Susanna Scarparo is the Cassamarca Lecturer in Italian Studies at Monash University, Australia. Her research interests include life writing, feminist theory, comparative literature and cultural studies.

Susanna Scarparo insegna nel dipartimento di italianistica all’Universita’ di Monash, a Melbourne. Si interessa di auto/biografia, teoria femminista, e letteratura comparata.

Di prossima pubblicazione: un libro dal titolo “Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction” (Troubador) e in collaborazione con Rita Wilson sta curando il volume “Reconfiguring Identities: Italian Women Writing lives” (University of Delaware Press)

Susanna Scarparo

Going Public

Using a definition of public as a shared and relational space, which Hanna Arendt also calls “polis”2, in this article I explain how a number of feminists in Italy are public intellectuals, yet they do not speak on television, and generally do not write for popular media. They do, however, write books, articles for more specialised magazines, and speak at conferences and seminars, and many of them are also teachers, either at universities or in schools. I argue that they create a public space other than that of popular media and television in which to operate as public intellectuals. I also show how their public and political activities are closely linked to the theory of sexual difference.

Too little is known about Italian feminism in the English–speaking world. This is despite the publication of English–language books on Italian feminist theory and the translation of key theoretical texts.3 Teresa de Lauretis’s introduction to the translation of

1Another version of this article will be published later in 2004 in Australian Feminist Studies 19.44 with the title “Feminist Intellectuals as Public Figures in Contemporary Italy.” I am deeply indebted to Luisa Muraro, Chiara Zamboni, Ida Dominijanni, Annarosa Buttarelli, Adriana Cavarero, Maria Luisa Boccia, Paola Bono and the many other intellectuals who were so generous with their time and so willing to share their knowledge and experience with me. I am also grateful to Bernadette Luciano, Rita Wilson, Mirna Cicioni and Klaus Neumann who read and commented on earlier versions of this article. Thanks also to Francesca Urpis and Amedeo La Mattina for their generous hospitality in Rome. The research for this article was funded by the Faculty of Arts at Monash University. Translations of extracts of interviews and of Italian texts are mine.

2 See H. Arendt, The Human Condition, (The University of Chicago Press) Chicago, 1958, p. 198. Adriana Cavarero explains that the polis for Arendt is not physically situated in a territory, but is instead “the space of appearance, always and everywhere capable of being enacted, where human beings actively show who they are.” (See A. Cavarero, “Politicizing Theory”, Political Theory, 30, August 2002, p. 525). According to Cavarero, this is what Arendt means by her famous statement: “Wherever you go, you will be a polis” (see H. Arendt, The Human Condition, p. 198).

3 In her introduction to Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice, de Lauretis states that “Italian feminism is not well known in North America. With very few and very recent exceptions, its critical texts are not translated, discussed or cited by American or other Anglophone feminists.” See T. de Lauretis, “The Practice of Sexual Difference and feminist Thought in Italy: an Introductory Essay” in Sexual Difference: A Theory of
Non credere di avere dei diritti created the impression that a new and exciting brand of feminism was coming to the American academy and would perhaps act as the ‘third way’ between Anglo–American and French feminisms. This, however, has not been the case. Twelve years since de Lauretis’s translation, the editors of the most recent collection in English dealing with Italian feminism still lament the marginality of Italian feminist writings. So far the only Anglophone feminist scholars who have analysed and referred to contemporary Italian feminist thought in some detail, have been academics working in the field of Italian Studies. This is partly the result of the relative dearth of translations and of the marginal status the discipline of Italian Studies has occupied in English–speaking countries. It is also due to the specific nature of Italian feminist thought—which is based upon discussions about language, semiotics, psychoanalysis, history and philosophy—and to its structural relationship with leftist politics.

Unlike in other countries, in Italy, the production and practice of feminist thought has operated mostly outside the academy. With the exception of a few interdisciplinary centres, and a handful of postdoctoral programs, there is not one women’s studies degree course in Italy. There are, however, several active and autonomous women’s cultural centres, and feminist journals and magazines. It is widely accepted that “a main characteristic of Italian feminism is its diffusion through a number of diverse groups” and individuals. The key cities in which feminist organisations are found are Milan, Verona, Bologna and, to some extent,


Recently, Graziella Parati and Rebecca West have edited a collection of essays in English by some North-American-based scholars and translations in English of Italian texts by some of the most distinguished feminist theorists in Italy. In their introduction, Parati and West place the Italian contribution to the debate on equality versus difference in the context of similar debates in the theoretical works of American and French feminist scholars. See G. Parati and R. West (eds), Italian Feminist Theory and Practice, Cultural Practices in Italy, G. Miceli Jeffries (ed.), (University of Minnesota Press) Minneapolis, 1994 has to date been the only other edited collection dealing specifically with Italian feminist theory; all contributors work in Italian Studies at North American universities. With the exception of an article by Rosi Braidotti and one by Italianist Mirna Cicioni, both published in Australian Feminist Studies in 1986 and 1989 respectively, English-language analyses of Italian feminist thought have mainly appeared in academic Italian Studies journals such as Italia, Forum Italian and Annali d’Italianistica. Scholars writing about Italian feminism in Philosophy and Gender Studies journals such as Discourse, Hypatia and Differences have also tended to be Italianists. Arguably the most prominent and influential contributor to such journals has been the Berkeley-based Italianist Renate Holub (see, for example, her “The Politics of ‘Diotima’”, Differentia, 6, 1990, pp. 161–73; or her “Towards a New Rationality? Notes on Feminism and Current Discursive Practices in Italy”, Discourse, 4, 1982, pp. 89-107.

Rome. In Milan there is the Women’s Bookshop Collective, made known to Anglophone readers by de Lauretis’s translation. In Verona there is the now well-established philosophical community Diotima. Founded in 1984 in Verona, it consists of a core community of ten women, who are also linked to intellectuals based in other parts of Italy. The collective publishes books under the name “Diotima,” and its project is to appropriate “a philosophical voice in the knowledge, rather than exclusion or transcendence, of sexual difference.” In Bologna there is a very active cultural and national resource centre with the largest women’s studies library in Italy. In Rome several prominent feminist intellectuals work mostly as journalists and academics.

In Italy the debate between competing brands of feminism has been, and to some extent still is, one between proponents of a theory of equality and those of a theory of sexual difference. Traditionally, Italian feminists have been active members of the left. Many of them were involved in the extraparliamentary groups that grew out of the students’ and workers’ protests of 1968, or were card-carrying communists and later joined the most significant successor of the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party), the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (Democratic Party of the Left). The involvement with party politics has often created a problem of “double militancy” for the women concerned, and has been the subject of many debates among feminists in Italy.

In the past twenty years, philosophers and academics who have not necessarily identified with left-wing politics have also become prominent in the cultural landscape of Italian feminism. These feminists – who have sometimes been categorised as third-generation feminists – have developed understandings of their roles as feminist intellectuals that differ markedly from those held by feminist political activists. The latter have tended to be more concerned with practical work geared towards emancipatory legislation and the achievement of equal rights for women, whereas the former have been interested in theorising a politics of sexual difference based on the recognition of an essential difference between men and women. Such difference, as the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective notes, “is not one culturally constructed from biology and imposed as gender”, but rather “a difference in symbolization, a different production of reference and meaning out of a particular embodied knowledge.”

---

9 Feminism in Italy started as a strong emancipationist movement at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and grew again in the 1940s in conjunction with the anti-fascist resistance movement. A significant achievement at the time was the formation, soon after World War II, of the Unione Donne Italiane (Union of Italian women), known as UDI which brought together many of the women who had been active in the Resistance in a hybrid coalition of socialists and Roman Catholics. However, UDI came into being within the framework of the political left. See A. De Clementi, “The Feminist Movement in Italy” in G. Griffin and R. Braidotti (eds) Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women’s Studies (Zed Books) London, 2002, p. 333. See also P. Bono and S. Kemp, “Introduction: Coming from the South”, p. 10.
10 Bono and Kemp define “double militancy” as “the simultaneous participation/involvement in the feminist movement and in the activities of an organised party or political group.” This, according to Bono and Kemp, proved to be difficult because even the most leftist groups were ultimately not able to “understand the new consciousness women were developing” and were “hostile” to their “newly found determination to gain a full autonomy of expression” and to any separatist activity. Furthermore, many in the Italian Communist Party considered feminism a “bourgeois phenomenon.” See P. Bono and S. Kemp, “Introduction: Coming from the South”, p. 11.
As early as 1970, in her seminal book *Let’s Spit on Hegel*, Carla Lonzi argued in favour of a theory for sexual difference:

equality is a juridical principle…. Difference is an existential principle which concerns the modes of being human, the peculiarity of one’s own experiences, goals, possibilities, and one’s own sense of existence in a given situation and in the situations one wants to create for oneself. The difference between woman and man is the basic difference of humankind…Equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture.\(^{12}\)

Lonzi’s critical view of equality was further developed. In January 1983, a group of women called Group Number 4 (who were part of the Milan Women’s Bookshop) published the influential essay *Più donne che uomini* (More Women than Men) also known as the green *Sottosopra* (Upside down). In this essay, the authors argued that the struggle against discrimination should come secondary because the real problem for women lies in the fact that the specificity of being a woman remains excluded from social discourse, “like an irrelevant particular, which is significant only if the woman takes on the roles bound up with her anatomy.” Her difference is fundamental to her being, yet “a social role based on anatomy is not freedom, just as there is servitude in a social freedom paid for by the erasure of one’s sexed body” which is what equality entails.\(^{13}\)

According to Luisa Muraro, one of the most prominent proponents of the sexual difference theory today and a founding member of Diotima and prominent theorist of the Milan Women’s Bookshop, sexual equality is not a feminist goal because it encourages women to emulate models they should rather challenge or aim to change. Hence, Muraro asks:

[I]s it really necessary for us to accept the paradigm of equality or can we incorporate, in our discussion and in political reality, relations of difference and asymmetry that characterize life, without also opening the door to domination and hierarchy? In other words, can we go beyond the politics of rights?\(^{14}\)

This is, I believe, an important question if one takes feminism, of whatever kind, to be about “dismantling the master’s house”\(^{15}\) as opposed to asking that there be a bed for women in that house.

For Italian feminists who promote a theory of sexual difference, sexual difference is neither only biological ‘sex’, nor is it only ‘gender’ as it has been culturally created; it is the inscription of both of these in the symbolic domain. The aim is to create a discourse of signification and modification not only of the social but also of the symbolic order. For these feminists, the theoretical work necessary to achieve such an aim must be done “outside” the


\(^{13}\) The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, p. 114. The second part of the essay focuses on the disparity between women and proposes the much debated theoretical practice of *affidamento* (entrustment), defined by Mirna Cicioni as the “recognition of, and reliance on, differences in competence between women.” For a discussion of *Più donne che uomini* and the practice of *affidamento* see M. Cicioni, “‘Love and Respect, Together’: The Theory and Practice of Affidamento in Italian Feminism”, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 10, Summer 1989, pp. 71-83.


academy. This means that it aims to be a practical philosophy, since it is a theory entirely centred on la pratica del fare (the practice of doing). This “doing”, however, is not centred on legal and social action as in, for instance, the opening of women’s shelters, or campaigning for women’s rights and so on. It is an altogether different kind of “doing”. It is a philosophical doing.\(^\text{16}\)

The philosophical doing at the heart of the sexual difference theory requires a shift from the notion of emancipation to that of freedom. The free understanding of oneself and the world around oneself must necessarily be reconfigured and rethought beginning from one’s own gendered experience (as somebody who is either a man or a woman). This practice, called la pratica del partire da sè, beginning from oneself, implies taking oneself as a starting point.

According to one of the philosophers of Diotima, Chiara Zamboni, la pratica del partire da sè was a direct legacy of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Zamboni describes this practice as a necessity to reconstruct one’s past and to understand the feelings and contradictions we deal with ordinarily: “This is what we talk about: of a politics that is able to treasure and turn into treasure our lived experience and our desires.”\(^\text{17}\) This practice leads to a practical philosophy. According to Muraro, a practical philosophy is a philosophy of those who think through a modification of themselves.\(^\text{18}\)

Yet, this modification of oneself and one’s understanding of the world cannot happen in isolation. In the 1970s Italian women attempted to modify the symbolic order through la pratica dell’autocoscienza (the practice of consciousness raising). From that theoretical practice they moved to la pratica delle relazioni (the practice of relations).\(^\text{19}\) Muraro claims that this practice frees the women involved from the paradigm of equality and the politics of rights because it attempts to go beyond them. However, as Muraro explains, la pratica delle relazioni operates by valorizing the relationships that we already have or by activating new ones, and entrusting to the very dynamism of the relationships the most important problems that we have. It is necessary to know that relations are neither an external institution nor an instrument at our disposal. Relationships make us be who we are, we are the relationships, beginning with the maternal relationship, from which we get life and the word [in the sense of Logos], together.\(^\text{20}\)

This practice takes different forms depending on the individuals involved. Maria Luisa Boccia, one of the feminist intellectuals I interviewed in Rome, told me about her engagement in networks of relations and women’s groups whose practices are heavily indebted or directly linked to the practice of consciousness raising theorised by Lonzi.\(^\text{21}\) Boccia became involved

---

\(^\text{16}\) There are many feminists, however, who do not agree with the sexual difference theory and are much more interested in achieving legal and social equality with men. In this article, I am referring only to the sexual difference theorists; I would not want to convey the impression that they represent the only feminist theoretical perspective in Italy.


\(^\text{19}\) In discussing the theoretical practice of affidamento, which was a precursor to and later developed into that of relations, Mirna Cicioni accepts Liz Grosz’s definition of “theoretical practice” as “the intervention of theories within concrete practices, and the restructuring of theory by the imperatives of experience and practice. See M. Cicioni “‘Love and Respect, Together’: The Theory and Practice of Affidamento in Italian Feminism”, p. 81.


\(^\text{21}\) Maria Luisa Boccia is a Rome-based feminist deeply involved in the sexual difference theory. She teaches political philosophy at the University of Siena and has published numerous articles and books on topics ranging from in vitro fertilisation to the relationship between women and citizenship. Her publications are all informed
with the then Communist Party at the age of sixteen. Both her mother and maternal uncle (Pietro Ingrao) were communists. In 1973, together with other women from the Communist party she started a Marxist-feminist magazine, which was primarily concerned with “feminism of oppression”. Following the launch of the magazine, which was attended by feminists from Milan, one of these Milanese feminists wrote that she was disturbed by the fact that Boccia and her fellow editors viewed women as an ‘other’. This was the beginning of Boccia’s confusion, which led her to join consciousness-raising groups and eventually to become one of the important theorists and practitioners of the theory, that was to become known as the sexual difference theory. The point here is that she realised she had to view herself in relation to other women, as one of them and as a woman, as opposed to treating women as a general theme of discussion outside oneself. This entails a rethinking and a questioning of knowledge as she knew it. As Boccia said: “la presa di coscienza poteva e doveva modificare i saperi” (the act of becoming conscious could and ought to change knowledge).  

Boccia then took this practice to the Communist Party where she worked intermittently as a cadre until the mid 1990s. Since then, she has been building a network of relations with other women both within and outside the Communist Party and its successors. For instance, during the two years in which the Communist Party changed its name and history, Boccia was part of a group called “La libertà è nelle nostre mani” (Freedom is in our hands). These women who came together in order to reflect on the party’s change of direction. Their aim was to try to find the means to understand, and hence the words to explain, what was happening, taking themselves and their own experience (not the party’s) as the starting point for their reflections. As Boccia explains, “There was always a problem with authority. It does make a difference if you feel you are authorised to speak by men or if you appropriate the authority to speak yourself.” These women wanted to find the symbolic means to authorise themselves to speak from a position of sexual difference.

Since the war in Kosovo, Boccia has been part of Balena, meaning, “Whale.” This group meets regularly to debate, and then create a discourse on war that comes out of the group’s practice of relations. The work done in this group feeds into Boccia’s work as a public intellectual. In November 2002, she was invited to speak at the Social Forum in Florence. The theme was “Politics and the Common Good,” and she was invited as the feminist who had recently published a book entitled La differenza politica: donne e cittadinanza (Political Difference: Women and Citizenship). Boccia was faced with the task of addressing 3000 people and had only ten minutes to do so. She decided to talk about war and to offer a critique of the paradigm of a just and ethical war, which had become acceptable to many European leftist parties, and to suggest that the repudiation of war should be part of the Constitution of the European Union. In and of themselves these were not necessarily feminist issues, yet she approached them by discussing two issues which had been widely debated by feminists in Italy. One was the issue of conflict and the other that of identity.

According to Boccia and many other Italian feminists, politics as a whole rests on the distinction between war and conflict and, therefore, on the binary distinction between enemy and friend. By analysing their own relations which by necessity are also based on conflict, the theorists of sexual difference have developed an alternative model that deals with difference not as necessarily conducive to destructive conflict, but to conflict that leads to philosophical practice. On the issue of identity, Boccia insists that a united Europe could not be built on a

by the feminist theory of sexual difference.

principle of European identity, but ought to be built on an acceptance of difference. These key theoretical points are the basis of Italian feminist theory of sexual difference and Boccia’s story shows how this theory is not so much interested in issues as such, but rather in developing a theory of social-symbolic practice (as de Lauretis calls it in the title of her translation of the Milan Bookstore Collective’s *Non credere di avere dei diritti*).25

There are, of course, other ways to engage in *la pratica delle relazioni*, but most of the intellectuals I interviewed emphasised that whatever theoretical reflections they do are always the result of the work done in these relations. Each of the women can also be involved in more than one relationship. This means that the work done in one relationship can then be discussed by the same women in other contexts and other relationships. This is how Annarosa Buttarelli, a member of the philosophical community Diotima, engaged in relational work with many groups of women who met to think about the transformations linked to their workplaces. These women were usually members of unions or political parties, but met to discuss independently of their party or union affiliations, and to reflect on the changes happening in the workplace. Their aim was to try to find the means to understand and hence the words to explain the changes, taking themselves and their own experience as the starting point of their reflections. They invited Buttarelli to participate in their discussions because she had written about these issues. Buttarelli established a relationship with these women and in turn brought back to Diotima her experience and reflections born out of those relationships. All of the women involved in Diotima are also involved in this type of relationships. The practice is carried out in groups such as the ones mentioned, or in relationships between two women. It is primarily these relationships that inform Diotima’s philosophical theories. The theories that come from lived relationships in turn go back to feed other relationships in a system that is referred to as *una rete* (a net).

There are also important symbolic relationships that inspire the community, for instance the female religious communities created by the beguines who pioneered communal living arrangements unencumbered by male authority.26 These religious communities, known as beguinages, were instituted by women for women in many cities and towns mainly in the Low Countries from the thirteenth century, and provided single women of all ages with an opportunity to work as teachers or labourers while leading a religious life without taking solemn vows. They lived in small cottages, could leave the community at any time and never constituted a religious order.27 According to Walter Simons, until the nineteenth century the beguinages, which are still scattered throughout the Low Countries, were of interest only to “amateur historians and scholars of folklore”, and no “historian of more than local stature would venture into their archives because, after all, beguines were considered rather inconsequential women without history.”28

Diotima’s choice of the beguines as symbolic predecessors has not been accidental. The beguine movement was not created by a single individual, and was formed by “communities of like-minded women seeking a novel way of life, pursuing similar goals and connected by various individuals who moved between them.”29 The women worked as caretakers and nurses but also led a religious life of contemplation and prayers.30

---


26 A. Buttarelli, audiotaped interview, Verona, 26 November, 2002.


significantly, the beguinages were female creations that provided an alternative to social living. The beguines lived in separate small cottages but within a community and according to self-determined models of authority and autonomy. Similarly, Diotima strives to create a female-determined mode of interpersonal relationships with philosophy rather than religion as their common goal.\(^{31}\)

Chiara Zamboni (member of Diotima since the beginning) explains that Diotima itself exemplifies *la pratica delle relazioni*, since the community is based on the diverse relationships that its philosophers have engaged in for more than a decade. Their philosophical reflections emerge out of these relationships.\(^{32}\) The community’s reflections take place at designated times. Core members, as well as invited “guest-members”, meet monthly and organise weekend retreats twice a year in monasteries. The guest-members are women with whom the core members have relationships (about thirty women). The publications result in part from the work done on these occasions but mainly from what they call “the big seminar”. This consists of a series of seven or eight public lectures (in Verona) on a specific theme the community is working on. (Currently they are working on relations between women and men). The lectures are delivered by members of Diotima but also by invited guests. Lectures are always followed by a debate. The book, which usually comes out a year later, is the result of the debates as well as the lectures and the reflections of the community. Diotima’s philosophers always base their contribution to the book on reflections arising from the specific theme in question. Hundreds of people attend the big seminar each year, and the books sell well. But is it enough to call Diotima’s philosophers public intellectuals?

In recent studies, most commentators agree that the institution of the public intellectual is in decline.\(^{33}\) A public intellectual is generally assumed to be an individual (usually male) who writes or speaks on matters of political and cultural relevance, addressing a general, educated public. According to Richard Posner, the decline of such a figure is mainly due to two factors. One is the rapid growth of the media which has led to a proliferation of highly visible forums for discussion, and the second is the greater academic specialisation which has created scholars too narrowly trained to comment on more general matters they actually do not know very much about.\(^{34}\) In Posner’s words: “Compared with the commentary of earlier public intellectuals, most of whom were not academics and whose erudition and breadth of knowledge were well suited to public discourse, the quality of today’s punditry is degraded by narrow vision and the often instant demand for media-savvy ‘expertise’”. This is because, according to Posner, although “not all intellectuals are professors, most actually are. Today, then, the typical public intellectual is a safe specialist.”\(^{35}\) Of course, if one believes that the role of the public intellectual is that of critical commentator

\(^{31}\) A. Buttarelli, audiotaped interview, Verona, 26 November 2002.  
\(^{32}\) C. Zamboni, “Preface” in Diotima *La sapienza di partire da sé*, p. 3. The kinds of relationships that inform *la pratica delle relazioni* do not necessarily include one-to-one sexual/domestic relationships or friendships as such.  
\(^{34}\) Jeffrey Goldfarb makes a similar point arguing that “the close interaction” between the intellectual and his or her audience, as revealed in the case of Socrates or other classic intellectual writers such as Zola and Sartre, “is replaced by distanced industrial and post-industrial processes: mass communications, public relations, the mass media, the cultural industry.” See J. Goldfarb, *Civility & Subversion: The Intellectual in Democratic Society* (Cambridge University Press) Cambridge, 1998, p. 42. Judith Brett also argues that academics by and large fail to be public intellectuals. See J. Brett “The Bureaucratization of Writing” *Meanjin*, 50, Summer 1991, pp. 513-522.  
addressing a nonspecialist audience on matters of broad public concern, one may be inclined to agree with Posner.

In Australia, Paolo Bartoloni discusses the case of the journalist Phillip Adams, who may be seen as the epitome of a public intellectual insofar as he is invested “with creating a bridge between the public and the intellectual in order to transport culture and knowledge from a more sophisticated and refined constituency of our society to a less, but not for this, culturally disenfranchised one.”

In relation to such a definition of a public intellectual, Bartoloni asks questions to do with legitimation. “Who is it that invests them with this function? What kind of public legitimates their voices?” Within this model of public intellectual, these are the necessary questions to ask.

Many of the intellectuals involved in Diotima, as well as others who also practice the sexual difference theory, are public intellectuals in the meaning identified by Gramsci, as that of the parish priest, or the teacher in a small community. Or they are public intellectuals according to the definition provided by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his 1988 book, Acts of Resistance, which he himself describes as a public intellectual work, he defines as main characteristics of the intellectual the “freedom with respect to those in power, the critique of received ideas, the demolition of simplistic either-ors, respect for the complexity of problems.”

However, to some extent, a feminist public intellectual may be an impossibility because in a conventional sense, being a public intellectual requires an acting on, commenting, transmitting of reality done by the individual intellectual who has the ability to become an interpreter for others. Yet as the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero points out, “the expression political theory is something of an oxymoron” because the term ‘political’ comes from the Greek word polis which according to Hannah Arendt is “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together.”

Theory, on the other hand, in Cavarero’s definition, comes from the word theoria, which “in its Platonic declension that was subsequently passed on to the entire Western tradition, is a vision of true and universal objects or ideas with the eyes of the mind.” According to Arendt, this type of vision was considered by Greek philosophy to be the attitude that characterises the only truly free way of life, bios theoreticos, what in Latin is called vita contemplativa (contemplative life).

This is clearly distinguished from the bios politicos-in Latin vita activa (active live)–“which denoted explicitly only the realm of human affairs, stressing the action, praxis, needed to establish and sustain it.” This leads Cavarero to conclude: “The traits of theory and politics are therefore opposed to one another. Consisting in contemplative thought, the first entails a solitary thinker who withdraws from the world of human plurality to enjoy the vision of abstract and universal objects. The second is a shared and relational space generated by the words and deeds of a plurality of human beings.”

43 A. Cavarero “Politicizing Theory”, p. 506.
Feminist theory is a theory that takes, and indeed needs politics for its very existence and the feminist intellectuals I speak of are both public and political. They are political if politics does not only mean political parties and institutionalised political discourse, but on the contrary—following Cavarero’s definition—it is a shared and relational space generated by the words and deeds of a plurality of human beings. These intellectuals are also public if one thinks of the polis as Hannah Arendt did, as “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together”.

The space in which people act and speak together is the public space, intended not as one, but as one of many public spaces in which the acting and speaking together may happen. Here I make a distinction between public ‘space’ and Jurgen Habermas’s ‘sphere’. For Habermas the public sphere is where private people come together as a public. However, as Graziella Parati points out, since such private people “soon claimed the public sphere to engage [public authorities] in a debate over the general rules governing relations”, women remained excluded from this kind of political debate.

Nancy Fraser also identifies a further problem with the use of the expression “public sphere” within contemporary discourse and particularly contemporary feminisms. Fraser argues that the expression has often been used to refer to “everything that is outside the domestic or familial sphere. Thus ‘the public sphere’ in this usage conflates at least three analytically distinct things: the state, the official economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse.”

The definition of public in this context is a shared and relational space which is also closely linked to the concept of agora. Agora (a Greek term meaning an assembly, the place of assembly, the market place) is a place emblematic to public life to which is given a political validity without it being political in institutional terms. For Italian feminist intellectuals there is another agora—that which women have put into existence through their networks of relationships. This agora is akin to Cavarero’s conceptualisation of the “locality” intended as a “place”, “without any homogenous or territorial substance. It is precisely this relational space that Hannah Arendt calls politics.” Politics for some Italian feminists means la politica delle donne (women’s politics) made of la pratica delle relazioni, which in turn is made public by the networks of relationships.

The type of public space constituted by la pratica delle relazioni provides the legitimacy Bartoloni questions when he asks” who is it that invests . . . [public intellectuals] with this function? What kind of public legitimates their voices?” For these are also questions asked by the sexual difference theorists. For them, however, the focus ought to be not so much on legitimacy as on authority. Indeed, central to the practice of relations has been a reflection on the authority that is bestowed on the feminist intellectual by the people or public with whom she is in a relationship. Starting from the assumption that relationships between people are not equal, feminists focus on developing a theory that would take that inequality as the point of departure for a philosophical reflection on authority. The feminist

---

45 Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, p. 27.
48 Luisa Muraro suggested the idea of the agora to me. She attributes this idea to the feminist lawyer and influential member of the Milan’s Women Bookstore Collective, Lia Cigarini, with whom Muraro is in relation and to whom she “has a symbolic debt.” L. Muraro, audiotaped interview, Milan, 28 November 2002.
intellectual is granted such authority by the person with whom she forms a relationship, but she does not assume that authority a priori. This understanding of authority is markedly different from power, particularly institutional power.

In her essay “What is Authority?”, Hannah Arendt argues that “authority has vanished from the modern world.” She refers to is not so much “authority in general,” but rather a very specific form closely linked to tradition and religion. In *Oltre l’uguaglianza* (Beyond Equality), Diotima theorises a fundamental distinction between authority and power. Taking as a starting point the work previously done by Hannah Arendt, Diotima’s work amounted to a radical re-signification of the concept of authority, distinguished also from authoritarianism and hierarchy. Diotima first analysed the historical and philological roots of the word authority, and then, more significantly, focused on the different ways in which the concept of authority worked when placed in the context of the mother–daughter relationship as distinguished from the framework of paternal authority. They suggest that a freer understanding of authority could come by focusing on the authority of the mother, and the maternal language in symbolic terms.

This recognition of what Diotima’s philosophers call “the symbolic order of the mother” has also allowed some of them to recognise, and therefore bestow authority, onto the words of other women who could speak of what was previously unspoken. As Zamboni points out, one needs only to think of the suffering inherent in the typically difficult relationship between mother and daughter as experienced by women in a male-dominated society lacking in symbolic figures who could validate such a relationship. For Zamboni, those women who tried to and were able to give to the mother–daughter relationship meaning in symbolic terms received recognition from other women. Zamboni explains that the political means by which the richness of these women’s insights can be made available to others should not be through relationships akin to sisterhood but rather through a relationship that is informed by the authority one woman bestows onto another. Zamboni thus defines authority as a bridge, a mediation. Authority comes from the recognition of a disparity between the people involved in the relationship and out of this recognition comes the re-signification of the concept of authority. The beguines are important in this context in that they are seen as symbolic figures that can validate Diotima’s own attempt at reconfiguring notions of community and relations.

Hence, my definition of these feminists as public intellectuals, intending that they are public not only because they interact with and operate in public institutions such as the school or the university, the literary or academic journals, publishers and so on, but that they are public in so far as they operate within an agora (or public space) of their making. This public space provides them with the legitimising authority that does not derive from institutional power. This space is both created through their *pratica delle relazioni* and is also the space in which they publicly practice their relational politics, otherwise called *la politica delle donne*.

---

53 See Chiara Zamboni’s introduction to *Oltre l’uguaglianza*, 1-3. Lucia Re points out that although Diotima owes much to Arendt’s thought, the community is also critical of Arendt’s insistence on “thinking by oneself” and her need for autonomy which run counter to the “need for maternal mediation and for inter-relational, rather than autonomous, reflection” that Re considers to be Diotima’s firm belief. Re also adds that for Diotima “Arendt’s thought is limited by its not having placed sexual difference at the center of the question of authority.” See L. Re “Diotima’s Dilemma: Authorship, Authority, Authoritarianism”, p. 63.
(women’s politics). This radical reinterpretation of “women’s politics” is what distinguishes Italian feminism informed by the theory of sexual difference.