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New femininities or identity and differences again

In speaking of femininities in the plural I'm referring to the impossibility of offering a characterisation of women that doesn't imply a normative identity or an essentialist definition of the feminine. Also, I intend to take into consideration the new situations brought about by the changes of the last two decades. Changes that generate perplexity and allows us to rethink the concepts we used to analyse the relationships between the sexes; changes such as the ones concerning the concept of family, especially now with the new reproduction techniques or the new adoption laws; changes in the new forms of subjectivity that erase borders and sexual positions; changes in our industrialised societies, in which, deriving from the migration waves, dischronical models of femininity and family coexists; changes emerging as a result of the progressive institutionalisation – whether in the university or in representative politics- of feminism. In fact, I do not aspire to enter into these questions, which I believe are very complex and immediately require serious attention, rather, I will only consider some concepts of the conceptual network we use to speak about women issues. Concepts such as identity, difference, subjectivity and memory.

I'd like to begin with the words of Elisabeth Roudinesco in her book *The family in disorder*¹: “what worries the conservatives of all strands is no longer the contestation of the family model but, on the contrary, the willingness to surrender to it” (p. 11). In fact, there is apparently a surprisingly widespread element in the abovementioned changes, namely the great desire for normality present in all of them. A desire that brings a proliferation of new discourses and rules which will constitute the social order given for future subjectivities and their understanding in relation to the difference of sexes.

Never as in the last 150 years has sex been so carefully studied, measured, investigated, exposed, to the extent that, since the emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century, subjects have had to understand **sexuality** as one of the defining elements of their identity. A subject is always a product of the social order that organises the experiences of a human being in a moment of history, through rules, orders, norms, etc. Being a subject and being subordinated to a system of impediments and discourses is actually the same thing. And this is even more apparent in the case of subjects that have been assigned an inferior place by the social and sexual order - that is, the case of women.

When I speak of *the given* I'm referring to all that is in me but that could not have been made by me, to that in which my initiative hasn't intervened. I don't believe at this point the question of whether *the given* is something natural or culturally constructed is crucial, since nobody chooses to be born as a man or a woman, but we all receive at birth something contingent and not elected. With this I mean that in considering femininity as something given I am not pointing to a particular species of human beings, but to a **political present**, a specific configuration of the world that has nothing to do with natural or biological determination. Every life begins in a definite moment of time, a particular place and in a particular community with certain physical and psychological characteristics. This beginning is not voluntary; we do not choose to be born in a period or in a body with certain characteristics subject to positive or negative evaluation. To be born means entering a world of relationships, discourses and rules that we haven't chosen and that in a certain way

¹ Roudinesco, Elisabeth, *La familia en desorden*, Barcelona, Anagrama 2004.

constitute us². What is given to us is not an undistinguishable reality but a broad distribution of differences –woman, Moroccan, etc.- that intertwine in each of us. However, this *given* that is imposed in each of us doesn't confer, by itself, any singularity.

I can further clarify what I'm saying with some well-known words from Hannah Arendt in a 1964 interview: "If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man, or whatever"³. With these words she didn't intend to provide some sort of formula of what would be implied in the act of defending oneself as a Jew –or as a woman, I must add-; she was pointing out that such an attack reduces the person under attack to what has been given to her and that she is denied the specifically human freedom of action; from this moment on, all of her actions can only be explained as "necessary" consequences of certain "jewish" or feminine qualities; the person has simply turned into a member of the human species as animals belong to certain animal species. The person has lost a place in the world that makes the opinions significant and the action effective. The person has become superfluous –in this case she can be replaced by another woman or another jew- and has been converted into something innocent, since her actions are always considered to be the necessary result of the natural, psychological conditions given and not chosen, and which are thought of as shameful. In this way, the prize of absolute innocence in our time is not to have a place in the world, the impossibility to singularise or distinguish oneself and be free.

It is precisely in regards to what has been given to us that we speak of identity and difference. The given, for example, renders us similar to other women with which we share the female identity, just as it makes us different from men.

Of course, there are several possible attitudes towards what has been given us and what we haven't done. One of them is denying it, since in our time the given-woman has undervalued connotations. This has led some women to choose to conceive of themselves as akin to bodiless beings assimilating the dominant discourse, thus rendering feminine as either lacking or excessive. The other is to feel grateful for the gift of femaleness or of any other difference, and to accept it as one's own, re-presenting it, bringing it into play through words and actions, and in the presence of others to discover who we are and distinguish ourselves.

From these two attitudes, the denial of the gift has a high prize, at least for women, since we live in a world where supposedly sexual difference is not relevant. And because we know that it is not possible to assimilate oneself partly to a discourse, we cannot assimilate ourselves to the prevailing masculine values without accepting at the same time as one's own the misogyny and the demeaning image of the feminine that these values imply. The other, on the contrary, allows us to discover the rising of a singular subjectivity through an initiative taken into what's been given to me, so that each singular person is made out to be an ever-unique modulation - and not an abolition- of differences that are shared in common with others. In other words, each action and each word drag with them some burden of flesh. And so, the question is never what the effect is of being born a woman, but how certain women live their lives, how they develop themselves in the world scene.

According to this, we mustn't understand individual biographies as being determined by a certain period or by the given; we must take them as illuminating. We frequently know about the given and about what we have in common through replies made to this given. This is why there is no woman but women, because subjectivity is always a way of being and not being at the same time; subjectivity is always a narration and never the revelation of an essence.

² According to Martine Leibovici, *Hannah Arendt una juive*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1998.

³ Gauss, Günter, "Què en resta? En resta la llengua materna" Entrevista amb Hannah Arendt", *L'Espill*, number 3, 1999, p. 104.

This may be the reason why women in recent decades have been working to recover memory and to rescue women from the past. It hasn't only been search to amend an historical injustice, the oblivion and non-transmission of women works and their exclusion from chronology, but it has also been, in large part, an attempt to understand what our *given* is, our legacy, and to re-present it, as I said before, and with this gesture to discover its radical heterogeneity. In every heritage there is something irreducible: we always inherit a secret we must decipher. This secret might be what some feminists have called "difference".

Bringing difference into play entails the possibility of singularising and of finding diverse forms of femininity in a common space. Arendt (*Human Condition*) uses the metaphor of people sitting around a table, and I think this illustrates well what I'm suggesting: the "table is located between those who sit around it; and, like every in-between, relates and separates us at the same time". Certainly, we can emphasize what unites them or what separates them, but without the table, without a place where we can singularise ourselves, we are crowded together one against another in a single model of femaleness and reduced to the *given*.

(translated by Anna Gallardo & Patrick Boner)