy was
more than a simple political necessity for the sake of feminist progress. Rather, it was also a health-related requirement in the lives of millions of women, to the point that illegal abortion clinics were seeing more women in their centers than actual health clinics.

Though the laws governing Italy were clearly at odds with the sexual needs and practices of its public, legislators in Parliament followed the will of the church on all legal and moral matters (Caldwell, 1981, 56). The unwavering allegiance of Parliament can be explained by the unique relationship the Catholic Church had with Italy as both a country and as a subset of various localities requiring social and economic support. The Catholic Church utilized its resources to provide welfare-state-like services to local communities. As Lesley Caldwell claims in her book, *Abortion in Italy*, the Italian government practically provided no forms of social service while the church provided “services like nurseries, care of the aged, hospitals, clinics, etc.” (Caldwell, 1981, 57). This sets up an important social setting for the abortion rights movements and feminism more broadly in Italy, as the Catholic Church was more than just a domineering religious institution; it was a central economic and community-based provider that men and women of all social categories relied upon. The Catholic Church’s ultimate power, however, involved more than just community-based support. The Church was intimately tied with the Christian Democracy party, the ruling party at the time, while also having a strong connection with the dominant Communist or Leftist Party in Italy (Caldwell, 1981, 59). These more liberal parties sought to establish themselves as valid political organizations through a use of Catholic doctrines alongside their focus on elevating the
working class. These interlocking dynamics meant that the Catholic Church was a unique moral, social, religious, and political powerhouse that defined nearly every aspect of Italian life.

The pervasive social and legislative power of the Church was accompanied by its strict prohibition of abortion as a legal or moral option for women. With the publication of the *Gaudium et spes*, the constitution of the Catholic Church written in 1965 after the meeting of the Second Vatican Council, there came a direct and published statement of the Catholic Church regarding its position on abortion. Pope Paul XI proclaimed that “life must be protected with the utmost care from the moment of conception: abortion and infanticide are abominable crimes” (*Gaudium et spes*, 1965). Beyond this doctrinal dominance, the Church owned a large majority of the technology used in the private clinics across Italy, which, if abortion were legalized, the church would most likely retract their property making the process of providing or procuring an abortion even more difficult (Caldwell, 1981, 55).

**Feminist Activism and the State**

Sects across the feminist movement had varying commitments to, interactions with, and points of tension with the Italian political arena. Centrally, male-dominated political parties, in both action and principle, were at odds with the theoretical framework under which feminist groups in Italy were basing their activism.
Italy’s political infrastructure leading into the 1970s offered an interesting landscape for feminist activism as left-leaning parties had more electoral leverage than ever before in post-war Italy. The Christian Democratic party, the leading party since its establishment in post-war Italy, was losing constituent support due to the secularization of Italy meaning that the party’s grip on a Catholic electorate no longer guaranteed an electoral victory (Andall, 1994, 242). The Communist Party, on the other hand, was gaining support as its vote distribution rose from 27% to 34% from 1972 to 1976 (Andall, 1994, 242). This growth in support was followed by the Communist Party of Italy forming a compromise with the Christian Democrats in that they could come together to form a new “moral code” that allowed both parties access to legislative success and party longevity (Ginsborg, 1990, 356).

Leftist political groups were divided in their approach to the issue of abortion. However, their varying approaches each managed to disappoint the feminist movement in ways that highlighted their broader goals concerning abortion and reproductive justice. The Communist Party, though a general advocate for women’s rights, approached abortion from a perspective that aligned it to compromise with the more conservative parties (Caldwell, 1981, 55). As Lesley Caldwell examines, the Communist Party “asserted the need to provide more general reforms in housing, nurseries, and health as the way to tackle abortion” (Caldwell, 1981, 55). The Communist Party conceptualized abortion as the wrong solution to a social-based problem in that women were not being granted adequate access to necessary healthcare outlets. In opposition, farther left parties such as the Party of
Proletarian Unity (PDUP), Avanguardia Operaia, and the Lotta Continua were focused on legalizing abortion but placed an emphasis on different internal debates to the issue itself such as class disparity and different abortion procedures (Caldwell, 1981, 55). The most extreme, the Democrazia Proletaria, proposed a bill that allowed for abortion up until the ninth month and called for full control of the decision to be left to the individual woman with no means of external mediation (Caldwell, 1981, 55). This bill was considered far more radical than the others presented by left-leaning parties and was evidence of full liberalization of abortion, but, perhaps surprisingly, feminist groups responded in outrage over what they saw as equating individual control to external agency (Caldwell, 1981, 55). Feminist groups were partially angry about the concept of presenting the bill through the Democrazia Proletaria in that it gave primary credit to the political party itself rather than a recognition of the struggle and purpose of the various feminist collectives involved in the debate over abortion legalization. But the primary point of tension was that the bill was viewed as incredibly insensitive about the experience of a woman who faces an abortion (Caldwell, 1981, 55). As a woman interviewed by *Effe*, an Italian feminist magazine, explained “it doesn’t mean confirming women’s freedom, it means saying women’s lives are shit anyway and that it makes no difference if they have to destroy another life or kill themselves because of it” (Caldwell, 1981, 55).

Aside from legislative discrepancies between feminist organizing groups and the Italian government, there was a theoretical disconnect in how abortion was approached and understood by the two. For the church and the government, abortion was connected to
procreation. For feminists, abortion was tied to liberation and bodily autonomy outside of the procreative structure. The connection of abortion to procreation continued a language of oppression for many feminists and caused a distrust of governing bodies ability to adequately handle the issue of abortion. As the Italian feminist magazine *Sottosopra* explained, abortion in the hands of governing institutions was a method of ensuring that women engaging in sexual activity were only allowed access to one contraceptive method and, in particular, one that was more about a response to a conceptualized intrinsic procreative purpose rather than sexual liberty (*Sottosopra*, 19). As Lesley Caldwell explains, abortion “does not imply the forethought that most methods of contraception demand, it more readily accommodates women not thinking of themselves as active sexual persons” (*Caldwell*, 1981, 59). Abortion as a form of contraception seemed to indicate that sex was an action primarily tied to reproduction. Whereas condoms could be advocated on the basis of allowing women to have pleasurable sexual encounters without the fear of pregnancy or conception, abortion could be viewed as insisting that pleasure was met with regulatory or medical punishment (*Caldwell*, 1981, 59). This is not to say, however, the feminist groups were opposed to abortion being an available medical option, rather, they were averse to the idea that relying on governing institutions to formulate their own abortion centered proposals would produce an ideal reproductive landscape for women in Italy.

This aversion to abortion as an isolated procedure and social norm can be seen in the
writings and guiding motives of feminist-established clinics established in the 1970s in order to perform safer abortions in women-centered spaces that could function as destinations of medical care and consciousness-raising. The term *consultori* was used to describe such clinics that operated during the period of abortion being illegal and played a critical role in both actions of feminist groups against state authority and revealing the ideological foundations of feminist thought on the issue of abortion (Bracke, 2017, 21). Take, for instance, The *Comitato Romano per L'Aborto e la Contracezione*, a Roman *consultori* that engaged in providing accessible abortions and contraception to women while also organizing grassroots campaigns to liberalize abortion in Italy at the state level (Bracke, 2017, 22). The group’s official program was indicative of a movement that understood abortion as a complex social ill in both its legal restriction and the expectation that it was a constant tool of liberation. As the program states, the group believed “abortion is always an act of violence, and women are compelled to turn to it in the absence of any real alternative...the committee is engaged in the campaign for the liberalization of abortion, but cannot split off this issue from the more general struggle waged around all the problems of free choice of motherhood (Programme of the CRAC, 1975/1976). For the *Comitato Romano* and similar groups, abortion was a social tax on women for their refusal of the reproductive framework of sexuality enforced by both the Catholic Church and the Italian state (Programme of the CRAC, 1975/1976). The clinics were not constructed for the purpose of centering abortion in the reality of women but, rather, to center women in the reality of a society that forces them to make strict choices between reproductive futures. For the purpose of liberation from the patriarchal state, women would have to center their reproductive experiences and decide based on their inherent desires for their futures while still
living in a sexist and static society. The theoretical foundation of these groups was one of alleviating women from the social stresses of patriarchal violence while realistically situating themselves in the lived realities of women.

In order to accurately situate the consultori alongside the general wave of Italian feminism, it is important to understand that these clinics were framed around a commitment to consciousness raising and bodily autonomy as the basis of liberation. They viewed the state as oppressive but not definitive of the role of women in society and wanted to encourage social change through an individualized basis rather than mass-movements. The best way to adequately highlight the unique disposition of the consultori and their intrinsic commitment to the ideals of libertà is to compare them against the two dominant strands of feminism arising in the 1970s. The first strand is that of the operaismo or the workerist feminist groups. Workerist was a term generally applied to union politics and was focused on fighting for the rights of employees in the workplace in terms of pay, safety, and health (Cuninghame, 2008). The workerist ideology entered a feminist framework through the theorizing of scholars Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Leopoldina Fortunati, both members of a workerist feminist collective known as the Lotta Feminista (Cunninghame, 2008). They both found intersections in housework and unpaid labor and believed that liberation for women included formally recognizing the importance of their work in the home and paying them accordingly (Cunninghame, 2008). As Leopoldina Fortunati claimed in her theoretical text, The Arcane of Reproduction, formal pay

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for housework is necessary for the sake of equivalence in the working relationships between men and women. She considered the structure of unpaid labor in the house to be unfair on the basis that “it is not an exchange of equivalents, because the male worker receives far more value from the female houseworker than he gives her...if the woman is a production worker and has a wage, the exchange between her and the man will alter, since she will have greater contractual power” (Fortunati, 1995, 9). For the workerist sect, feminine liberation could be achieved through the direct focus on wages for housework and not through pushing women into outside jobs. This objective was generated through the belief, expressed by Fortunati, that compensation presented bargaining power and directly influenced social transformation.

In contrast, the second dominant strand, liberal feminists, were operating under a different guiding principal. They sought equality in all political and social realms through a rejection of sexual difference and gendered segregation of all forms. Specifically, liberal feminists disagreed with workerists over the focus on domestic labor and instead wished to push for women to leave the home for the workplace on the basis of equality. Many liberal feminist groups saw the ability of women to perform in the same roles as men and receive the same compensation as them to be synonymous with liberation while workerist feminist sects rejected notions of equality as “an obfuscation of women’s difference from men, but above all a mystification of the class relation between paid men workers and unpaid women house workers” (Cunninghame, 2008).

For the sake of situating reproductive justice and the abortion debate, it may seem that
these conflicting ideological foundations rooted in equality and difference have little bearing when history tells that the two groups were topically united on the issue of abortion and came together in the fight for access, despite foundational disputes. What we need to understand, though, is that equality and difference or workerist and liberal feminism do not present us with adequate tools to properly understand the approach of Italian feminists to the issue of abortion, especially as far as the consolturi are involved. This inadequacy is found from the way that these terms primarily represent a relationship between the body of the woman and the state. In exploring libertà, we must begin with conceding that the term defies restrictions of state-defined terms or outward-facing feminism. libertà, as it was detailed and expressed through the texts of the Rivolta Femminile, represents something inward-facing and entirely reliant on self-expression and individual freedom rather than mass-liberation through a denigration of the state. On the issue of equality, libertà closely follows the writing of the Rivolta Femminile in situating itself through an understanding that “liberation for woman does not mean accepting the life man leads, because it is unlivable; on the contrary it means expressing her own sense of existence” (Manifesto Rivolta Femminile, 1970). In separating libertà from workerist roots or difference feminism, it’s important to emphasize what is meant when “difference” is highlighted in the writings of workerist leaders like Fortunati. Throughout the entirety of her foundational text on difference feminism and the workerist movement, she references “wages” and “housework” while only defining liberation through monetary reward and the economic and social ability this provides to women in their respective spaces
(Fortunati, 1995, 9). This direct wording relates liberation to state structures and conceives of difference as feminine control over personal economic practice and bargaining. libertà, in contrast, places intrinsic value on matters of consciousness raising and a rejection of male power structures being given any authority over the validity of women’s work, even if that authority is to deem it adequate or exceptional. The consultori becomes a unique and powerful example when placed in opposition to these framings as they transcend equality or difference for the sake of establishing the woman as the individual subject of her own power-making and allot her the tools necessary to pave her own path in the movement. The consultori were much less focused with defining a specific kind of liberation so much as granting women the ability to achieve the freedom they sought most, whether it be through political action, reproductive decision making, or individual realization. This framing becomes central in understanding the previously mentioned feminist response to liberal or progressive groups various attempts at passing abortion legislation. If we are to understand the guiding logic behind legalizing abortion through the lens of equality or difference, the intention of varying parties would matter little, so long as the state is agreeing to codify legislation that allots equality through access or represents difference through an understanding of the need of women to access abortions. libertà provides us a vital piece of the ideological puzzle in that the needs of individual women as well as the nature in which they are succeeding their own actions rather than succumbing to male-dominated power structures are centralized and consciousness becomes a tool for liberation

In understanding the various principles of libertà, aside from its unique disposition
alongside equality and difference, we must assess the importance of “consciousness” or identity developments that have a primary purpose to empower the individual through self-reflection. Workerist feminism has often been understood as operating under differing ideological framings than autonomist feminist sects, such as the Rivolta Femminile, especially when it came to the emphasis and core reasoning they have to various women’s issues.

Whereas Marxist and workerist groups understood abortion and reproductive freedom from the lens of class struggles, autonomist feminist groups were operating on the basis of autocoscienza (translating to “self-consciousness”) (McBride, 2001, 189). Autocoscienza, as it is utilized in the framings of autonomous feminist groups, meant an assertion that sexual freedom is paramount to the liberation of women through full control of their reproductive lives and their reproductive identities (Bono and Kemp, 1991). This theoretical tool can be explained further in the writings of the Rivolta Femminile on abortion and sexuality in the 1970s in which they highlight that “free motherhood and free sexuality must find their meaning within our consciousness: only in this way shall we be sure that the freedom we are talking about is really ours and not that of the male who fulfills himself through us, through our most hidden oppression” (Rivolta Femminile, 1971). It becomes clear from this that autocoscienza was central to the foundation of libertà in establishing that feminist resistance was to come from within and be determined in a way that defies state structure, difference, and equality.
The Feminist Conceptualization and Actualization of libertà:

Before libertà can be explicitly defined, abortion, as both a medical procedure, social experience, and tool of feminist resistance, must be examined as it came to find its place in theoretical notions of institutional discrimination and individual liberty. For Italian feminists of the time, abortion was tied to a new internal framing of what it meant to be a woman that was both being discovered and actualized into calls for state authority to represent and respect this newfound feminine identity. Through the lens of Italian feminism, abortion was a tool in the grand scheme of a larger revolution, regardless of the specific sect or ideology underlying a particular feminist group.

In examining the relations of libertà to state powers, the realities of the consultori are important in establishing libertà as a method of exploring reality and liberation through the context of reproduction. Consultori, specifically those established under the CRAC, took their woman-centered motivation to establish a unique approach to medicalized bodies and socialized experiences. The CRAC established a set of guiding points to direct future clinics in their operation and dedication to empowering the women attending. Through this unique list of objectives, the group called upon the “knowledge and science of the doctor to be socialized, at the service of women (Programme of the CRAC, 1975/1976). A core tenet of the Italian feminist movement was the distribution of knowledge through the engagement of women in both their personal lives and political struggles. The CRAC wanted to ensure that male doctors were unable to lie or confuse their female patients while also allowing women the right to dismiss any doctors they saw unfit to accurately assess them. Furthermore, the CRAC called
for “a room set aside for meetings and debates” for the sake of collective organizing and connecting personal services offered by the consultori with political realities (Programme of the CRAC, 1975/1976). The function of this operation was about more than changing relations with the state or simple resistance in that it was predicated on a deeply personal notion of feminism. Though the CRAC was certainly centering political resistance in its guiding framework and functional philosophy, the group catered to small groups of women and facilitated conversations that enabled them to become activists but did not demand their participation in the movement. Individualized guidance was a function of many consultori in that connections between reproduction and the self or bodily autonomy were understood as being crucial to developing a feminine identity of freedom and personal gain that did not require activism against the state, though the option was present.

The consultori were both a product and a defining precedent of libertà in the grand scheme of Italian feminism and the struggle to achieve reproductive justice. Though libertà is a strictly Italian principle that defines and situates the movement in the scope of a broader global feminism, this isn’t to say that it was not influenced by and built upon separate Western sources. Rather, I argue, libertà was the unique contribution of Italian feminism to feminist scholarship as a whole. Though I have specifically focused on the importance of libertà in the scope of Italian feminism, it is worth mentioning that it should be understood as a specific and powerful contribution to the broader history of feminist activism and scholarship. Consultori, in particular, reveals this distinctive aspect of libertà as it created a historically significant
space for women. Dr. Maud Anne Bracke argues that:

for the feminist groups, the clinics became the core site of a new politics of the body, pivoting around self-help and (collective) self-discovery of the body, inspired by U.S. feminist texts such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. It was here that a new, gendered language was developed with which to speak of one’s body, one’s sexuality, one’s pain and alienation. And it was here that the most difficult questions were asked as to whether and how to build mass campaigning, and relate to the state and the law.

(Bracke, 2017, 16)

This expression of grappling with complicated questions surrounding identity and autonomy relates specifically to the idea of the woman as the subject of her own life and the relationship this understanding has as a tool of political and social liberation. For libertà, the woman as subject is not only essential in a larger group narrative of freedom but as a metaphysical connection between individual women’s lived reality, self-perception, and actualization of her own capabilities. As the Rivolta Femminile expressed in their manifesto, “woman as subject does not reject man as subject but she rejects him as an absolute role. In society she rejects him as an authoritarian role” The women-only spaces presented by the *consultori* created a new grounds for theoretical consciousness building that was unique in Italy for encouraging women to independently utilize knowledge that contextualized their own experiences as the sole purpose of their individual activism.

Furthermore, the *consultori* offer us an insight into the relationship libertà constructed between feminist activists and the state. They acknowledged the presence and unwavering influence of the state but never allowed it to define or control their formative principles or
actions. If anything can be learned about libertà from the example of the consultori, it is that the lives and experiences of individual women were held to the highest standard in the development of resistance activities. Though the act of “resistance” is inherently placed in the direction of the state, it is clear from the consultori that it is also aimed at combating long-held beliefs about the role of women that even women themselves have internalized to form barriers to liberation in the scope of self-centered consciousness raising. Furthermore, the consultori were operating illegally and so the question of the law and the state were rendered almost irrelevant in the perspective of these collectives. For the sake of my arguments, the consultori are the perfect example of libertà as it united the varying strains of feminist resistance across Italy and uniquely positioned the movement as something beyond political engagement and collective resistance.

**Conclusion:**

Though focused on dismantling internalized notions of sexism, libertà accomplished more than consciousness raising and individual liberation. Through the grass-roots organizing of the Italian feminist movement, therapeutic abortions became legal in Italy in 1978. Despite, initial legislative success, however, abortions remain hard to access as conscientious objection laws mandate that physicians may object on religious or moral grounds from performing necessary abortive procedures (Minerva, 2015, 171). This complicated medium of legal but not accessible illuminates the validity of the feminists' concerns in the 1970s as well as the
inherent importance of libertà as a progressive framework in advancing a truly radical ideology about the role of women in reproductive spaces. Individualistic liberation relies on a detailed examination of the role of the woman in a case by case basis whereas the eventual legalization of abortion, though significant and a milestone in the struggles of the Italian feminist movement, reflects the perfunctory attitude of male-dominated power structures towards women’s liberation and reproductive autonomy.

“Io sono mia” became a key slogan of feminist groups across the political and social spectrum, including the “Rome- and Milan-based Rivolta Femminile, the Padua-based Lotta Feminista, and the Milanese Collettivo di via Cherubini” (Bracke, 2017, 12). “Io sono mia” translates to “I am mine” but, beyond simple word structure, represents the core element of libertà in ascribing agency to the individual women in the grand makeup of the Italian feminist movement. The question of abortion becomes central to this consideration as disagreements on the topic paved new ways for women to position their minds, bodies, and actions in a manner of self-service. As mentioned before, the feminist movement was fractured alongside the question of abortion legalization in terms of how it should be legalized, what wording should be associated with its legalization, and what is meant in the broader scheme of the lived realities of women for it to be legalized. Io sono mia as a radical philosophy intends to say that every approach to the issue which provides comfort and empowers the individual is of value. From the feminists who opposed unbridled legalization to the feminists who took matters into their own hands with the formation of the consultori as well as the feminists who built up grass-roots campaigns to spread knowledge of abortion as a procedure related to patriarchal power structures, individual women working within these
collectives were operating on the notion that their individual voices were worth following for
the sake of their own social expression. This is libertà as it guided and formed the feminist
movement and brought questions about abortion to the theoretical and social forefront of
various collectives. Though there were varying approaches to the issue, they all agreed on
some form of legalization while also seeking to ensure that access was connected to the needs
and desires of women rather than abortion being formulated as a tool of continued male
dominance.

Libertà translated into addressing systemic oppression at its roots rather than
highlighting legislative victory as the primary target of feminist activism. The voices of the
individual woman were at the forefront of the movement in a way that was unique,
transformative, and emancipatory. Though it is clear that the Italian feminist movement was
divided on a multitude of issues, the placement of the lived realities of women at the core of
the movement as well as the theoretical unity around the importance of women-led solutions to
the issue of abortion legalization were clear components of a grander social strategy under
libertà. For Italian feminism, libertà meant more than simple legislative freedom or social
liberty; it meant uprooting the intrinsic values cultivated by decades of sexism and power
dynamics intended to keep women trapped beneath the confines of social degradation. Libertà
meant restructuring what it means to be a woman and educating individual women on their
importance, capability, and innate power. The Italian Feminist movement did more than make
abortion legal; they changed the Italian landscape for what was expected of women and what
women could expect from themselves and it is only through libertà that this can truly be
granted historical value, social authority, and individual capacity.


Comitato Romano per l’Aborto e la Contracezione. Programme of the CRAC. 1975/1976


