

Chiara Zamboni

## Diotima: an outline

After briefly retracing the story of Diotima, I will present the publications that have accompanied our philosophical studies over the years.

In 1983, Luisa Muraro asked for a group discussion on a political pamphlet that had just come out by the Women's Bookshop in Milan, entitled "*More Women Than Men*". We met in the home of Annamaria Piussi, who then lived in Via della Fontana del Ferro in Verona, to talk about it. The group continued to meet regularly for at least a year and took its name from the street where Annamaria lived. Then we realised something that ended up changing the group's direction. Almost all of us involved in the discussions came from a philosophy background and so philosophy kept coming up in the concepts we employed, the way we structured our arguments and our references. This repetition was too persistent for us to ignore, and so our attention, which until then had been focussed only on issues surrounding women's politics, began to shift. The women who took part in the discussions loved philosophy and at the same time felt keenly the lack of importance that being a woman entails in philosophical discourse, in its codes and the concepts passed down through the centuries by the male tradition. The invention of Diotima, which gave us a new beginning, arose from the desire to unite our love for philosophy with loyalty to our womanhood, which needed to find a way of being expressed through discourse itself.

So in 1984, Diotima was formed. It was and still is composed in part of university lecturers, in part of philosophy and literature teachers, and in part of women who have other careers but who love philosophical debate. In any case we conceived it as a group that was part of the university in Verona, so we moved our meeting place from Annamaria's home to the university's meeting rooms. This was a symbolic gesture for us. We wanted to show that using a private house continued the old separatism, which had marked (and in many ways had good reason to) the feminism of the 1970s, but which by the 80s had basically ended. With Diotima, did we want to signal the inclusion of women in institutions? Absolutely not. Rather, we wanted to create the contradiction of a thinking and autonomous female presence within the institutions and see what would happen in terms of changes to the institution itself.

Practising philosophy whilst staying loyal to one's womanhood is a matter of inventing lines of thought and at the same time creating praxes, because a revolution in thought does not only happen because somebody identifies concepts, structures for discourse and guiding topics, but also because somebody creates the contexts that allow for a wealth of unforeseeable exchanges within the usual contexts. In this light, the choice to bring to the fore the issue of sexual difference as something to simultaneously discover and produce and something examined by women was as important as coming up with innovative philosophical praxes.

Taking our chosen topic as a starting point, our journey took us to Diotima's first publication: *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (*The Philosophy of Sexual Difference*), published by Laura Lepetit's publishing house La Tartaruga. It was published for the first time in 1987, then in 2003 the same publishing house printed a second edition. The book was about considering sexual difference as the orientation of a thought experienced especially by women. A passion for sexual difference was and is something that pushes women to become subjects of philosophical discourse. It attracts independent thought and at the same time cause real suffering, because in the sexual division of symbolic roles women have found themselves restricted and uncomfortable and have expressed their suffering in many ways. In this book, we used this as a springboard for the construction of a discourse on being human and on the world. There is no symmetry between women and men when you talk about sexual difference. In many ways, the majority of men benefits from this sexual division of symbolic roles. They do not suffer because of it. They do not feel the need to discuss it.

The practices introduced into our philosophical community were equally important. For example, the fact that we reasoned and debated orally, in the presence of others, believed in the worth of what each speaker was saying, and excluded the philosophers (both male and female) that we had read and that formed our educational backgrounds.

This emphasised the importance that oral philosophy came to have alongside its written counterpart. The model for our oral philosophy came from feminist practices, which were mostly oral.

All this has created a fabric of female thought over the years, with its own way of progressing and its own style. Our female philosophy developed through practising it, intertwining with the topics we broached as we went along, but without being tied down by the topics. In other words, we have gradually created a form of philosophical process that goes hand in hand with the content of the idea. Moreover, we have been very careful to develop both aspects, because both are highly symbolic.

Over the years, at the same time as developing our philosophy, we have also wanted to present our line of study to an audience made up mainly of women, but also of men aware of the issues. Every autumn we hold our Great Diotima Seminar at the University of Verona. The name basically chose itself, because it is attended by a great number of women and it is held in one of the grand halls of the university. It is a way of confirming our studies, given that we place a lot of importance on the debate that emerges around a number of issues and that gives us a way to measure what we are thinking. That is why this annual meeting is essential for us. It is there that we have presented the different themes that later developed into our books. In some ways, the books tell the story of how our community has developed from the 80s to today. In 1990 we published *Mettere al mondo il mondo (Bringing the World into the World)* also with La Tartaruga in Milan. In this book we wanted to say that women's exit from the political separatism that had marked feminism meant that women now had the possibility to open the world up to its truth, without descending into a discourse only on women but bringing to bear their knowledge as a way of measuring social relationships and creating a new civilisation.

In 1992 we published *Il cielo stellato dentro di noi (The Starry Sky Within Us)*, which took up Luisa Muraro's idea from *L'ordine simbolico della madre (The Symbolic Order of the Mother)* of a fabric that is gradually woven by civilisation when we take our bond with our mother as the beginning of our personal journey. And it is this theme that we examine again in our latest book, which is being published and will come out in 2007 with the Liguori publishing house in Naples. The title of the new book is significant in itself: *L'ombra della madre (The Shadow of our Mothers)*. It suggests that if the mother is the beginning of civilisation, then it is a beginning full of darkness, ambiguity, fear of the mother's omnipotence, mostly female conflicts and male repression: a confused mass of fantasy and phantoms that we need to recognise if we want the idea of the mother as starting point to have political weight. We also argue that the shadow of our mothers persists not only in our lives but in the very process that governs politics in the western world.

In 1995, *Oltre l'uguaglianza. Le radici femminili dell'autorità (Beyond Equality: The Female Roots of Authority – Liguori)* came out. This is an essential book on the theme of authority, rescuing the concept from the twentieth-century tradition that filled it with negative connotations linked to force and authoritarianism. The idea is to set it in antithesis to power, thus opening a breach in the wall that is today the only way of interpreting politics and therefore power. The experiences recounted in the book relate to women, but there is also a lot more.

*La sapienza di partire da sé (The Wisdom of Starting from Self - Liguori 1996)*, talks about crossing over subjectivity as the main path to finding links with the world that go beyond mere subjectivity and that function as a sounding line and a way of orienting oneself in the world. The subjective female inclination to talk about oneself releases its political potential when we manage to grasp the impersonal elements inherent to the narration itself.

*Il profumo della maestra (The Scent of the Schoolteacher – Liguori 1999)* gives importance to female knowledge based on experience and examines the conflict between knowledge deriving

from experience and knowledge deriving from education, a kind of knowledge that can become technical; a procedure for controlling reality.

*Approfittare dell'assenza* (*The Advantages of Absence* – Liguori 2002) takes on the issue of history. Women have not always been present in history. They are not its protagonists at all, whereas we can easily see men's presence in history. The book suggests taking this as a symptom of another way of being in relation to history: there, but veiled. Visible and invisible, where invisibility creates a different way of being there. In this way, we avoid the anxiety that comes from wanting desperately to appear in the history written by men. *La magica forza del negativo* (*The Magical Power of the Negative* – Liguori 2005) centres around the idea of ambiguity as the place where more definite positions are formed. Ambiguity is like a crucible full of elements that are yet to be defined, which it is best to return to so that the negativity in our lives and in changes to reality does not end badly but becomes a vivifying element when mixed with all the others. Finally, the already mentioned *L'ombra della madre* (*The Shadow of our Mothers* – Liguori 2007) shows how the daughter's relationship with her mother is not only made up of a positive, sunny side arising from the trust in a positive exchange and in the possibility of repaying that trust in the form of a publicly tapped political force, but also of a dark side. This shadowy dimension is formed by a sense of continuity with the mother made up of ghosts, feelings of omnipotence, fear of dependency and desire for sisterhood. The book investigates whether it is possible to also use this dark side as a springboard towards a greater presence in the public sphere.

Diotima also has a website: [www.diotimafilosofe.it](http://www.diotimafilosofe.it), which also includes the journal *Per amore del mondo* (For Love of the World); its editor is Diana Sartori.