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Experience, Subjectivity and Politics in the Italian Feminist Movement

Redefining the Boundaries between Body and Discourse

Lucía Gómez Sánchez

UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA

Ana Belén Martín Sevillano

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

ABSTRACT This article describes the political practices of a part of the Italian women's movement that, as of the 1980s, gave way to the *sexual difference thought*. Through a political analysis of their own experience, which removed any humanist identity assumptions, the women's movement generated new practices and discourses. With these, women were able to exert self-criticism, and simultaneously to produce new subjectivities articulated around the *sexual difference* concept. The *difference thought* helped highlight the limits of institutional policy, renewing the premises of political analysis and redefining the borders of what was deemed to be 'political'. Intended to foster dialogue with other feminist proposals, the article underlines the *situated* nature of this political experience and focuses on the method, the political praxis and the process rather than the outcome, the conclusions or the theory.

KEY WORDS difference ♦ experience ♦ feminism politics ♦ practices ♦ subjectivity

The aim of this article is to describe the feminist subject through its political experience, taking into account the partial, limited and localized character of any particular experience. Specifically, our interest lies in the fact that this strategy was used by the Italian women's movement, and has been the source of the *sexual difference thought* since the 1980s.¹

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A sociohistorical reconstruction of a section of the Italian women's movement, with an analysis of hands-on feminist political experiences, allows one to understand the importance of whatever becomes a problem in a place and a time. Feminist practices are closely linked to their context, and that link is as historical as it is political since these practices are means of resistance that answer a specific design of power. This is the reason why it would be impossible to speak of 'feminism' in the singular, as a unified system of conceptual analysis with determined political priorities.

Therefore, when feminist endeavours are cut off from the social conditions that gave them meaning, and are placed on a theoretical ground, they lose their active principles and become objects. This favours division and conflict, preventing other feminist rationales from thriving because all these singular experiences are difficult to classify or to fit the categories and dichotomies established by the theoretical field (Roseneil, 1999). In order to prevent feminism from losing much of its worth when it becomes a practice that simply obeys a theory (De Lauretis, 1989), we should elude any ahistorical approach in which the only purpose is to ponder which are the correct objects for feminism and which are not (Adkins, 2004).

The strategy implemented by a faction of the Italian women's movement consists, on the one hand, in a critique of self-identity, and, on the other, in the production of new subjectivities. Our analysis seeks to give a clear picture of how this was accomplished, but focusing more on the process and the political praxis, than on the outcome, theory or conclusions. An analysis of the political manifesto 'Più donne che uomini' ('More Women than Men', 1983), the foundation and heart of the movement, gives us the opportunity to understand a crucial moment in that process due to the narrow relation between discourse and political practice.²

In the first section, we describe the movement's analysis of their own political experience. Next, we examine how new subjectivities emerged through different political practices. In the third section, we focus on the sociopolitical context to which this experience belongs. To conclude, we aspire to opening discursive lines to relate this experience to other feminist proposals, and to the present.

BODY AND DISCOURSE: THE EXPERIENCE OF *INADEQUACY*

'Più donne che uomini' was the fruit of a two-year process of collective discussion, and it incarnates the path, story and practices of a group of women. During the 1970s, many Italian feminists proposed to take political action outside the conventional channels provided by the

establishment. Through practices such as self-awareness, the unconscious practice of unravelling or the practice of doing, groups of women thought about the material that informed their own experience.³ While at the beginning these groups placed their trust in what came out of the immediacy of individual experiences, they soon started to question them, only finding their meaning when understanding their connection with contemporary social practices or power relations. As a consequence, these practices provided simultaneously new significance to women's relations, and analytic power to shared experiences.

Thus, *'Più donne che uomini'* gave theoretical expression to real experiences at the same time as it renewed political practices, particularly when giving social orientation to the strength and knowledge produced by women's relations (Libreria delle Donne, 1987).

Self-reflection through the aforementioned practices made it possible for women to observe the experience of a social and symbolical defeat. These practices showed a discontinuity between women's experience and what can be publicly stated according to language tools, social sanction and common sense. Purposely, the manifesto founded its political analysis on the experience of inadequacy, failure or uneasiness in public spaces:

We want to start from our present condition and talk and ask questions about our failure to achieve in social life. This failure reverberates in a diffuse sense of discomfort, a feeling of inadequacy, of mediocrity. As failure it needn't be anything special: on the contrary, in general it doesn't present itself as extraordinary failure but more as inhibition, as a block on capacity, a source of anxiety and withdrawal. (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 111)⁴

What here grew to be a problem, that feeling of not-belonging and inadequacy in social relations, is not a representation, or an ideology either, it is a real experience, anchored in women's bodies. And to pay attention to corporal symptoms and how they are expressed should not be relegated to intimacy or irrationality. On the contrary, the body is the first place where politics are received and inscribed. Desire, sexuality, fantasies and fears enter political discourse (Cigarini, 1995). Therefore, the experience of inadequacy, body language for this feminist praxis, is questioned and analysed through the manifesto in social and political terms, not in psychological, private or individual ones:

It is because we do not wish to give up our social existence that we are now concentrating on our sense of unease. First of all we wish to emerge with an explanation of its roots. (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 117–18)

Why is there that 'sense of blockage'? What is behind that 'diffuse sense of discomfort, a feeling of inadequacy, of mediocrity'?

The sense of blockage is produced because this society is fashioned by male desire, by being and having a man's body. To be a woman, with a woman's experience and desires, has no place in it. (Delmar, 1991: 114)

'Più donne che uomini' explained how the symbolical order – the cultural set of dispositions and meanings that we assume under the form of schemes of value and cognition – is not neuter, but androcentric and patriarchal. The only experience that has been given a symbolic interpretation has been men's experience (Larrauri, 1996). Invisibility has tinted women's experiences since they have not been socially acknowledged. Furthermore, these experiences could not even be expressed because patriarchy is not just a way of perceiving or saying, but perception and language themselves (Tommasi, 1987). A woman's experience is inadequate because it is outside that cultural and linguistic universe, dismissed or invisible for differing or making no sense:

What creates the obstacle, the refusal to have anything to do with social games, whether experienced as a block or as diffuse discomfort, is definitely the fact of being and having a woman's body. (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 113)⁵

Acknowledging that patriarchal symbolical order is present in women's language, feelings, behaviours, desires and bodies assists them in perceiving the paradox that women are actually collaborating with that they want to fight. And this collaboration reaches preconscious and inner structures of subjectivity. Consequently, identity becomes a controversial space. Hence, the practice of analysing experience from a political view allows women to move away from images, behaviours and expectations that are part of what is considered feminine. From this practice of de-identification that opens an empty space, the political project suggested in 'Più donne che uomini' aims to find new ways of doing, thinking and reflecting about ourselves:

We have discovered the originality which goes with the fact of being women. . . . But at the moment we have no way of translating the experience, the knowledge and the value of being women into social reality. (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 110–11)

Questions such as 'from where should we build the feminine difference?', or 'what is the ground for political action?' arise here because these new practices of doing and thinking are not built after an original theoretical difference, essential, alienated and repressed. If, as we said, symbolical order is not neuter but androcentric, to praise specific feminine characteristics would only lead to ratify the position of women, so that social and symbolic inequality would be considered the reason and basis for feminism. Hence, *sexual difference* has to be produced, never assumed,

it has to be either acknowledged or discovered (Bocchetti, 1995). The politics of sexual difference escape man/woman identitarian opposition since their focal subjects are those elements not considered by the conventional androcentric representation of gender: 'that part in every woman that refuses to be described, illustrated or defended by anyone' (Libreria delle Donne, 1987; our translation). These experiences of inadequacy, discomfort and failure speak of margins of not belonging to the existing symbolical order. Precisely for this reason they have a subversive potential: they demand to be coated by discursive expression (Cigarini and Abbá, 1976). Thus, the project of *sexual difference* makes no essentialist or relativist assumptions. Those margins of not belonging are not random, but rooted in the real, material, embodied and sexuated experience of women (Braidotti, 1994).

THE PRACTICE OF WOMEN RELATIONSHIPS: STRENGTHENING THE *SEXUAL DIFFERENCE*

The political action of the women's movement attempts to produce previously non-existent references for women based on symptoms and experiences, not on identity. The challenge lies in thinking the *sexual difference* (to produce references) with thinking and language tools that are not made to think or talk about it (Cavarero, 1987). Women are placed in a theoretically risky position, given that they cannot base their own discourse on a positive certainty, but they still dare to deeply commit to a meaning (Zamboni, 1990). Besides, there is also the personal stake of shedding historical reified identities, reinventing oneself from a movement where identities are endangered.

We need a moment of reflection and a specific political practice which can make our sense of unease and inadequacy in social transactions into the principle of a knowledge and a resolve in relation to society. As a result we will be able to say: society is made like this, functions like this, demands this kind of performance, but I am a part of society and I am not made like this, and because of this society will perhaps have to change so as to give expression to my existence within it as well; through an understanding of this contradiction we can become aware of what we wish to be. (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 115)

The feminine will of social existence needs an adequate symbolic mediation. In this sense, the manifesto helps to collectively redefine and express experiences emerged from political practices such as self-awareness, the unconscious practice and the practice of doing. However, 'Più donne che uomini' also proposes a new kind of political practice that sets a turning point in relation to previous ones: its main aspiration is to

permeate social relations through the actions taken by the *sexual difference* movement:

Social relations must be sexualized. If it is true that social and cultural reality is not neuter, that within it human sexuality is expressed in a displaced form, then our search for social existence cannot but clash with the domination of men over women in the fabric of social and cultural life. (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 116)

Consequently, the authors insist on the necessity for women to establish relations among themselves in order to value the fact of being a woman. These relations are based on the authority that a woman deliberately gives to another woman, confronting power relations in which coercion and persuasion affect behaviour (Larrauri, 1996). Ascribing worth to whatever another woman thinks and says turns into an alliance only shared by women and women's interests, it turns into relations not allowed by the masculine symbolic order. Thus, a new place for relations and practices emerges outside the rule of the establishment (Cigarini, 1995). Relations among women go beyond friendship, family ties or personal relations since they are a political practice. In contrast to the traditional feminist practice of 'sisterhood in oppression', these new relations admit disparity among women; they give the opportunity to learn how to value what other women are and do, avoiding masculine paradigms:

Solidarity is precious but it is not enough. What we need are diversified and strong relations in which, once minimum common interests are safeguarded, what links us is not just the defence of our interests; relations into which differences enter into play as enrichment and no longer as threat. (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 121)

The practice of relation through authority is able to transform the affective factor, symbolic meaning and social value of relations among women. It also gives form to new self-perceptions. These practices are not only an instrument to produce the feminine symbolic order, they are the symbolic order themselves (Zamboni, 1995). Authority relations set a space of experience that promotes competency, and gives consistency to the own sexuated position (Giardini, 2004). We have to take into account here the subjective, social and political effects triggered by these exclusively feminine associations (Dominijanni, 1995). Against the traditional politics of division between means and ends, here politics are simply political practice, an end in itself:

Only by reference to those like us will we be able to rediscover and therefore support those contents of our experience which social reality ignores or tends to cancel out as scarcely relevant. This is also perhaps the only way in which women can give to man the measure of his incompleteness, letting

him perceive the existence of relationships and interests which do not put him first. . . . This is what we call the common world of women, a web of relationships and references to others like yourself which is able to register and make consistent and effective our experience in its integrity, recovering and developing the practical knowledge which many women in difficult circumstances have already intuitively acquired. (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 120)

Therefore, in this political manifesto, utopia is replaced by the politics of experience. Refusing an imposed identity involves taking a risk experimenting with yourself. Women become a research laboratory. These new practices are what Foucault (1984) would call 'practices of the self',⁶ which appear when identity fades away, giving women the opportunity to actively participate in their own formation. They entail constant and limitless work; they involve a game that takes place right on the limits of existent cultural practices.

ITALIAN POLITICS AND FEMINISM DURING THE 1980S

The political experience that we are describing through 'Più donne che uomini' could not be understood without considering historical events. It seems necessary to go further now and rebuild the meaning of the manifesto within the social conditions in which it was uttered.

It is not our objective here to fully present the social framework, but to mention a few significant elements. In order to do so, we first shift our attention from what the discourse says to what the discourse does, pointing out the impact that the manifesto had, particularly in the space of Italian feminist politics.

The *sexual difference* claim generated an intense debate, and consequently much theoretical work, within Italian feminism. It was also the basis for new political organizations (De Lauretis, 1989), such as the philosophical community Diotima that started out of the discussion of 'Più donne che uomini' (Muraro and Zamboni, 1990). The manifesto's urge to give visibility to the *sexual difference* had an effect on a new sexuated approach to philosophy, politics and law, where the universality of the masculine subject is now questioned.

Once the politics of *sexual difference* were born, the map of the Italian women's political movement got reorganized: the centres in Rome, Milan and Verona were now an axis for the theoretical articulation of the *sexual difference thought* (Bocchetti, 1995; Cigarini, 1995; Diotima, 1987, 1990, 1995, 1996; Muraro, 1991).

However, it is important to remark, in order to reflect on the conditions of possibility of political action, that the weight of a new discourse is not given by the power of its words, but by the recognition that the group it represents might achieve (Bourdieu, 1982). This recognition requires

analytical social tools, as well as presence and visibility, for which the Libreria delle Donne in Milan was essential. Libreria, as some other women's centres, reviews, press and communities of scholars that emerged during this period, had as its main objective to critically reread codified culture on the basis of the feminine subject difference. At the same time, it was also fulfilling the increasing demand of cultural self-realization.⁷

Within the sociopolitical context in which the manifesto came into being, there was an important conflict between the position represented by the women's movement with its different groups, and the position of women in left-wing political parties, such as the Communist and Socialist parties, and associations such as the UDI (Unione delle Donne Italiane [Italian Women's Coalition], linked to the Communist Party), and the MLD (Movimenti di Liberazione della Donna [Women's Liberation Movement], connected to the Radical Party). These two positions presented different understandings of feminist politics, and furthermore, different understandings of politics themselves: the role of institutions, pressure strategies, or even the definition of power. By observing them, we can better analyse the tension between institutional politics and the social movements than give shape to the rules of the political game that 1968 initiated.

These movements, as does the women's, believed that the real political space is that limited by *micro-physics* of power, a space that was traditionally considered private. Accordingly, they refused any attempt of inclusion in the public sphere through conventional forms of political representation (see Foucault, 1994a, 1994b).⁸

Broadly, we could understand from this a dispute between the politics of the *sexual difference* and the politics of women in parties and unions. Against the notion of representation, the movement understood women's politics as a set of practices based on women's relations able to give them recognition (Cigarini, 1987). Against the abstract analysis of the feminine condition, the thought of the difference aimed for a continuous flow between events and meaning: a bond between the real world and the material experience (Bocchetti, 1995; Cigarini, 1995). Against claims for legislative and institutional change in order to reach male–female equity, the women's movement adopted a critical position that pointed towards the fissure between feminine body and juridical masculine order⁹ (Libreria delle Donne, 1987; Campari and Cigarini, 1989).

Thus, the politics of the *difference* presented problems irreducible to classic political rationality. However, this position not only confronted institutional politics, but also had some bearing on it, especially through women in the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the second political force at the time (De Lauretis, 1989). Thanks to the advocacy of women with political militancy, the *sexual difference thought* reached the field of

traditional politics and gave account of the conflicts between women's political positions. The wish of conferring a sexuuated nature to social relations was achieved when political alliances became weak and forged new ones, with their own tensions and conflicts (Bocchetti, 1995; Cigarini, 1995; Libreria delle Donne, 1987).

Finally, these two forms of political behaviour, more asymmetric than opposed (Dominijanni, 1995), despite the wish for bonds by some members, came to be irreconcilable and incompatible, to the extent that dialogue eventually ceased. Simultaneously, the refusal to participate in politics through institutional means did not please everyone inside the women's movement, which was to lead to divisions during the following years.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

While describing the politics of *sexual difference*, we have mentioned practices that opened fissures in the contemporary political synthesis (Zamboni, 1995). It seems particularly relevant to highlight the founding intensity of the movement and its politics, because it was able to place itself in practices and in language. *Sexual difference* holds no predefined characteristics; it is not a new discourse, nor does it belong to any abstract theoretical domain. It grows as it moves through experience, shaping it with relationships and practices (Giardini, 2004). This is why we have not described the emergence of new identities or collective subjects, but the emergence of complex, open and mobile sexuuated positions.

The movement of *sexual difference* involves a constant change in positions, a dislocation in the existing order of relationships. It will continue producing new practices and discourses according to historical experiences with their particular web of relations. This exercise of sociohistorical reflexivity has taken place within the women's movement itself, where many discussions have focused on the efficacy and limits of some of their own political practices. They have pointed out that the practice of relations, the axis of its politics concerning symbolical order, is not enough when it comes to facing acute social, economic or political problems. At the same time, they acknowledge that the refusal of institutional order turned out to confirm the masculine symbolical order; what was thought to be a protest, a transgression, happened to exclude women once again (Bocchetti, 1995; Dominijanni, 1995).¹⁰ However, revising and updating practices, in order to answer a different set of power and social relations, does not diminish the strength and worth of initial ones that were meant to be in a different context.

Acknowledging its situated nature, the power of this section of the Italian women's movement and its politics rests on the questions it was

able to raise, which still remain unanswered. The question 'how to think political action when considering that patriarchal structures found language, feelings, behaviour, wishes, and even give meaning to women's bodies?' is still a major one in feminism. It opens up aspects that should be addressed when taking political action: why does every woman not yearn for freedom? how it is possible for the one who wishes to wish for that which controls it? At the same time, this experience remains a useful cartography that articulates a transformation project based on that major question. The politics of *sexual difference* disown the concept of humanistic identity in terms of rationality, self-representation, homogeneity and stability. Consequently, they put themselves in jeopardy, *displacing* subjects and practices from a safe place to an unknown one where speaking and thinking have no certainty (De Lauretis, 1990; Zamboni, 1990). The movement of *sexual difference* does not define what is feminine, but, from a sexuated position, moves language incessantly through new concepts (genealogy, symbolical mother, feminine freedom) and practices (self-conscience, entrustment, disparity). It adopts an eccentric position that shifts from the inside to the outside of its own social and discursive conditions (De Lauretis, 1990). It is in this eccentric position where the women's movement meets other political projects (based on post-gender, ethnic and postcolonial approaches) with the same endeavour of rethinking political practice beyond any essential conception of feminine identity. However, some of these groups believe that the concept of *sexual difference* is fixed in a deficient men/women axis that ignores many other differences (class, ethnic, sexual preference) that also shape women, favouring the western idea of an ethnocentric and exclusive woman (Kaplan and Grewal, 1994; Mohanty and Alexander, 1997). Nonetheless, as we said before, antagonistic theoretical and political approaches converge somehow, since they are all placed in an identitarian eccentric position. Some of them have produced new figurations of feminine subjectivity, such as the *inappropriate/d other* (Minh-Ha, 1989), the *mestiza* (Anzaldúa, 1987), *cyborg* (Haraway, 1991) or the *nomadic subject* (Braidotti, 1994), which build theory and define praxis from their own embodied experiences. Experiences that will, in addition, draw the borders between body and discourse.

NOTES

1. Libreria delle Donne di Milano (1987) gives a detailed account of the process.
2. The manifesto 'Più donne che uomini' was the first written document that approaches women's issues from the *sexual difference* position. It was published in 1983 in *Sottosopra*, an occasional publication from Libreria delle Donne in Milan, under the authorship of 'Collettivo No. 4'.

3. For more detail see Libreria delle Donne (1987).
4. All extracts from 'Più donne che uomini' are taken from the translation by Rosalind Delmar, 'More Women than Men', in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (1991).
5. The manifesto formulates a critical analysis of social order by reflecting on subjectivity. This link between experience, subjectivity and social practices does not pretend to adjust feminism to poststructuralism, it belongs to the singularity of the feminist praxis (De Lauretis, 1989; Gómez Sánchez and Martín Sevillano, 2006).
6. Having the self as subject and object simultaneously, Foucault's practices of the self allow new forms of subjectivity, and they can be useful when explaining some aspects of the *sexual difference thought* (Gómez Sánchez, 2004; Larrauri, 1996). However, his notions of the subjected subject and of the body as a product of social practices reinforce the opposition between sex and gender, opposition rejected by the *sexual difference thought* for being fixed to the masculine neuter order, not acknowledging the sexuated nature of body (Giardini, 2004).
7. This shows a shift in the interests of the women's movement. When in the early 1980s, new directives and public policies included some of their demands, women were forced to think of politics not just in terms of claiming. This change could be also due to the form in which feminine demands were translated by institutions (Libreria delle Donne, 1987).
8. Foucault's notion of power entails a theoretical effort to legitimize the new political site that can be considered the ground for political philosophy after 1968.
9. The position adopted by Libreria delle Donne in the fight for abortion rights (1978), or during the debate on the law on sexual violence (1989), was significant in this regard (Addis, 1989; Bocchetti, 1995; Libreria delle Donne, 1987).
10. This debate is currently open within the social sciences, and it points out crucial aspects in need of special reflection. Specifically, a number of authors have considered the effects of previous discourses and practices on the current political map (Bauman, 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Rose, 1999), showing how power is able to adopt claims and by so doing remove their critical potential.

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Lucía Gómez Sánchez is associate professor at the University of Valencia, Spain. Her research approaches the relationship between feminism, identity and politics from a poststructuralist perspective. Address: Departamento Psicología Social, Universidad de València, Avda Blasco Ibáñez, 21, 46010 Valencia, Spain. [email: gomez@uv.es]

Ana Belén Martín Sevillano is a lecturer at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Within the area of cultural studies, her research interests include concepts such as civil society, diaspora, feminism and identity and their relationships with arts and literature in Latin America and Spain. Address: Department of French, Hispanic and Italian Studies, University of British Columbia, 797–1873 East Mall, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z1, Canada. [email: msevilla@interchange.ubc.ca]

