

Pro-Life Activism, Abortion and Subjectivity Before Birth: Discursive Practices and Anthropological Perspectives

Claudia Mattalucci

Lecturer in Anthropology of kinship and gender
Università di Milano-Bicocca
Email: claudia.mattalucci@unimib.it

Abstract: *This paper is intended as a critical examination of pro-life discursive practices. It is based on ethnographic research conducted in Lombardia (northern Italy) among a group of pro-life activists. Pro-life activism in Italy has a predominantly Catholic matrix and subjects who participated in my research mainly come from a Catholic background. However, their discursive strategies are not framed in religious terms. Although informed by ethical concerns, pro-life activists make a great use of scientific material (images and descriptions of intrauterine development) to advocate their idea of the fetus as a human being with a right to life and to prove that subjectivity precedes birth. In this paper I consider the empirical and theoretical implications of the overlapping of moral issues and scientific knowledge. On one hand, pro-life activists emphasize the similarities between the fetus and the newborn child; they also attribute the unborn some of the characteristics of the Western-informed notion of person: individuality, autonomy, the ability to communicate and interact, and some form of consciousness. I argue that the definition of fetus as person relies on a teleology of vital processes that presupposes a specific moral order. On the other hand, pro-life discursive practices allow to reconsider the uses of the Western idea of the person at the margins of human life and to articulate a critical approach to the biologization of the abortion debate.*

Introduction

In September 2010, while a bill on informed consent and advance directive for treatment (more commonly known as living will) laid before the Chamber of Deputies, I met with Fabio,¹ a 23 year old student from the Catholic University of Milan. On that occasion Fabio, an active member of the Pro-life movement at his university and in his hometown, told me:

In the past few years there have been several cases (like the Terry Schiavo case or the Piergiorgio Welby case²) that have been exploited to talk about biopolitics and biolaw. The fields of bioethics and biotechnologies have been tied to the field of politics and law to pretend to find answers to practical issues. However, to expect the legislator to meet all practical needs is an illusion.

We cannot expect to find the solution to every matter with the help of legislative outlines that indicate when to pull the plug or the extent to experiment on embryos, that is to say when a person is human, no longer human or not yet human. Biopolitics should not fade into biolaw but it should give itself broader objectives, and think of policies to protect life. Biopolitics should be a form of politics that defends life and protects the weaker subjects: the conceived infant, the disabled person, the terminally ill patient. Unfortunately it seems to me that these

¹ I have used pseudonyms to maintain my informants' anonymity.

² The Terry Schiavo case was a legal battle involving prolonged life support in the United States. After a cardiac arrest, Terry Schiavo was diagnosed by doctors as being in a persistent vegetative state. In 1998, her husband petitioned the Sixth Circuit Court of Florida to remove her feeding tube, with favorable outcome. However, the prolonged series of legal appeals presented by her parents and by state and federal legislative intervention effected a seven-year delay before life support was terminated. Piergiorgio Welby was an Italian man diagnosed with a severe form of muscular dystrophy. Following a tracheotomy he suffered a respiratory insufficiency that left him unable to breathe normally. He depended on mechanical ventilation and artificial feeding. In 2006 he publicly declared his wish to interrupt treatment. In the absence of specific law on the matter, his request was rejected. He was later assisted to end his own life. His doctor was accused then acquitted of charge of homicide of a consenting person.

are not the priorities of politics nowadays.

This essay presents and critically examines the argumentation put forward by the Pro-life movement and the claim that since conception embryos are human beings entitled to the right to life. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Lombardia between early 2009 and late 2010.³ Here, just as in the rest of Italy, the Pro-life movement was born in the mid-seventies to prevent the legalization of abortion.⁴ By then its objectives have changed as a consequence of social transformations and as a result of innovations in the field of biotechnologies. Today, the cultural and political activity of its members covers a wide range of issues ranging from medically assisted procreation to living will; the “protection of the conceived and the unborn child” remains a major priority on their agenda.

The Pro-life movement declares itself to be nondenominational.⁵ The activists I have met during my research, however, are all committed Catholics.⁶ As believers, they consider life to be a gift from God. They also believe that since conception a woman carries in her womb an ensouled human being whose soul separates from the body at the moment of death. To them, fetuses are persons in the Christian sense of the term and abortion is a “murder” legitimized by State law. However, the explicit pedagogy of the Pro-life movement does not appeal to arguments that are based on faith alone. Pro-life militants in Italy, like elsewhere in the West, make a great use of medical and scientific lexicon and technological images (Petchesky 1987; Franklin 1991; Newman 1996; Morgan 1997; Palmer 2009). These images portray fetuses as human beings separated from the maternal body. The display of photographic sequences that show the embryo and the fetus at different stages of their development underscores teleology of life before birth. The accompanying text lays a moral discourse upon the scientific description, one that highlights the similarities between fetuses and newborns and attributes the former some of the characteristics of Western personhood: individuality, autonomy, the ability to communicate and to relate with others, sensitivity and some form of consciousness. The identification of such “qualities”, that may vary in degree over the course of the nine months of pregnancy but are nonetheless present since conception, together with the avoidance of any reference to the spiritual aspect of human beings, reduces the distinctive features of the person to a set of biological attributes. I conclude my argument with a reflection on the consequences of the projection of the notion of person as individual at the margins of human life.

“Lives” of soul and body

I have mentioned in the introduction that all Pro-life activists I have met over the course of my research are Catholic. Faith is part of their inner motivation to engage in activism. Nevertheless, references to religion are quite rare at conferences and events organized by the Pro-life movement and are not mentioned on the illustrative brochures and DVD that it circulates. The cultural initiatives against abortion mainly make use of representations of the fetus in the womb while images of abortions are less recurring.⁷ It is a widespread idea

³ I have conducted interviews with several members of the Pro-life movement, with members of the Movit (the university branch of the movement), and with several operators of the Life Help Centers (Centri di Aiuto alla Vita – C.A.V) who provide social and financial help to women who deal with undesired pregnancies. I have also attended to cultural events organized by the Pro-life movement. Furthermore, this article is based on illustrative materials produced by the movement itself. It is a part of a larger research project about the representations, the politics and the experiences of abortion in Italy.

⁴ The voluntary termination of pregnancy is governed by law 194 of 1978. On the history of abortion in Italy, see Sciré (2006).

⁵ See the statute of the Italian Pro-life movement at

http://www.mpv.org/pls/mpv/v3_s2ew_consultazione.mostra_pagina?rifi=quest&rifp=quest&id_pagina=30.

⁶ By committed Catholics I mean subjects who are active in parish churches or in Catholic groups or associations. To most of them, their involvement with the Pro-life movement is only part of their faith-oriented social commitment.

⁷ In other countries pro-life campaigns make a more frequent use of images of abortions or abortive remains where body parts are clearly identifiable. See Petchesky (1987) and Mason (1999) for the United States; Franklin (1991) and Hopkins, Zeedyk and Reitt (2005) for the United Kingdom.

among activists that the images of the development of life in the womb prove that fetuses are human beings since conception and that, as a consequence, abortion is a form of murder. "Facts", "scientific evidence" and images, unlike religious arguments, speak to everyone. According to Pro-life activists, those in favor of abortion perceive the fetus as a "clump of cells". To eradicate what they consider a false belief, Pro-life activists, engage in a form of cultural action that is directed to provide information about the "wonder" of prenatal development and to sensitize the public to the violence of abortion. Their public discourses do not address issues that are strictly linked to Catholic religion, such as the sanctity of life, ensoulment⁸ and the destiny of aborted fetuses. Some of these topics have surfaced during the course of my conversations with activists and people that gravitate around the Pro-life movement but were never openly discussed. These are teleological and complex issues and according to my informants their relevance is secondary to the objectives of the Pro-life movement. My questions did raise convergent perspectives but also specific and sometimes unique points of view; these reflected the background of my informants, their personal history and their subjective interpretation of the "mystery" of human life, rather than a normative discourse.

The term *vita* has multiple meanings in the Italian language. It indicates the state of natural activity of any living organism; the lifetime of any individual; it is a synonym of human being, health, vitality etc. Within the context of the Pro-life movement "life" is above all a synonym of "human being". The fetus (like the terminally ill) is the emblem of life and is intended as a "human being": although invisible and fragile, its existence carries within itself the sacredness that distinguishes a human being and is associated with it. According to Catholics, every person is sacred because it is the fruit of divine action. My informants often described life as a gift:

We did not give life to ourselves, we did not choose life, we received it. Couples who cannot have children suffer enormously because life is a gift. This is not a religious experience. It is a lay experience. If life is a gift, we can't help but welcome it.⁹

A Catholic understands immediately the value of life because he knows that God is above men, and created all things. A Catholic knows that there is a natural law, that there is a meaning behind everything and that men cannot behave as they please or better yet dispose of life as they wish. God creates life and life has an immense value.¹⁰

According to my informants every living being received the gift of life from God. However life is equally a gift for those who welcome it and care for it. Those who receive "life" (understood here as existence and relation) cannot reject this immensely precious gift from God. Such gift, however, is never definitive and life – because of its intrinsic nature and intimate relation with its donor – shall ultimately return to God.

Nowadays the body of the unborn is visible thanks to technology; this visibility represents a key element in the communicative strategy of the Pro-life movement, as we shall see below. Believers think that the body of the unborn is imbued with a soul. Over the course of history, the moment of ensoulment has been the subject of two main speculations. The first, systematized by Thomas of Aquin and predominant until the XVII century, posits that the soul is infused into the body around the third or fourth month of pregnancy, that is once the body itself is sufficiently formed to develop the potentialities of the soul. Before this moment, a voluntary termination of pregnancy is considered as an unjust act because it interferes with God's plan but it's not considered as the killing of a human being. The second speculation became prevailing in the modern period

⁸ According to Catholic teleology, the term "ensoulment" designates the moment the transcendental principle informs the material body, thus attributing the new living being the distinctive ontological quality of humanity.

⁹ Angela is 76 years old and has been a member of the Pro-life movement in Milan since it was established.

¹⁰ Gianluca is 23 years old and is completing his master degree. He is a member of Movit.

and is still predominant to the present day: claims that animation takes place at conception:¹¹

The theory of Thomas of Aquin ignored some of the knowledge in our possession today. God created nature and every living being. Because one exists, one is ensouled. Today we know that since fecundation the DNA remains the same. The embryo is very vital, it multiplies, it creates, and this is astonishing. It would not be so creative if it were just simple material.

The body is a means through which the soul manifests itself: according to Anna, a 38 year old woman with a college degree and a master in bioethics, before birth the vitality of the organism reflects its presence. While there is general consensus among pro-life activists about the fact that the spiritual principle of men is present since “the very first sparkle of life”, little is said about the infusion of the soul into the flesh. Elisabetta, a family counselor working at a Life Help Center in Milan, seemed willing to discuss this issue more openly than other informants. Her biographical trajectory and professional activity contributed to forge an original interpretation of the souls of unborn children:

So, let's say I am God. I take a little piece of my essence and this piece turns into a dove: this is the soul. Let's imagine it as a dove because it makes things easier. This dove chooses where to incarnate, because God allows it to do so. Before becoming incarnated, each soul already knows what the odds of coming into the world are, whether the mother intends to terminate the pregnancy or not. [...]. Once doves choose their mothers and fathers from high above, they are able to see their essence, and if there is something in particular that they like. Besides this spiritual perception, doves also know whether mother and father are married or not, and how many children they have already, if it is the first, fourth or fifth child. When they choose their parents they are well aware of everything, when they are pure soul they see everything, just like when one dies: it is the flesh that obfuscates the soul.

The above quote suggests that incarnation obtenebrates the soul but that is equally a condition of individualization and salvation. Everyone's soul comes from God: it is originally part of God's essence, and God is where every soul shall return after death.

The destiny of the souls of “unborn children” is among the topics of conversation I had anticipated to discuss with Catholic activists. This is a complicated issue, and one that was never fully resolved: a few years ago, it has been the object of a debate among members of an international theological committee assembled by Pope John Paul II. Traditionally, it was a common opinion in the Catholic world that the souls of the unbaptized who die would enter the Limbo where, although they would not enjoy the vision of God, they were not punished. The idea of the Limbo and the mitigation of the rigid alternative between salvation and damnation, progressively lost ground. For instance, it is not mentioned in the catechism of the Catholic Church (1992), where it is stated that the unbaptized who died in infancy should rely on God's mercy, whose intent is to save all mankind.¹² The 2007 document of the international committee gathered by the Pope affirms that the Bible does not contain any specific precept on the subject. The text does not altogether dismiss the idea of the Limbo, and renews the “hope” that unbaptized infants who died “be saved and enter eternal beatitude”.¹³

Most of the activists I talked to agree that the souls of aborted fetuses go to Heaven:

¹¹ Betta (2006) shows how during the XIX century, while medicine was rapidly acquiring the monopoly over birth, the Church began to have a more defined point of view about ensoulment.

¹² http://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0014/_P3L.HTM#9K

¹³ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_it.html

Every last Friday of the month, the volunteers of our C.A.V organize a funeral for aborted children. They take them from the hospital to the cemetery and celebrate a small ceremony. These children are innocent victims and when they die, they go to Heaven.¹⁴

I believe God takes back all unborn children. Abortion is an injury to humanity. Unborn children have no fault of their own. They go straight to Heaven. To pray for them is a personal choice. I don't think it should be one of the objectives of the Pro-life movement, by its nature nondenominational.¹⁵

I don't worry too much about the souls of aborted children. God is merciful, and it is merciful to those who have abortions as well, because He sees their struggle. The problem is that abortion concerns not only individuals, but society as a whole; it is society as a whole that is ill, and of course we ourselves are society.¹⁶

In Lombardia the burial of abortive remains is authorized under cemetery ground.¹⁷ There are associations (the main one is called "To defend life with Mary") that have entered agreement with hospitals to bury such remains. There are also prayer groups scattered all over the territory: these meet on a more or less regular basis to pray for the souls of unborn children. I have met with members of the Pro-life movement who have joined such initiatives in a private capacity or, as the first quote says, as members of a Life Help Center. These activities, the inherent expression of a certain Catholic culture, are presented as separated from the objectives of the Pro-life movement. Indeed, the movement continues to claim to be nondenominational and its aims are presented as mundane, as it is inferred in the second quotation here above presented.

The public discourse of the Pro-life movement: what "science" teaches

Although my informants share the conception of personhood that is typical of the Catholic anthropology and although they apply such notion to all life stages, from conception to natural death, they do make scarce reference to religion to advocate the unborn right to life; rather, they employ what they consider to be "scientific" arguments. While I long tried to investigate the transcendental premises of the social and political battles fought by the Pro-life movement, my informants invited me to focus on the "facts" and to assume an "objective" point of view in order to fully understand the reason why embryos are indeed persons.

This section introduces the public discourses of the Pro-life movement and relies on conversations with existing members as well as on illustrative material that circulates at Pro-life gatherings and events.

In September 2009, the local branch of the Pro-life movement in Varese, northern Italy, organized an exhibition called *Un grande sì alla vita. 28 quadri di bioetica* (A big yes to life. 28 bioethics posters), that was intended as an itinerary exhibition, to be presented at other local branches upon request. One of the panels described the beginning of life as follows:

The fusion of gametes, sperm and oocyte is an irreversible process that marks the beginning of a new living being: the zygote, or unicellular embryo. A few seconds after the fusion of gametes, the zygote is traversed by a calcium wave, and this activates a new system: it is the human subject who begins to self-construct. The formation of a new living being determines a qualitative shift at a biological and ontological level, one that continues until the end of its vital cycle.

¹⁴ Valeria is 32 years old and volunteers at the C.A.V in Varese.

¹⁵ Marco is 37 years old and has a college degree; he is a member of the Pro-life movement in Milan.

¹⁶ Valentina is 37 years old and holds a high-school diploma; she's a member of the Pro-life movement in Milan.

¹⁷ Regional regulations, 6th February 2007.

According to the authors zygote, morula, blastula, embryo, fetus and infant are “all names for the same human being”: they are scientific terms that describe the process of biological development. As highlighted by the quote, such process presents no ontological discontinuity, except at an initial stage, when the beginning of a new life is set in motion: conception originates a new autonomous subject. The acknowledgment and individuation of the autonomy of the unborn translates into the recognition of its dignity as a person. For instance, Anna, the 38 year old woman whose words I previously quoted, maintains that:

Everyone agrees that there is where a human being originates. Even those with more extreme points of view have no doubt about. The question is whether we can call that human being a person or not... We think [...] that a person originates at conception, because there is a new entity, a new individual, because there is autonomy. There is a DNA that differs from the DNA of parents [...]. Autonomy means that the embryo is the master of its own development. The whole development, the whole thing: when it reaches the uterus, the placenta, the fact that the mother doesn't eliminate it even though it has a different DNA and usually our body eliminates foreign bodies. How does a woman's body not eliminate that foreign body? It is because there is immediate communication. Early at the beginning of life [the conceptus] communicates with the woman. Of course, it's a chemical form of communication: he says, look this is me, I am different but this is me, I'm your child [...] And then the tubes soften etc. [...] If all of this happens and a new human being originates, who can actually say if it is person or not? What are the criteria to define what a person is? And who sets these criteria? You need solid basics, and I think you might just find that by looking at the very beginning of life. Everyone agrees that there is where life starts. The most respectful thing [...] is to recognize that if there are solid facts and if that's where the human being originates, then one cannot take away its dignity as a person.

As it is suggested by the quote, the recognition of the unborn as a person is based on the individuation of characteristics and abilities: its individuality, the fact that it is genetically distinguished from the father and the mother; its autonomy, its being the master of its own development; its ability to communicate (which is chemical, at the beginning at least).

According to Pro-life activists, another quality that determines the recognition of the unborn as a person is its inherent completeness. Images of intrauterine development serve as substantial “proof” that the body of the unborn is identical to the body of a new-born child and to the body of the adult that it will shape up to be. *La vita umana: prima meraviglia!* (Human life: the first wonder!) is a study aid that was realized by the Italian Pro-life movement and made available on DVD and booklet. Over four million copies were printed and distributed for free at rallies and events. With the financial help of the Lombardy region, about 25.000 copies were sent via mail to families in Milan in order “for parents to have it at home and look through it with their children” and to have a “scientific text that is simple and illustrated, written in a simple language and full of appealing pictures, one that does not mention abortion but the growth of the child in the maternal womb”, as the promoter of the initiative suggested.¹⁸ All illustrative pictures were taken by Lennart Nilsson, an internationally known photographer, whose pictures have been widely used by pro-life activists worldwide. First published on *Life* magazine in 1965, these pictures represented the unborn as an independent subject, separated from the maternal body (Newman 1996; Michaels 1999). What is presented as a scientific text, then, accompanies these pictures. As the following examples show, these scientific descriptions convey a moral discourse that emphasizes the presence of the physiological and morphological features of every human being in the embryo and then in the fetus; such moral discourse further attributes the fetus the

¹⁸ Paola is 73 and has been a member of the Pro-life movement in Milan since it was established.

qualities, relations and abilities of a newborn child:

Let us enjoy a close up of this small human being that has been living in the maternal breast for a month now! Curled up like a ball it looks like boxer, full of hard-bitten vitality. The heartbeat of this small being can be spotted on the electrocardiogram already (V.U: 19).

Here's our child at six weeks of age. The head seems to capture our full attention, and it will be the most flashy and touchy part of his tiny body for a long time: it's the extraordinary "central", where all sparkle of intelligence that will one day illuminate the world is contained: tomorrow's ideas are here already, in these soft cerebral loops that send a message of their own: one can record their activity in an electroencephalogram by now (V.U: 20)

Look at it at three months of age, isn't it... incredible?! Its features are becoming more and more definite. The lips open and close, the forehead wrinkles and the area around eyebrows moves, and the head turns around: the baby is becoming more expressive and is beginning to make up a language to communicate once it's born: this language is still mute, yet effective (V.U: 23).

Nilsson's pictures display miniature bodies. The text enable the viewer to see that these bodies show all the body parts and functions that will be fully visible at a later stage in the life of a person. Humanity and the completeness of the body are equally emphasized through the description of gestures of different stages of the life to come: facial expressions anticipate future expressive possibilities and the hands of the unborn "throw punches as a sign of protest against something that is bothering him"; these are all proof of precocious interactive abilities during pregnancy (V.U: 24). The embryo and the fetus are called "children", "little human beings", "and sons". The stress is on what the fetus is going to become, on its genetic development and his potentials as a person. The teleology of vital processes renders the embryo a human being with a whole life ahead of itself, a life whose path is blazed at the moment of conception (Franklin 1991: 197).

According to the rhetoric of Pro-life, relational competence and sensitivity are equally important features in the recognition of the unborn as a person. These are also thought to be present since the moment of conception, and to further develop during pregnancy:

In the past we used to think that the baby [in the womb] was some kind of undifferentiated being, a tabula rasa, with a body and no soul [...] – a doctor active in the Pro-life movement maintained at a conference in Brescia in 2009.¹⁹ Now we know that before birth the baby is an active being, rich, competent, and capable of movement, of exploring the environment; an intelligent human being, capable of emotions.

The idea that the fetus is a sensitive being and is somehow conscious is widespread among Pro-life activists. The Italian movement translated and circulated a documentary that was released in the United States during the 1980s under the title "The silent scream". Copies are also sold at events and gatherings. This documentary shows the abortion of a 12-week fetus²⁰ and has been the subject of numerous studies. Rosalind Petchesky (1987) has underscored how the medical frame of reference (the narrator is a doctor, fetology studies are quoted and anatomical models, medical instruments and ultrasound scans are shown throughout the documentary) is used to promote a dramatic anti-abortion rhetoric. The doctor's voice

¹⁹ Giovanni is 65 years old; he's a member of the Pro-life movement and an active member of a C.A.V.

²⁰ In Italy, abortion is legal in the first 12 weeks.

translates the silent gestures and movements of the fetus that are visible through ultrasound scans:

The child is moving quietly in its sanctuary. As the suction tip move toward the child, the child rear away from it and undergoes much more violent, much more agitated movements [...] Here we sees the child's mouth wide open in a silent scream. This is the silent scream of a child threatened imminently with extinction. [...] The child's movements are violent at this point. He does sense aggression in his sanctuary. He's moving away in a pathetic attempt to escape the inexorable instrument that the abortionist is using to extinguish his life.

The documentary suggests that the fetus is aware of what happens during an abortion: it has feelings, fears; it suffers and shouts.²¹ Carlotta is a university student and a member of the youth section of the Pro-life movement. She watched the documentary for the first time when she was still a student in high-school:

If you face the reality of it and watch that movie, what can you say? That that is not a baby? That the baby doesn't suffer? You don't need to be a rocket scientist to understand the documentary. You just need to pay close attention to the reality of things and not to your interpretation of it.

According to Pro-life activists, the qualities that make the fetus a person are easily detectable. It only takes to "pay close attention to the reality of things", which is ironically possible only through fiction. In their opinion it is the right and a duty for citizens to be exposed and be acquainted with such "facts" so that they can form their own opinion on the morality of abortion.²²

Subjectivity before birth

Let us go back to biopolitics. According to Michel Foucault (1976; 1994) in the "biological modernity" the individual – the mere living being – and the species are the fundamental stakes of political strategies. "What comes out is a progressive bestialization of man through extremely refined political techniques" and "the possibility to protect life and to authorize a holocaust" (1994: 719). Consistent with Foucault's reflection on the politicization of life as a key component of modernity, Giorgio Agamben (1995; 1996) underscored how human life is essentially a "form of life", "a life that can never be separated from its form." Each form of life "is never prescribed by a biological vocation, nor is it assigned by whatever necessity [...] it always retains the character of possibility" (1996: 13-14). On the contrary, the bare life, the subject of biopolitics, is mere material support, a biological substratum. As it emerges from the opening quote of this article, members and activists of the Pro-life movement are critical towards modern biopolitics, its claim to govern life by establishing the limits and the quality of what a human life is. From their point of view every life is human – from birth to death – and must be protected. All vital processes possess an inherent teleology and a transcendental normativity: the DNA of every living being is the distinctive feature of a life that is imbued with sense because it is given by God.²³

I have shown how activists attribute the unborn the dignity of the person and argue that since conception

²¹ Following the release of the documentary in the United States, doctors, columnists of the New York Times and representatives of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America reacted and argued that a 12 week fetus has no cerebral cortex and cannot therefore feel pain; with no air in the lungs the fetus cannot scream; furthermore, any movement of the fetus is a reflex movement and has no aim (Petchesky 1987: 60-61). On fetal pain see Lee, Ralston, Drey, Partridge & Rosen (2005).

²² For a critique on the citizen-spectator in the abortion debate see Berlant (1994) and Palmer (2009).

²³ Boltanski talked about "an arrangement with the creator" with reference to the monist visions of humanity where all human beings are recognized as sons of God.

the living being possesses some of the characteristics of the subject-individual. In a cultural and social context that activists feel is hostile to the Catholic faith, they do not make reference to the Creator or to the incarnation of soul at conception in their public discourses. Instead, they make use of “scientific” knowledge and images because, according to them, they facilitate the recognition of the distinctive characteristics of a human being and the identification of the embryo or the fetus as “one of us”.

The construction of subjectivity before birth advocated by the Italian Pro-life movement and by similar right-to-life groups around the world has been the subject of numerous critiques. These have underlined how the representation of the fetus as an individual is widespread in the European and American culture (Strathern 1992). Embryology and fetology, to which activists made great reference, present the embryo and the fetus as active partners during pregnancy (Franklin 1991). The representation of the unborn as an individual is also the consequence of ultrasound scan images and photographs that separate the “double body” of pregnant women, by isolating the fetus and excluding the woman (Duden 1993; Tyler 2000). Nowadays, legal debates about abortion make great use of bio-medical notions such as sensitivity, fetal pain and viability to circumscribe the rights of the unborn (Heriot 1996; Palmer 2009). These social and cultural processes tend to hide that “personhood is not a property that individuals – or fetuses – possess prior to their entrance into social life and relations, nor is it an attribute that can be discovered with the accumulation of greater scientific knowledge or with the development of more advanced techniques. Who or what is called a person is, among other things, a highly contingent historical formation; it is both the site and the source of ever-changing cultural contexts and always under construction as a self-evident fact of nature” (Hartouni 1999: 300).

In the light of these analyses, the biologization of the abortion debate is the clear effect of the influence exercised by biomedicine and technology and their attempt to govern life. The specificity of the rhetoric of the Pro-life movement, then, does not lie in the projection of the attributes of the person onto the unborn, but in the assumption that such attributes are the basis for an abstract and universal recognition, irrespective of the peculiarities of every “life”. The Pro-life movement fights to assert the right to life of the unborn in its essence, regardless of the choices and the relations that influence its coming into the world. Although firmly positioned against State bio-politics that legitimize abortion, the Pro-life movement finds himself caught within the biological modernity that privileges the biological over the relational, social and affective aspects of personhood and subjectivity. The analysis of its discursive practices paves the way to a reconsideration of the uses of the Western idea of person at the margins of human life and to the articulation of a critical approach to the biologization of the debate on abortion, one that, as my conclusions can only suggest, takes into account the distinction between “life” and “forms of life”.

References

- Agamben G. 1995, *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Agamben G. 1996, *Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Berlant L., 1994, “America, ‘Fat’, the Fetus”. *Boundary 2* 21(3): 145-95.
- Betta E. 2006, *Animare la vita. Disciplina della nascita tra medicina e morale nell’Ottocento*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Duden B. 1993, *Disembodying women. Perspectives on pregnancy and the Unborn*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Boltanski L. 2004, *La condition fœtale. Une sociologie de l’avortement et de l’engendrement*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault M. 1976, *La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault M. 1994, *Bisogna difendere la società. Corso al Collège de France 1975-1976*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Franklin S. 1991, “Fetal Fascination: New Dimensions of the Medical Scientific Construction of Fetal Personhood”, in S. Franklin, C. Lury e J. Stacey, *Off-Center: Feminism and Cultural Studies*. London: Harper Collins: 109-205.
- Hartouni V. 1999, “Reflection on Abortion Politics and the Practices Called Persons”, in L. Morgan & M. Michaels, *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*. Philadelphia: Univ. Pennsylvania Press: 296-303.
- Heriot M. J. 1996, “Fetal Rights versus the Female Body: Contested Domains”. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 10(2): 176-194.
- Hopkins N., zeedyk S. & RAITT F. 2005, “Visualising abortion: emotion discourse and fetal imagery in a contemporary abortion debate”. *Social Sciences & Medicine* 61: 393-403.
- Lee S. J., Ralston H. J. P., Drey E. A., Partridge J. C. & Rosen M. A., 2005, “Fetal Pain. A Systematic Multidisciplinary Review of the Evidence”. *JAMA* 294(8): 947-954.

- Mason C. 1999, "Minority Unborn", in L. M. Morgan & M. W. Michaels, *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 159-174.
- Michaels M. W. 1999, "Fetal Galaxies. Some Questions about What We See", in L. M. Morgan & M. W. Michaels, *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 113-132.
- Newman K. 1996, *Fetal Positions, Individualism, Science, Visuality*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Palmer J. 2009, "Seeing and knowing: Ultrasound images in contemporary abortion debate", *Feminist Theory* 10: 173-189.
- Petchesky R. P., 1987, "Foetal Images: the Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction", in M. Stanworth (ed.), *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine*. Cambridge: Polity Press: 57-80.
- Sciré G. 2008, *L'aborto in Italia. Storia di una legge*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- Strathern M. 1992, *After Nature. English Kinship in the Late Twentieths Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tyler I. 2000, "Reframing Pregnant Embodiment" in S. Ahmed, J. Kilby, C. Lury, M. Mcneil & B. Skeggs (eds.) *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*. London: Routledge: 288-301.