

Fina Birulés

Difference, Freedom, and Violence. Women and politics

Despite the subtitle of my paper, “Women and politics”, all the issues I’ll refer to are somehow more related to thinking rather than to action. In fact, I teach philosophy, and philosophy is a conceptual knowledge not oriented towards solving problems. Philosophy tends to put in question, to problematise, whatever seems to work fine. One could say that we turn to philosophy to make things a bit more complicated to deal with: thinking implies stopping where we’d have the temptation to rush. For it is true that, the moment we start thinking on no matter what issue, we stop everything else. Maybe the purpose of thinking is indeed to take us away from the safe ground of daily life and all specialised knowledge. Being so, it can hardly provide clear indications for action. And this is precisely because, in thinking, one –not necessarily a professional thinker, we all have the capacity- aspires to defer time, to stop and reflect.

Philosophy has something to do with finding a space from where to tell what is lacking in our life, what we miss, what we want, what meaning do we ascribe to what happens to us or to what we do. And this space or moments of reflection are only possible when we are not under the pressure of urgent needs or the noisy social life where too many things keep us from thinking. It is only in this space, far from the clamour and hurries, in these moments of time interruption, where questions emerge, questions that generate perplexity and do not always have an unequivocal answer.

However, if by thinking we were aspiring only to find definitive answers or useful indications, this would simply imply that we wouldn’t really be moved by the desire to think but by the aim of getting results that would make unnecessary the continuation of thinking.

I

While preparing my speech for today with the title “Difference, Freedom, and Violence”, I would like to recall¹ what Olympe de Gouges, the author of the *1791 Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen*, wrote about her fear of seeing how her ideas could be condemned as words by, as she puts it, “a woman who has only paradoxes to offer and not problems easy to be solved”.²

What is a paradox? Literally, it is an opinion that challenges the common opinion, the *orthodoxy*. But the dictionary includes other meanings as well: the one identifying it as a reasoning that carries out two contradictory conclusions and another one, which is the one I wish to underline today, understands paradox as a rhetorical figure to which an accepted enunciation appears absurdly or in a contradictory manner. In this sense, to be slow in a paradox can be a sign of our willingness to pay attention to the complexity of the scene. Even more, we can say that it is an indicator of our capacity or our wish to destabilise in a creative way what is

¹ From a reading of a work by historian Joan W. Scott who uses Gouges’ words in the title (*Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge, Mss., Harvard University Press 1996).

² De Gouges, Olympe, *Le bonheur primitif de l’homme*, Paris 1788, p. 23.

given to us.

In a great manner, the subversive power and the historical significance of the feminist struggles have been, among others, placing the paradoxes' disturbing effects in a central place. As an example, we can think of the claiming of the *universality of rights* that, despite the name, has been excluding at least one half of humanity for centuries. Another example is the use of the concept of Man, which pretends to be neutral but has only masculine characteristics. In other words, it is a concept at the same time paradoxically abstract and terribly concrete.

But feminism is also aware of the paradoxes that have emerged and are still emerging from its own struggles and conquers. One must only recall the feminists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: they refused to be women in the terms their society dictated and they wished to participate in a public space where sexual difference was an irrelevant factor. However, these same feminists needed to speak in the name of those women in their political vindications. So this need to invoke a subject –women- produced a sexual difference and, at the same time, decreased the attempt of considering it irrelevant for the political purposes.³ We can therefore consider that one of the paradoxes of the feminist political speech is that it seems to produce the same difference that it seeks to question.

I believe that thinking about this paradox allows us to realise two main aspects about the topic we're dealing with today, women and politics:

First, it allows us to realise that the women emancipation movement has aspired and aspires to harmonise two movements of the modern democracy which haven't always come to terms: the universality of human rights and the duality of sexes, present all along the nineteenth century utopian tradition; to put it in other words: we seek to conquer the universal in the name of the first human difference, the sexual difference... The political vindication of parity seeks the *one* without destroying the *two*; the aim is to achieve unity without destroying sexual duality.⁴ In forgetting this scenic complexity, so to call it, we're made to think that the assumption of the female freedom is synonymous to equality of rights; as if all the important truths about what's right and what's wrong could only be formulated in the only language we know. This would be the language of the rights that can be granted to all, despite not being ensured for all human beings. This is why female freedom has sometimes been understood as given automatically once all these rights have been conceded. This would also explain why the female difference has been considered an empty concept and thus used in an electoral or propagandistic manner- I'm referring to the fact that, through apparently defending it, it is actually used for very heterogenic purposes. As a close example, we can think of the use of the afghan women situation in order to justify partially a military intervention.

Since the eighties, the politics of women have made evident the limits of this conception, a conception that ties together equality of rights with political freedom. In my distinction between equality of rights and political freedom it is useful to recall the former Soviet Union, where the emancipation of the lower classes and the accomplishment of equality goals did not come with political freedom. The emancipation of women, that is, the fact that we have reached the condition of subjects of rights, doesn't imply and has never implied female freedom.

This is the reason why the feminist debate has concentrated not only on equality, but also on freedom, that is, on difference. And in doing so, it takes the paradox seriously and gives rise

³ SCOTT, Joan W., p. 11-13.

⁴ FRAISSE, Geneviève, "Entre égalité et liberté", *La Place des Femmes*, Paris, La Découverte 1995 "Entre igualdad y libertad" (spanish translation in *La controversia de los sexos*, Madrid, Minerva Ediciones 2002).

to a second main question regarding the present subject: **the difficulty of giving a definition of woman**. Is a characterisation of women possible that doesn't imply a normative identity, that doesn't exclude? Women are diverse and we see ourselves in very different manners; we all have different wishes. Short-listing only, we find the heterosexuals, the lesbians; some belong to a generation that didn't have to fight for the right to vote or to access higher education, while others lived in difficult times or in cultural traditions that include men-women or women-women relationships that are strange to us; some prioritize motherhood while others do not consider that the so-called maternal instinct or the care of others play any role in their identity, which –by the way- almost always falls on female shoulders. But we can say none of them, whether feminist or not, whether politically on the right or on the left, whether being docile or being critic with the rules of the institutional debate, or whether indifferent towards the political conflict, is willing to give up equality –what we could call “the right to have rights”, that is, paid work, legal personality and education-. And at the same time we can say they are neither willing to give up freedom: I mean to control and enjoy the one's own body and to decide the one's own displacements or movements.

We, the women with rights, also want freedom. As an indication that still remains a lot to be done to be able to speak about female freedom in the public context, there still persist those endless parliamentary debates on questions such as contraception or the diverse law projects to “regulate” the right to abortion. In those debates, there is never lacking a long list of “advisors” of all kinds –on physical, mental or social health- who are supposed to intervene to “guarantee” women's “free” choice.

Actually, it has been a long time since women stopped considering it necessary to “give wings to the flight of complaint”⁵ and we practice forms of political intervention that go beyond the politics of equality. Today we know that politics must be immodest towards the modesty obliged by the consensual logics of perpetuating the present status.

And this is so because one of the characteristics of the public space is that we do not get along well together every time we dialogue or talk. In order to explain what I'm suggesting, I will use a term that the French philosopher Jacques Rancière⁶ has called *disagreement*. The disagreement refers to a kind of speech situation, in which one of the participants understands and at the same time does not understand what the other participant is saying. As an example, the paradox I mentioned above has a few different forms of presenting itself: when women are presented as not being different at all, they become spare and superfluous, whereas if they are presented as different this difference sooner or later plays against them and makes them inferior⁷. Contrary to ignorance, the disagreement doesn't disappear with a mere amount of knowledge or with a greater amount of preciseness in the words used on the debate. Disagreement cannot be reduced to mere misunderstanding, nor to misconstruction; the disagreement cases are those in which the participants do and do not at the same time understand the same thing in the same words.

This way, when women speak of political freedom, institutional politics usually considers the woman question just another social one.⁸ Actually, there are already a few open fronts against considering all questions related to women as merely a social care issue. Obviously,

⁵ MARÇAL, Maria-Mercè, *Sota el signe del drac*, (IBARZ, Mercè ed.) Barcelona, Proa 2004 (printing).

⁶ RANCIÈRE, Jacques, *La mésentente. Politique et philosophie*, Paris, Galilès, 1995 (spanish translation in Eds. Nueva Visión, Buenos Aires 1996).

⁷ MARÇAL, Maria-Mercè, *Op. cit.*

⁸ DOMINJANNI, Ida, “El sentido de la libertad femenina” (Fempres: *Feminismos de fin de siglo*, Santiago de Chile, 1999).

there are many women needing the help and assistance of the social services programs, but this doesn't imply [that the only political actions related to the female question must be reduced to solving financial problems], or as [if the female question could only be read in terms of lacking].

To be more precise, men do not ignore the inequality situation - they know that women continue to work much harder than them in the home tasks and in the care of others, and that they continue to have lower salaries, etc., and they also don't ignore what's behind domestic violence. They do not ignore the situation –even they know that we know they know.⁹

However, it is also true that men and women do not pre-exist to this situation –which, as I have said, is not one of mere exchange of ideas- but are a product of it. They are both formed in the context of this disagreement, as can be appreciated by the fact that many women reproduce the dominant practices and discourses. This is the reason why I have been referring to the need to get away from the naïve (na-i-ve) trust that the resolution of a violent or unjust situation can come without any sort of conflict, and that women's policies must be brave and creative in order to modify this situation of *disagreement*, which does not change with a mere exchange of ideas or with just some extra information.

II

There are some words that were written in 1951 by a German-born Jewish political theorist who knew that politics isn't reduced to representative politics or to those obliged by the consensual logics of the present status, and which are representative of what I'm trying to suggest. Hannah Arendt wrote: "No doubt, wherever public life and its law of equality is completely victorious, wherever a civilization succeeds in eliminating or reducing to a minimum the dark background of difference, it will end completely petrified".¹⁰

These words suggest that freedom must not be confused with equality; which is the same as remembering that the possibility of a shared public life is not identical to a homogenous citizenship. It is in consideration of this point that the turn we, women, have made since the late seventies makes sense; we have come to speak of a female literature or of a female experience, to designate the literature that explores or has explored those moral zones silenced by the dominant culture. This gesture is no longer reduced to a merely listing of the damages, but more the result of a need to enlarge "the seams of our moral universe"¹¹ and of our own identities, or else is the result of the desire of trying "to plumb abysses which are generally agreed not to exist",¹² the result of an immodest policy.

Arendt's words resound also when we proclaim that we must not only defend ourselves but also reaffirm ourselves as a creative force – we must be fierce to become what we are instead of obstinate to discover it. We must "not remain outside the field of vision"; we must tell our own experience. And, in order to do so, an imaginative movement to hear oneself as the spokesperson of a merely possible community, rather than as a lonely expatriate has been necessary. Speaking of community, it must not be understood as a homogeneous female group but as spaces, networks, of relationships with different intensities and qualities where it is

⁹ COHEN-HALIMI, Michèle & BOSSIÈRE, Anne, "Mais qu'est-ce qu'elles veulent encore?" (foreword for the dossier "L'avenir politique du féminisme. Le cas français"), *Cités*, Paris, 2002, n° 9.

¹⁰ ARENDT, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace&Co. New York, p.297.

¹¹ STOUT, Jeffrey, *Ethics after Babel*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1988, p. 159.

¹² FRYE, Marilyn, *Politics of Reality*, Freedom (California), The Crossing Press, 1983.

possible to articulate and show the conflicts, to put them in words and name them.

An example of heterogeneous community can be found in some words of Montserrat Roig wrote on occasion of Maria Aurèlia Capmany's death. Roig says: "She was to me the earth and the craving to fly at the same time" in an article with the significant title *We argued so much*.¹³ So, even being aware of the complexity of the gesture, we can speak of "creating a female culture" in the context of art, of narration, of poetry, cinema or philosophy, without making it a simple and immediate translation of a supposedly homogeneous femaleness.

And that Hannah Arendt's political need of not reducing to the minimum the dark background of difference also comes out when we underline the fact that it is not a question of adding an appendix of women history to the ordinary *history*. It comes out as well in the fact that we've stopped defining female identity in terms of its oppression; and this has made possible the emergence of unstable, flowing subjectivities, doted of diverse qualities. This is the result of being aware that if we characterize our own identity as oppressed, we favour only one kind of relationship: between those who exclude and those who are excluded; and there is only one possibility of liberation: that those who exclude –in other words, men without qualities– stop doing so... that would imply accepting to be in a ghetto! Instead of winning any sort of freedom or independence we would permanently feel absent and dependent on the prevailing discourse.

It has been a long time since we have known that what matters is escaping this dialectics of acceptance and refusal, and for this reason we've bet more or less successfully on the elaboration of a speech and some practices that do not allow the confoundment of equality of rights with freedom, and that do not allow the assimilation of emancipation from the domination of other with the issue of women freedom. Even clearer: none of us still believes that the horizon holds a radiant tomorrow where there will be no difference between men and women, where compulsory heterosexuality and misogyny will have disappeared; to put it this way would imply a certain tendency to our own self-erasure.

III

As I have been saying, political freedom and equality of rights are not synonymous. Moreover, it is precisely because of their difference that the freedom of women is denied. How, if not, can we explain the persistence of violence against the woman body in societies where equal rights have practically been won? How to understand, for example, the clearly planned raping and violence against women in certain periods of wars such as that of Former Yugoslavia or Algeria? Such questions seem to indicate that to conquer feminine freedom is not enough to obtain equality. As Fraisse correctly pointed out, our battle is not only for equality, but also and fundamentally for freedom.

The problem of the violence against women is a painful proof of what I'm saying. And it's not enough to reduce it to the need of small changes in the legislation or to underline the necessity to deepen children's education in respecting the rights and values recognised in our society.

I'm referring to the fact that, after each new case of mistreatment, there is a considerable lack of analysis of what has happened, that comes simultaneously with a gesture of non-

¹³ ROIG, Montserrat, "Ens haviem barallat tant!" (4-X-91) in *Un pensament de sal, un pessic de pebre. Dietari obert 1990-91*, Eds. 62, Barcelona 1993, p. 422.

acceptance of responsibilities. All regards are put on solutions that seek to add new laws to a criminal code that faces the facts once they've occurred, or to question the effectiveness of the education system or the necessary civic and democratic content that should be transmitted in education, without even suspecting that perhaps the phenomenon of violence against the women's bodies has a greater depth.

These options, so to call them, (small changes in the criminal code or strengthening of the civic and democratic contents in school) seem to take into account merely two possible routes; the first one, to punish what has already happened, as if we knew of no way to avoid it; and the second one, to admit that we, the adults, cannot face the problems of our world, so we transmit the responsibility as a poisoned heritage to the next generation. As if it were still legitimate to leave it all for the radiant future of Humanity, in order to avoid the task of questioning what we do, the place we occupy or who we are, procrastinating everything perpetually and letting our sons and daughters assume responsibility for everything. Maybe this gesture has something to do with that common attitude adopted by many men¹⁴ for generations who, when in the public and social sphere, seem to seek the emancipation and the female freedom of their daughters only and not that of their spouses or partners, that might transform their own lives and the posts they occupy or the tasks of which they're in charge.

Possibly, the phenomenon of violence against women's bodies has something to do with the abovementioned paradoxes, and it goes beyond the result of mere discrimination, mere failures in equality, of chronic imperfections, of exceptions, of permanent traps of the democratic universal. And maybe here we can discern some of the axis of the *disagreement* that runs across the contemporary political arena.

When we speak of attempts against female freedom or of its loss, we're not referring to discrimination, that is, of inequality, but of violence, of true attempts to keep physical and social control over women's bodies and their movements.

Discrimination, in any case, strives against the principle of equality, founded on the identity or resemblance of human beings; violence, on the contrary, strives against the principle of freedom, assumed in the name of the difference of sexes, of humane diversity.

Stated more strongly: freedom is like a perpetual reminder of the fragility of the conquests of equality.¹⁵

In sum and to finish, equality has to do with our status as subjects of rights, as citizens; but, as women haven't ceased to remember, equality does not exhaust the political field:

¹⁴ These words are not intended to blame the masculine community; we've known for a long time that when everyone is guilty no one is to blame. The guilt, the moral or legal responsibility, is personal: concrete individuals are in actuality responsible for the violence against women. But we must keep in mind –as Hannah Arendt reminded- that guilt and political responsibility are not synonymous; the first one is tied to the action and the "self", while the second places emphasis on the world, since every individual is a member of a community or of a group that cannot be disseminated through the action of some of its members. We all live and survive according to some sort of tacit commitment that cannot be considered voluntary. Thus, the political responsibility is collective: it has not so much to do with *who has done what action*, as it has to do with *what kind of responsibility we take*, what we want to last, what we want to renew and keep. We are, then, politically responsible for the contradictions of the present and the present habitability of the world. This way, unless our attitude towards the world is indifferent, we can speak of a certain collective political responsibility in the maintenance of structures and uses or values that render impossible the freedom to exist in many fields.

¹⁵ FRAISSE, Geneviève., *Op. cit.*

equality is the previous condition of the political. And to recall the fragility of the conquests of equality does not signify the inclination to misunderstand them, but rather the capability of confronting freedom, with the possibility of “speaking” the difference without generating violence or inequality in the process. And if we possess the courage to do this, without self-erasing ourselves in the present and without conferring this disagreement to the next generation in an irresponsible manner, perhaps then we will begin freely to inhabit our contemporary world, one overwhelmed in so many areas, particularly in the political ambit, by a powerful gust of new events and important transformations, and one devastated by the absence of words that make sense of our actions and passions. And it must not be forgotten that a new world cannot be embarked upon without words or new forms.

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(translated by Anna Gallardo & Patrick Boner)