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AN ETHICAL HERSTORY OF GIVING BIRTH

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Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir (eds.), *Naşterea. Istorii trăite* (Giving Birth. Life-stories), Iaşi: Polirom, 2010

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One can easily exaggerate when attempting to address “hard” issues such as the process of giving birth. Some well-known feminist views may nourish these exaggerations, especially when taken out of context. Thus, one can imagine a world in which artificial wombs, coupled with IVF-like techniques would externalize the process of conceiving and bearing children and finally separate the reproduction process from biology and radically “liberate” everybody (especially women) from the burden of giving birth (a view imagined by Shulamith Firestone). Or, respectively, one can fall into the other extreme, and essentialize women, celebrating their capacity of child-bearing and choosing to neglect all other important dimensions of women’s identity and consequently marginalizing, for instance, childless women.

It is therefore remarkable that the first Romanian volume on the experiences of giving birth through the lenses of mothers – *Naşterea. Istorii trăite* (Giving Birth. Life-stories)¹ manages to escape all these possible exaggerations and offer the readers a true sample of *herstories*. The volume collects the stories of twenty women, from different generations, of their becoming mothers, from the moment of discovering the pregnancy until the end of confinement and sometimes the weaning.

I believe that one can find multiple layers of encountering and reading a book; the volume mentioned here makes no exception. All books treating various aspects of societal or cultural taboos will inevitably rise attention and generate various reactions. In a way, the editors have warned about this in the foreword: “On these things *one does not talk*, or if one talks, *one does not write about*, or, if still, one writes about it, at least *one does not publish*.”²

Firstly, taking into account its editorial framework, one can note the novelty of the project as such for the Romanian society. The fact that, twenty-one years after the events of 1989 and sixteen years after the

appearance of the first book of Romanian feminist political philosophy³, we can finally read a personal history book in which twenty women overcome several cultural and social taboos and choose to share one of their most private moment of life can be regarded as a sign of normality. It is a necessary first step, because, in order to build a more complex and thorough research, one needs far more such books, such stories and such voices. The volume offers a remarkable opening, in that it covers the history of at least three generations of women, from different times and, to a certain extent, even different spaces (two birth experiences are from abroad, from US and respectively Spain). Nevertheless, the above mentioned diversity is limited in one important respect. Thus, all women in the volume (with maybe one exception) belong to the category of the so-called “intellectuals”. They are all well-educated, well above the majority of ordinary women; most of them are teachers, physicians, and almost all graduated university.

Of course, this is not a lack of the volume, nor does it constitute a critique of its structure. However, it confines the representativeness of the book to this socio-professional category. Thus, some trends or features are over-represented among this category: a certain type of care towards the baby, overwhelming feelings of helplessness or of exaggerated guilt are easier to be founded here than among other types of mothers.

To illustrate this point, I shall make a comparison with a totally different book, especially from a methodological point of view. In the latter one, *Social Exclusion at the Crossroads of Gender, Ethnicity and Class*⁴, the focus of research is represented by a community of Roma women nearby Orastie and their reproductive issues. Here, the experience of maternity is somehow taken for granted, even from a very young age. “Next year, next baby”, as a respondent states. For this category of women, the reproductive dilemmas do not especially concern the birth process or the rearing process in the next months, but rather the ways in which this fatality of mothering can eventually be stopped, after a reasonable number of such experiences. I use this example in order to sidestep the tendency, to some degree natural, to make generalizations departing from this book.

Looking from another perspective, through the lenses of a feminist researcher, I would be tempted to emphasize the contribution this volume brings to the history of the relation between medicine, ideology and female body in what concerns the process of giving birth and, more generally, the reproductive practices. Thus, the book covers dramatic transitions, from the communist past of the ban on abortion and political limitation of the Caesarean interventions to the more recent times of modern maternity, when future mothers choose for (or against) epidural anesthesia, for (or against) cytokine. As mentioned in the foreword: “The volume could have perfectly been labeled *From Sâncrai to Guadalajara* or even *From the gramophone to cytokine and epidural anesthesia*”⁵. The passage

seems a spectacular one, and to a certain degree it definitely is. However, I would be careful not to equate medical progresses and the overcoming of a certain pro-natal ideology with the disappearance of ideological processes entirely. The constant tendency of medicalization of pregnancy (and other life moments), as well as treating pregnancy as a kind of disease (entailing “risks” for the “patient”, in need of “regulations” and “monitoring”, to offer just a glance of this ailment vocabulary) represent, to a certain extent, the failure to treat the soon-to-be mothers as full persons, capable of autonomy and individual choices. In the Romanian context, this also goes hand-in-hand with the moral blaming of a medical system that is tainted in various degrees by corruption⁶. The fact that present-day mothers might have a wider scale of choices, starting from the person of the obstetrician to the birth circumstances does not ensure that all the choices are wise⁷, nor that they all are equally possible for all women. Although not specifically mentioned in the text, issues about information opportunities, education, and resources are crucial when attempting to access the various reproductive programs, and the “free choices” are not available to all women. Sadly enough, poor women, women in rural areas or marginal women, when they contemplate the process of mothering, might find themselves in circumstances not so dissimilar to the problematic conditions from the recent past⁸.

Yet, from a third perspective, that I would label “of a feminist ethicist stand”, an issue that is not explicitly addressed in the book is the one of children’s images. I had a controversy with a good friend of mine, in which I argued that, from, say, the perspective of an American advocate of children’s rights, one could claim that these stories, no matter how affectionate or personal, put in brackets the issue of children’s images. From a rights perspective, I added, such a book could have been published only if accompanied by the signed agreements on behalf of the children involved⁹. I was wondering whether this type of precautions were necessary, or at least appropriate, for this type of books. My friend replied to me that, differently from the position of women, the children there lacked the type of “agency” that would permit them to have a position concerning their own birth. They were there, and could only possibly be there in the first place as a conclusion of their mothers’ decisions to bring them into the world. These remarks are, of course, of common sense. However, I believe that the issue of children’s rights and images need to be more carefully examined. Maybe not in relation with this type of stories, although I argue that their birth stories are in a particular, if diminished, sense “their stories” too. They are not simple “objects” without agency, or, if they may be regarded as such at the precise moment of their birth, their formation of agency is something that evolves, and cannot be fixed arbitrarily in a precise moment of time. However, if the issue of subsequent agreement of children to the published stories of their birth could ring awkward for the Romanian readers, I believe that further

research is necessary to investigate this complicated relation between one's image and the various uses of that image in different circumstances.

Away from these personal notes, the volume *Nașterea. Istorii trăite* (Giving Birth. Life-stories) represents a necessary restitution of a dimension of life that remained neglected or unacknowledged. The book invites reactions, and will surely provoke debates in the cultural area. It would be sad if it wouldn't, because in this way the „conspiracy of silence” against which the book was written would perpetuate indifferently.

Notes:

¹ Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir (eds.), *Nașterea. Istorii trăite*, Iași: Polirom, 2010.

² Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir, „Cuvînt înainte”, in Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir (eds.), *Nașterea. Istorii trăite*, Iași: Polirom, 2010, 12.

³ We refer here to the pioneering book of Mihaela Miroiu, *Gîndul umbrei. Abordări feministe în filosofia contemporană*, București: Ed. Alternative, 1995.

⁴ Eniko Magyari-Vincze, *Excluderea socială la intersecția dintre gen, etnicitate și clasă. O privire din perspectiva sănătății reproducerii la femeile Rome / Social Exclusion at the Crossroads of Gender, Ethnicity and Class. A View through Romani Women's Reproductive Health*, Cluj: EFES, 2005.

⁵ Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir, „Cuvînt înainte”, in Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir (eds.), *Nașterea. Istorii trăite*, Iași: Polirom, 2010, 9.

⁶ This proves to be a bleak reality that almost all texts depict, which is, of course, not exclusively related to the medical institutions, but to other institutions – juridical, political, administrative, educational – as well.

⁷ For instance, many pregnant women choose to give birth through Caesarian intervention, which has nowadays become more “fashionable” than the natural birth. Of course, in the recent past this thing was inconceivable, during the times of “rationalizing” the Caesarian interventions. But the fact that today it is more available does not transform it into a panacea. Caesarian interventions do save lives and are very important opportunities in cases when natural birth is not an option, but only when such an intervention is medically recommended. To perform a Caesarian intervention out of the fear of pain may turn sadly against the intentions of those who choose it (there are some texts that illustrate very vividly this aspect, by depicting the deep pains in which the mothers find themselves *after* the medical intervention).

⁸ See for instance articles from the press depicting the conditions in which various categories of women face the difficulties of reproductive practices: Paula Scînteianu, „Nașterea la privat, preferată de gravide”, *Adevărul de Suceava*, 5.02.2010, accessed online in 18.02.2010; http://www.adevarul.ro/locale/suceava/Nasterea_la_privat-preferata_de_gravide_0_202779967.html, Florin Jianca, „O tînără a născut înainte de sosirea ambulantei”, *Adevărul de Piatra Neamt*, 13.02.2010, accessed online in 18.02.2010, http://www.adevarul.ro/locale/piatra_neamt/O_tanara_a_nascut_inainte_de_sosirea_ambulantei_-_Revista_presei_locale_0_207579286.html; Simona Vârban, “Zeci de femei nasc acasă si vin de la spital cu bebelusul în brate”, *Adevărul de Slatina*, 10.02.2010, http://www.adevarul.ro/locale/slatina/Slatina-Zeci_de_femei_nasc_acasa_si_vin_de_la_spital_cu_bebelusul_in_brate_0_205779545.html

⁹ What I had in mind was the possible analogy with the cases in which children later sue their mothers for what constitutes „inappropriate” habits during the pregnancy: for instance, smoking mothers or drug-addicted mothers. See Judith L.M. Mair, „Baby v Mother”, *Women and Birth*, vol. 5, no. 2, (1992): 15-20.