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Speaker: Maud Anne Bracke, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, U.K.

Chair: Mark Gilbert, Professor of History and International Studies, Johns Hopkins University SAIS Europe, Bologna, Italy

**Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy  
During the Long 1970s in International Perspective**  
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Traditional scholarship of Italian ‘Second Wave Feminism’ has focused on the movement’s theoretical contributions to feminist thinking as well as its specificity to the region. Dr. Maud Anne Bracke opens the lecture by questioning this approach. Building upon her latest book, *La reinvenzione della politica: Femminismo in italia, 1968-1983*, she argues for a ‘transnational’ approach to 1970s Italian feminism and for the consideration of the movement’s impact beyond its conventional confines.

The critical question facing the ‘transnationalisation’ of Italian feminism is whether there is an Italian feminist movement. Through interviews with ordinary activists and campaigners in Turin, Rome and Naples, Bracke discovered that the discourse in Italy was a translation of discussions from outside the state. In fact, texts from the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany circulated in Italy before being re-contextualized for the Italian public. As a result, Italian feminists were influenced by American, French, British and German thought, as well as, more broadly speaking, international politics and culture. It is evident that the expression ‘sisterhood is global’ rang true in Italy, though it should be noted that Italy was far more open and engaged with Western, and not Eastern, Europe.

Following this demonstration of the transnational character of Italian feminism, Bracke pivots to ask how this approach helps us understand the social movement. From her perspective, this transnational methodology provides a context in which to evaluate origins, strategies and practices. As an example, Bracke highlights her interview with Livia Geloso, a feminist who was active in both the 1960s student movement and the radical left. Disenchanted by the male-centric nature of the latter movements, Geloso became interested in the body, the political awareness rooted in the body, and sexual health – a focus on Italian feminist groups in the 1970s. Through her involvement in the feminist movement, Geloso adopted the practice of self-help, in which one discovers the body in small groups. In her interview with Bracke, Geloso pointed to a revelatory self-help session with a group of women from Los Angeles; in that encounter, she perceived the Americans as physically and politically more liberated than her. It should be stressed that if such an encounter was impactful and allowed for the possibility of reinventing the self, what mattered was the *perception* – rather than necessarily the reality of the more liberated woman.

This transnational approach can also aid in resituating political strategies, which Bracke illustrates through the case of Italy’s push to legalize abortion in the 1970s. A rallying call for a woman’s sovereignty over her own body, this topic came to the forefront of Italian feminism. In her analysis of this significant event, Bracke explains how, due to similarities in legal frameworks, the Comitato romano per la liberalizzazione dell’ aborto e della contraccezione (CRAC) in Italy looked to the Mouvement pour la liberalisation de l’avortement et de la contraception (MLAC) in Paris for

strategies of how to create a mass-based social movement. The two organizations converged on their understanding that the legalization of abortion had to be underpinned by cultural and societal change. Bracke notes that while these two campaigns shared certain characteristics, there were differences between the processes in Italy and France. While Italy's campaign remained grassroots, France involved the professional sector, with doctors and lawyers joining the demonstrations.

To evaluate Italian feminism in the 1970s, and its impact, Bracke calls for a renewed emphasis on external histories. In particular, she asserts the need for a broader definition of feminism due to the double revolution – a concept that calls for the transformation of self and sense of self with larger roles in society. By acknowledging these social and existential transformations, which existed in the feminist movement but also elsewhere, Bracke believes organizations that did not self-identify themselves as feminists, but had similar experiences of self transformation, can and should be included in the larger definition of feminism. This expansion would support the initiative to map the larger social, political and cultural impact of feminism in Italy in the 1970s.

Bracke concludes her talk by questioning the 'waves' metaphor and offers, in its place, a periodization structure, highlighted by the turning point of 1989-1994 in which Italian feminism is absorbed into the communist agenda. By underlining the societal impact in political and socio-cultural spheres, as well as its transnational relationships, Bracke highlights the need to reconsider Italian feminism in the 1970s in a different light.