

Feminist genealogies in Italy. Time and politics

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This is a story about generations in feminism. It is a way to tell the recent history according to what happened through, and thanks to, the relations among women in these past twenty years.

Italy can be an interesting laboratory to look at, as it has been, altogether with France, the cradle of "sexual difference thought", a peculiar way of approaching feminism, politics, theory and the analysis of women's position in the contemporary.

A hint about sexual difference

I will start from *my position*: mainly because sexual difference is not a theory one can pick up among others. Rather, it is a standing point, a way of relating to others, and the approach it entails. Assuming one's sexuated position means first of all that one, I, am the material of my thinking: what happens to me, my desires, the problems arising in my life.

In fact sexual difference is a materialistic conception of thought. Maybe the youngest among you are aware of the debate about essentialism (see especially Judith Butler), but I will sketch it shortly. All over the Nineties there has been a strong criticism about the idea that "woman" could be a name or a concept rooted in the body: the fact I have a body with sexual feminine marks does not "matter" (J. Butler, *Bodies that matter*), it doesn't entail anything in my identification as a woman – in this way Simone de Beauvoir's sentence was taken over "one is not born a woman, one it becomes". I am persuaded that this assumption was a useful warning against biological determinism that produced racism and was ought to produce new forms of sexism.

But this wasn't the point with sexual difference. First of all because of the kind of body at stake, that is both historical and biological. Sexual difference has stolen many concepts to psychoanalysis, especially the Lacanian one. Sexuated bodies are, all in one, both biological *and* psychic, unconscious and conscious – this is the point when we think according to drives (*Triebe*) - and express through the social dimension. Sexuated body does not function as the cause of psychic states, it is a plastic material that may find the "good" ways to express/unfold itself or not. If the ways are "bad", then we will have the symptom. Like the symptom *par excellence* of the hysteric, the woman acting and speaking in a chaotic way, the figure feminist in the Seventies had to cope with.

According to sexual difference then, the problem for women is not really the social or economical oppression – and, consequently, the struggle for equality to men, that is to say, the claim for inclusion in the existing social order - , but more widely the transformation of the patterns of identification that are offered to a woman by the social order. One has then to fight in order to get rid of the dominating patterns and to create some new ones.

Thus this is a first point: *according to sexual difference, "being a woman" is a discovery I am making while liberating myself from what the social order is asking me to be. And this enterprise is always a collective one* (see Carla Lonzi, "Die Lust zu Frauen sein").

In Italy the materialism of this process of liberation has been particularly stressed. Within a sort of "T.A.Z. temporary autonomous zones" – the spaces where women stay and speak to each other – they started by making a "tabula rasa", a cut in respect of ideologies: no theory could substitute the direct relation to one's own experience and the recognition of it coming from another woman. We can consider it the political version of the "feminist consciousness arising groups".

What was discovered in those spaces?

First of all *the need for feminine genealogies*. What was going wrong for a woman was the fact that she had no access to the other woman – the mother – as a way of social identification. According to the dominating patterns, both on the psychic and the social side, only the father was the one assuring the entrance into the "symbolic" order, that is the realm of social exchanges. The other woman, the mother, was due to assure the first non social steps to identification, and was due to be left aside in order to become an adult and a full citizen. Differently from men, a woman had to leave behind her her sexuated identification.

Other discoveries – made all along the Eighties and Nineties – concern the relations to power, the need of representations for the disparity among women, etc. But I want to stress the point of genealogies, because it has to do with the topic of this speech.

Genealogies in the Eighties and in the Nineties

This is the point of my entrance in sexual difference feminism. Although I first got in touch with it through capital texts such as *Speculum* by Luce Irigaray, the work of the women philosophers of the community of "Diotima" and *The symbolic order of the mother* by Luisa Muraro (*Die symbolischen Ordnung der Mutter*), the first and last way of attending this feminism was the relation with these women.

It was a many folded situation: a) a big part of my participation was *due to texts and not to the direct experience* of feminist politics in the Seventies; b) the place of this encounter was university more than political groups; c) we, me and other younger women, seemed to have to continue – more precisely, to repeat – what had already been done and said by other women; therefore d) the mark of our generational position seemed to be a minus: less political, less inventive; and, finally, e) trying to take a distance from our elders was in suspect to be a "matricide", a phallic way of identifying by killing, once again, the mother, the other woman.

I have to underscore this last point. I, and others of my same age – but I should say, in my same generational position – were too young in the Seventies and yet not that young to have a truly new period to deal with. It seemed we had more or less the same problems to cope with than our elders, and it seemed they had already expressed them so well. We were, as we say in Italian, neither fish nor meat: not feminist activist of the Seventies, not "young feminist"

with new stories to tell. And our elders were quite sharp with us: nothing new to listen from us, nothing as good as they were able to discover and to enact. They were barely listening at us, and in case it was to say that our work or what we were saying wasn't exact or smart enough. It doesn't sound like a drama but, believe me, being in such a position in respect of our elders was painful. We admired those women – many of us had worked with Luisa Muraro, Chiara Zamboni, Maria Luisa Boccia – we admired the things they were saying and doing, but we felt in a dead end.

How could it be that such a genealogical relation made us feel quite passive, and useless? Was it this the true meaning of the relation among women they had valued so much?

In the same period – it was the very first years of the Nineties – other women of our age, facing the same problematic relation to elder feminists, decided to turn to easier and more fruitful encounters, especially towards authors such as Donna Haraway or Rosi Braidotti, first, and then Judith Butler. I will tell more about Butler in a minute, but we, who were closer to sexual difference thought, didn't want to commit matricide, even in the form of substitution¹.

Matri_x. A name, a position.

As in feminism happens, we started to meet and speak together about our feelings, a mixed state, something between gratitude and saturation: we were fed up – too much words, too much nutrition and too many maps already drawn, indicating where to go and where not to, which were the good and the bad ideas, and so on. We also knew we could not repeat a sort of movement of liberation: this could be done in respect of patriarchal order, but how could we do it in respect of feminism itself?

Many years after I can say that sticking to the necessity of the relation to our elders, to that feminism, not looking for ways out of it, has been a truly feminist attitude. Instead of switching to another "theory" – sexual difference was not a theory – we wanted to reshape the relations among women themselves. And, I think, we discovered something new.

Time passes by even for feminists: not any woman has the same age and memory, and we cannot rely upon an automatic transmission from one generation to the other.

Speaking, and reflecting, and writing, we finally found the right way to represent what we were in need of. It was a word and a drawing at the same time:

Matri_x ist das Zeichen einer Position.

Matri: die Akteurinnen des Schnitts, die sich von der herrschenden Ordnung abgetrennt haben und der Freiheit der Frauen Raum gegeben haben.

_: das Intervall, das uns mit ihnen verbindet aber auch von ihnen trennt.

x: die unbekannte Größe; die Leidenschaft für Erfahrungen, die Notwendigkeit des Versuchs (see the text: "Matri_x. Ein Name, eine Position").

¹ In that period I edited the Italian version of an exchange among Carolyn Gubar, Robin Wigman and Carolyn Heilbrun, appeared in "Critical Inquiry" with the title *What ails feminism?* The way out of a similar problem in the English speaking world was coming from theory: if the elder feminist were the agents of a new period, the younger were marking their difference through new theories, especially postcolonial and black theory.

We represented our common position within the time, the story of feminism as a relation to our « symbolical » mothers, our elders, but with a blank space between our position and theirs. In that space we were going to look again to reality, to our experience, in order to discover in our lives something that wasn't exactly as they had said to be.

What happened to my companions in that adventure? Many of them started – very early – to put in question what “work” was for a young woman at the end of the Twentieth century (and how prescient have they been!²). On my side, as I was in philosophy, I looked for a new way to represent sexual difference, a way that could allow me to keep both the sexual mark of subjectivities and a sort of emptiness of contents, so that I could read new situations.

The idea was to use, literally, sexual difference as a 15-puzzle:



Sexual difference becomes the empty space, the in-between, the condition to move, put in a distance or bring closer, the tiles-sexuated positions, in a given situation of experience (see, F. Giardini, *Relations. Phenomenology and sexual difference*). Empty of identifications, empty of already known contents, sexual difference is thus becoming the necessary condition in order to *move thought and language according to the materiality and dynamics of experience*.

Here is a short example: if I take the experience of work in the Seventies and the sexuated positions it involves, the interval puts men as workers-citizens, women on the side of struggling to get out of domesticity and altogether, starting to realize that a society, organized on the model of the male worker, is not enough for women's citizenship. If I take the experience of work in the early years of the XXI century, I will have: women in the position of workers, the nature of work profoundly changed – no more a sharp distinction between working time and lifetime, and younger women and men in the position of discovering that work cannot be the base for citizenship (there is too little work to assure the fundamental rights). But we could make the same with the experience of sexuality. *Difference is always there, but it changes* according to the transformations, the historical transformations, of the relations constituting our respective positions.

² Antonia De Vita, *Imprese d'amore e di denari; La creazione sociale*.

These very last years. Feminism as "cosmopolitics"

In this first decade of the new century I have been making political work with younger women – and, sometimes, younger men –, time is passing for me too. On the base of this experience I can make the following observations.

The season of the reception of Butler has come to an end. The idea that gender is something that has to be undone (*Undoing gender*), altogether with feminism, is unsatisfactory. I must say that Butler in Italy was one of the authors who were helpful in turning away from the stiffened relations to feminists, she has therefore been read mainly in an antifeminist mode. Although *queer* theories are diffused, as generally they are considered good tools against discrimination and homophobia, they do not seem to offer a wider approach to the political questions arising nowadays.

Thanks to the mobile version of sexual difference I can assume a different relation to youngers than the one my elders assumed towards me.

I will make an example, drawn from my experience of teaching in an advanced course that has been useful to me also in joining the recent struggles against the neoliberal politics privatizing what we call "common goods" such as water or education.

In these last years the general topic of the course has been the idea of a "cosmopolitics", that is to say a new set of political questions dealing with *the order, and disorder, among human beings and among human and non human beings*. Each year a specific aspect of the question is treated. The example comes from the course on "Cosmopolitics. 'Human nature' and nature".

Now, what happens when one takes sexual difference as an approach? Or, in other words, when one considers not "human nature" but the sexuate subjects? The first fundamental result is that we cannot speak about human nature and about politics in the same way we are used to: politics is not about social matters that have to be distinguished from environmental matters, and human nature is neither an unpolitical nor a scientific matter alone.

Being subjects as a man and a woman does not allow separating nature and culture as two different kingdoms. Rather it requires, as a political duty, to think about new ways in which culture can elaborate the nature we are by our bodies.

The problem is how to articulate the different states of nature in which each is born towards a new culture, a new political realm. The modern solution – let's think about Thomas Hobbes or John Locke – has been outlined through a specular and unspoken debt between what was intended to be natural and what was intended to be truly political.

A new way of conceiving politics as cosmopolitics, beyond the dualistic opposition between nature and culture, can start by thinking about sexual difference as a political question, the political question. Taking into account the nature we are made of as a political matter, as a cultural duty in becoming human, points out that each one has the right to "return to the self", which also means knowing the limit we, each of us is made of. This limit does not result in a

lack of freedom, on the contrary it is the chance to become fully human, the way to "become who you are" (Irigaray-Nietzsche *How one becomes what one is* subtitle of *Ecce homo*, in *Keywritings*) in relation to others.

According to sexual difference, the sexuated conception of common good I am now fostering has to do not really with some fundamental/natural/prepolitical rights, but instead with the idea that the fundamental has to do with our very first relation to life: *the nourishment relation*.

In fact, if we consider that we are not nature/culture, body/mind, but sexuate subjects, we discover that what has been removed in the early narrative of modern times is not labour, but nourishment.

Here how John Locke puts it:

He that is nourished by the acorns he picked up under an oak, or the apples he gathered from the trees in the wood, has certainly appropriated them to himself. No body can deny but the nourishment is his. I ask then, when did they begin to be his? When he digested? Or when he eat? Or when he boiled? Or when he brought them home? Or when he picked them up? And it is plain, if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. That labour put a distinction between them and common: that added something to them more than nature, the common mother of all, had done (*Second treatise of civil government*, V, 28).

And, as we are both mind and body, there is no way to distinguish what is fundamental to nourish our bodies – water, etc. – and what is fundamental to nourish our minds – education. Politics has to deal with all that is necessary to be full embodied subjects.

This is an example of the way in which we can afford *any* question, though maintaining the sexual mark of our subjectivities, and it entails today that a feminist approach does not concern women's or gender policies, but rather it affects politics on the largest scale. Politics conceived and enacted by women, but intended to a justice concerning the all of us.

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