

CONCLUSIONS: ADAPTIVE PATRIARCHY AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY

Orsetta Giolo¹

Abstract: Does patriarchy still exist? In 2011 the “Inter-university working group on women’s political subjectivity” began its trajectory of study and analysis beginning from this question and the ensuing reflection on whether or not complex contemporary societies retain a patriarchal structure. Patriarchy seems to have become softer, more seductive and persuasive only in terms of rhetoric: in reality, it has maintained all its most grim and violent features. Rather than disappearing, patriarchy appears to have honed its skills and strategies of adaptation in relation to continuously and rapidly evolving contemporary contexts. “Adaptive” patriarchy thus functions as a system capable of continuously and swiftly repositioning mechanisms and rhetorics of domination and control over women. From this perspective, the rhetoric of choice appears to be an expression of the adaptive character of patriarchy: a model of femininity that is actually not so different than the stereotypes of the past has successfully established itself as something new, silencing anyone who does not intend to adopt this model.

Keywords: “Adaptive” patriarchy, feminism, equality, women’s subjectivity

1. Foreword

Does patriarchy still exist? In 2011 the “Inter-university working group on women’s political subjectivity” began its trajectory of study and analysis beginning from this question and the ensuing reflection on whether or not complex contemporary societies retain a patriarchal structure. As scholars have noted, in the Italian context there has been a lengthy discussion concerning the “end of patriarchy,” starting from the well-known position taken by the Libreria delle Donne (Sottosopra, 1996). In other contexts, in contrast, the issue has never been framed in these terms; instead, discussions have revolved around the transformations of traditional patriarchy over time: “post-patriarchy” and “neo-patriarchy” are two of the terms adopted to account for the survival of this structure while also capturing its shifts (Casalini, 2011). It is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate why the survival of the patriarchal regime has been cast into doubt in Italy; however, it is useful to underline the fact that

¹ University of Ferrara, Italy. E-mail: orsetta.giolo@unife.it

statements such as these have in some ways strengthened the belief that the lion' already been accomplished and the most important battles already won:

Patriarchy is over, it is no longer given credit by women and thus is finished. It lasted as long as it was able to have meaning in the female mind. Now that it has lost this meaning, we realize that it cannot last without it. For women's part, it was not a matter of agreement. Too many decisions were made without and against them, laws, dogmas, ownership systems, customs, hierarchies, rituals, school programs [...] \ Rather, it was a matter of making the best of the situation. Now, however, we no longer do that (Sottosopra, 1996).²

This kind of standpoint has likely helped to spread the belief that women's freedom has been attained and sanctioned once and for all and that the problems that continue to burden women involve limited, specific situations centered on work, familial organization or political representation. In recent decades new 'rhetorics' of women's rights have taken hold in relation to some

of these individual issues, at times perceived as mutually independent: gender equality, work/family reconciliation, part-time employment, nursery schools, assisted reproduction and so-called "pink quotas" of female representation have in some ways become new 'keywords' accompanying the classic themes of 1970s feminism, such as divorce and abortion. It is no coincidence that, from the stage of the Rome "If not now, when?" protest, Susanna Camusso, secretary of the CGIL trade union, identified divorce and abortion as "two great achievements" made by women and, without any problematization, associated them with the new demands being made in the streets on February 13, 2011.

It appears to be particularly difficult to advance critical readings of classic or new topics of feminist reflection in that the very act of questioning what are considered in some ways the cornerstones of past and present feminist struggles seems to necessarily

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È accaduto non per caso, in "Sottosopra", 1996. This famous issue of the journal Sottosopra was signed by a number of intellectuals, including: Francesca Graziani, Sandra De Perini, Luana Zanella, Denise Briante, Cristiana Fischer, Anna Di Salvo, Daniela Riboli,

Luisa Muraro, Clara Jourdan, Rosetta Stella, Rinalda Carati, Lia Cigarini, Maria Marangelli, Oriella Savoldi, Mari Zanardi, Letizia Bianchi, Lilli Rampello, Traudel Sattler, Annarosa Buttarelli, Marisa Guarneri and Loredana Aldegheri.

involve an attempt to neutralize or undermine the deconstructive power of feminist thought itself. Alternately, such a move might carry the risk of breaking with a significant segment of the Italian feminist tradition. Indeed, calling into question abortion not as a legal regulation but as the outcome of a particular (male) approach to sexuality almost inevitably means sliding into the ideological sinkhole of the clash between secularists and Catholics, in Italy and elsewhere. And yet I believe it is important that we reopen discussion on this issue while at the same time seeking to avoid the most cliché theoretical assertions as well as self-serving ideological and political positions³ and

focusing instead on the insights emerging from other, more recent theoretical currents⁴ or past and present scholars such as Carla Lonzi and Catharine MacKinnon who address this topic in more problematizing terms.

A radical feminist, Lonzi has expressed multiple concerns about “simply” legalizing abortion without also rethinking women’s sexuality and sexuality in general.⁵ MacKinnon, an American lawyer and legal scholar, has repeatedly stressed the need to remember that conception is always the result of a sexual relationship and that sexual relations continue to be conceived of and constructed according to sexual politics organized around a sexist logic.⁶ The

³ The issue of abortion emerges on a cyclical basis, at times with the aim of redefining it as a crime (thus inevitably consigning abortion to back-alley contexts), at times in order to criticize the inadequate implementation of the law (not enough clinics, too many doctors who are conscientious objectors, and so on). More recently, this same clash between the two sides – Catholic vs. secular – has also emerged regarding issues such as the so-called morning-after or “abortion” pill and, more generally, the new questions surrounding reproduction (such as assisted reproduction, for example).

⁴ See for example the positions developed by *Feminist Disability Studies*. In relation to this topic, see Maria Giulia Bernardini’s essay in this volume.

⁵ As Lonzi writes: “Women have abortions because they get pregnant. But why do they get pregnant? And why does having relations with their partners in a way that risks conception meet a specific sexual need of theirs?”

[...] Men have abandoned women in the face of a law that prevents them from having abortions: alone, denigrated, unworthy of belonging to the community. One day men will abandon women in the face of a law that will not stop them from having abortions: alone, gratified, worthy of belonging to the community. And yet women asked themselves: ‘For whose pleasure have I gotten pregnant? For whose pleasure am I aborting?’ This question contains the seeds of our liberation: by posing it, women give up their identification with men and find the strength to break a code of silence that is the crowning achievement of colonization.” (Lonzi, 2010: 54). Please see the essay by Sandra Rossetti discussing Lonzi in this volume.

⁶ In a key passage of her essay, MacKinnon writes that the abortion debate has been focused on separating control over sexuality from control over reproduction and the separation of both of these from both gender and the life options of the sexes. Liberals have

drama of abortion, with its violent and tragic conflict between already-existent and developing bodies, between desires and duties or obligations, might be addressed not as a matter to be resolved or overcome by defining once and for all the status of the fetus, but rather as an issue that derives from the way relations are organized, a form of organization that still reflects a primitive and taken-for-granted male-dominated management of sexuality. If abortion is a political issue, as Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote in the period of the 1978 referendum, then conception is political as well, and so is intercourse, the act from which all else follows.⁷ However, feminism has continued to grant relatively little attention to sexuality and sexual freedom, just as it does not appear to have investigated in depth why “control” over the effects of free sexuality should still be left entirely to women. The doubt is therefore whether

women’s sexual freedom has ever been fully analyzed or if, rather, it continues to represent a taboo.

Furthermore, the sex scandals involving former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and the unrestrained exploitation of the female body and image seem to testify to the absence of an effective “liberation.”⁸ Far from it: what seems to have become established is an imaginary that represents women as ready and willing to offer themselves up to male desire without hesitation and – finally, at least – no longer risking social disapproval or moral (or worse, legal) condemnation. As a matter of fact, prostitution seems to have become emblematic of a specific approach to reality: contemporary (and, at the same time, archaic), unscrupulous (by virtue of ignoring the ethical implications of certain behaviors), cool (because it is depicted by the media) and productive (in that it is highly profitable). At the

defended the choice to have an abortion as if the woman ran into the fetus by chance (MacKinnon, 1987:93-102).

⁷ “Clearly coitus – with all the permissiveness of the world – continues to be a taboo [...] rather, it indicates the omission of a sincere, rigorous and comprehensive political assessment. Indeed, intercourse is political. Thus one cannot speak politically about abortion without also considering intercourse to be political” (Pasolini, 2012: 104)

⁸ “The question that naturally arises is thus: which bodies are being represented today? Are they “liberated” bodies – women who have appropriated their lives and freely make use of them – or are they *prostituted*, commodified *bodies*?” (Melandri, 2011: 75). Regarding the contemporary debate on “freedom” and “liberation,” see the essays by Dolores Morondo Taramundi in this volume.

same time, urban spaces have gradually become more pornographic as a result of the overexposure of women's nude bodies: photos, posters, signs, allusions, magazines and shop windows relentlessly convey the image of a model of woman (of *a* woman, always the same one) who is available, who offers herself.

Nonetheless, those who raise such issues often face charges of moralism from multiple fronts: feminists, liberals and Catholics. And yet the attempt to once again characterize sexuality as a "simple" moral issue is extremely reductive (MacKinnon, 1987: 32-45).

2. Adaptive patriarchy

For those who are convinced that individuals are free to choose for themselves even to the extent of prostituting their own images or bodies, this position is based on the indisputable freedom of choice. According to the "rhetoric of choice," if choice is free, there should not be judgments of any kind. What is more, the fact that we are free to choose – and that choice is therefore no longer regulated by law in one direction or the other – is taken as

proof that patriarchy has come to an end and that, if it does continue to exist today, it does so in a "lightweight" form: it no longer works through force; if anything, it works through persuasion. It would thus seem more useful to focus on the factors that might condition this freedom of choice: social, familial and economic forms of conditioning that might in some way undermine the independence and freedom of individual women. This argument is typically liberal and yet also highly problematic. The well-known diatribe about the "freedom to become a slave" and the paternalism characterizing any rule or law that seeks to limit this "freedom" to subjugate oneself attests to the difficulty (or even impossibility) of clearly and conclusively defining this issue. On closer inspection, in fact, no legislative move in these areas is able to completely free itself of standpoints that ultimately convey political, legal, moral and economic negotiations and decisions: the abolition of slavery was a choice – a political, legal, moral, and likely economic choice – that overrode, and continues to override, the possibility of legally permitting individuals to voluntarily subjugate themselves.

Ultimately, this is a matter of identifying what model or which models of politics, morality, and the law – not to mention the economy – ought to prevail, also in terms of sexual freedom. Up to now, what has most likely continued to prevail is a sexist and patriarchal model. Indeed, “women’s choices” appear to reflect not so much the expression of true self-determination, but rather an inevitable effort to adapt their desires to a despotic regime. “Women’s power”⁹ and “a woman’s right to choose”¹⁰ are oxymorons, contradictions in terms, paradoxical expressions.

On closer inspection, patriarchy seems to have become softer, more seductive and persuasive only in terms of rhetoric: in reality, it has maintained all its most grim and violent features. One example is the resurgence of violence against women – systematic violence, which goes beyond the tragedy of rape and murder; another example is the marginalization of women in political and economic spheres. Moreover, the attention focused solely on women’s ability to exercise choice in terms of

sexual freedom – whether it be free or constrained – seems to attest to the continuing presence of an old idea that women are the only ones who can make choices in this area: in this way, surreptitiously, men continue to be represented as if they were incapable of rationally (and therefore freely and morally) ‘managing’ their own sexuality, on the basis of an alleged law of nature according to which they are slaves to an uncontrollable form of sexuality. As a result, according to the traditional opposition of libertarians versus moralists, women continue to be the only individuals responsible for managing their own sexuality while men continue to have no accountability for what occurs.

Rather than disappearing, patriarchy appears to have honed its skills and strategies of adaptation in relation to continuously and rapidly evolving contemporary contexts. “Adaptive” patriarchy thus functions as a system capable of continuously and swiftly repositioning mechanisms and rhetorics of domination and control over

⁹ See MacKinnon, 1987: 46-62.

¹⁰ As Butler notes, “women’s right to choose remains, in some contexts, a misnomer” (Butler, 2004: 12).

women.¹¹ From this perspective, the rhetoric of choice appears to be an expression of the adaptive character of patriarchy: a model of femininity that is actually not so different than the stereotypes of the past has successfully established itself as something new, silencing anyone who does not intend to adopt this model.

The imagery conveyed by the well-known late-1990s TV series *Sex and the City* clearly expresses this “adaptive” rhetoric: in the series, the uninhibited model of sexuality performed, spoken and communicated by the female characters is a model transferred from a male identity to a female identity. According to the series’ message, even women would express their sexuality as much as men and in the same way, “without consequences,” if they only could.¹² Not even the process of “female” eroticization that has gradually come to characterize film and literature would appear to represent or express the sexual freedom of contemporary women;¹³ rather, it

actually testifies to the transposition of a male model of sexuality onto women – unrestrained, disconnected from emotional relationships, and explicitly performed – without any fundamental paradigm shift or new conceptualization of sexuality, human relationships, desire or pleasure. However, if gender domination hinges on the nature, conceptualization and disciplining of the sexual relationship, then focusing on the issue of sexuality would involve rethinking women’s sexual freedom from a point of view that is completely innovative in relation to the traditional trajectories of contemporary debate (especially in Italy).

As is well-known, today’s most significant conflicts revolve around concepts that are related to either conservative moralism, libertinism or progressive libertarianism. In other words, there is no alternative but to choose either the moderate path of restrained sexuality or the total acceptance of one’s own and others’ sexuality no matter what shape it takes.

¹¹ Regarding “anti-feminist counter-attacks” see Faludi, 1991.

¹² See for example MacKinnon’s argument on this issue: MacKinnon, 1987: 93-102. Regarding the sexist conceptualization of sexuality, see also Bourdieu, 1998.

¹³ I refer here to the editorial success enjoyed by E.L. James’ novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* and films recently released in the United States and Italy (such as *E la chiamano estate*, by Paolo Franchi, which earned an award at the 2012 Rome film festival).

However, neither of these positions appear to offer any possible liberation for women's sexuality: in the face of the ever-present over-representation of women, they do not seem to grasp either the centrality of the issue of sexuality or the link between sexuality and other political and social issues, some of which (such as assisted reproduction) are now considered exclusively "bioethical issues" unrelated to the planning and management of sexuality itself.

Indeed, the majority opinion – be it conservative or progressive – continues to perceive sexuality as a private matter that should either be regulated in keeping with a particular moral code (Catholic, Muslim and so on) or freed of any and all limitations so that rules (and the power exercised through them) cannot invade individuals' most intimate sphere. Men's sexuality might well be considered private, but that of women appears to be 'public.' Women's sexuality has always been a "common good" in certain ways, and as such subject to regulation, disciplining and control by the collectivity (of men). Presumably this is because women's sexuality is 'problematic' in the sense that it problematizes social relations whenever it goes beyond sexual intercourse and, if not controlled, has the potential to lead to reproduction. Law was

used in the past to regulate women's sexuality and it is still used today to maintain control over this field. Male sexuality, in contrast, is traditionally out of control and not subject to legal regulation. The former is public while the latter is private. This is true to such an extent that, while more recently law has had a more delimited role in relation to women's sexuality (for example with the abolition of adultery as a crime), this delimitation has never led to a radical reformulation of traditional gender roles. For that matter, this point invokes the argument, so dear to feminism, that law is good and capable of giving voice to women's claims and subjectivity. Would it not actually be preferable to abandon the law – that gendered, sexist, paternalist system for regulating and disciplining subjectivity, identity and practice – as a tool of liberation? However, there remains an unavoidable doubt as to whether, in the absence of law, already-existing power relations between the sexes would inevitably tend to consolidate rather than growing weaker.

As a matter of fact, one gets the impression that, in adopting this stance, over the past decades feminist thought has 'left law' to itself or, rather, to the logics that have traditionally dominated

it and continue to dominate it. After all, does not law remain steeped in sexist and patriarchal-type rules and ideas? Would it not be useful to once again mount a powerful feminist critique of law, in all its ramifications?

What is more, if we could overcome the opposition between moralistic arguments and libertarian positions, we could address the issues of prostitution and pornography in a new way, with a view to considering what models of sexuality these practices continue to convey and what market dynamics govern the legal and illegal sectors of the economy surrounding them. Asking ourselves what cultural approach and sexual politics give rise to the use of “postmodern sex,” to paraphrase Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 1998), would likely lead to new questions concerning the *homo consumens* models (Bauman, 2007) that contribute to enforcing a vision of sexuality that is suitable for

‘consumption’ and therefore ‘exchangeable in the market.’

Whereas the materiality of patriarchy has long been the subject of investigation (see for instance Cristine Delphy’s research on the “political economy of patriarchy” (Delphy, 1998 e 2001), it is only in recent years that the bond that has developed between sex and the market has been stressed and studied more extensively. For instance, *Pornotopia*, Beatriz Preciado’s study of the success of “Playboy” highlights the close connection between sexuality, gender, pornography and capitalism (Preciado, 2010).¹⁴

From a feminist perspective, however, it is not yet clear whether we should endorse, much less celebrate, this symbiosis: in fact, there is an ongoing debate regarding the possibility of regulating prostitution like any other type of work (Garofalo, 2012 e Power 2009). On closer inspection, this dilemma becomes even more

¹⁴ As Preciado writes that Playboy and its enclave of inventing pleasure and subjectivity were crucial in transforming the disciplinary regime into a pornographic drug. Pharmapornographic capitalism might be defined as a new system for controlling the body and the production of subjectivity that emerged, following WWII, alongside the appearance of new synthetic materials for consuming and reconstructing the body (such as plastics and

silicone), the pharmacological commercialization of endocrine substances for disconnecting heterosexuality and reproduction (such as the birth control pill, invented in 1947) and the transformation of pornography into mass culture. This hot capitalism differs radically from the Puritan capitalism of the nineteenth century that Foucault characterized as disciplinary. See Preciado, 2010.

problematic if we consider that the ‘non-sexualized body,’ the human body without any gender attribution, cannot be subjected to commodification either as a whole or in its parts. It is thus unclear why the ‘sexual body,’ the gendered body, can be transformed into an object to be used and consumed in keeping with market logics.¹⁵ This is even more true given that the market is not synonymous with freedom, independent choice or responsibility: on the contrary, it involves violent and discriminatory dynamics that hierarchically order humanity and individuals’ lives. Today, the market dominates state and international politics in all their manifestations; it is thus highly unlikely that sexuality is the only area which, when subject to the market, would somehow remain untouched by the pressures, marketing, direction and orientation of supply and demand. For instance, the ‘female-oriented’ eroticization of literature and film could be interpreted not as an expression of women’s eroticism but rather as an

attempt to take a model of *homo consumens*, a sex-consuming subject that has begun to lose ground as a male model, a male model for practicing and consuming sexuality, and transfer it to women. Might this therefore constitute another manifestation of ‘adaptive patriarchy’ seeking to preserve a certain behavioral model – that of ‘traditional’ male sexuality – in that it is necessary for the functioning of market logics – despite the fact that this model is giving way to new sexual identities, practices and choices that are more aware, more mature and less irresponsible?

In conclusion, is the dominant erotic and eroticized model linked to a certain concept of sexual freedom, one necessarily understood as the exercise of a form of freedom that is wholly free from relationships, consequences and effects on the individual or others, actually neutral? Or is this fabled neutrality simply another name for masculinity?¹⁶

3. Enduring distortions

it is very difficult to overlook an unequivocal fact, namely that body parts such as hands and feet are not ‘sexualized’ or ‘gendered’ to the same degree as sexual organs.

¹⁶ See MacKinnon, 1987: 46-62.

¹⁵ In response to this question, some supporters of labor rights for prostitutes argue that the sexual organs of prostitutes should be compared to the hands or feet of those who perform manual labor or drive buses. However,

The debate on women's status and rights also appears, at least in Italy, to contain "distortions" that only serve to shift analytical attention away from its rightful focus, that of 'male domination.' There are many such distortions: here below I propose to identify only a few examples, specifically, the ones I think are usually perceived as minor or even wholly overlooked (Giolo, 2012).

The first of these distortions concerns the relationship between women's freedom, rights, multiculturalism and immigration. A fact symptomatic of this distortion is that for many years now (at least two decades), issues such as the use of the veil or the practice of female genital cutting have dominated academic and political debate on the status of women in multicultural societies while the condition of oppression – if not actual neo-slavery – imposed on female migrants by highly repressive immigration legislation shaped by sexist logics has remained an almost marginal consideration (Giolo, 2012).¹⁷ Indeed, attention has mainly focused on clothing or cultural practices cast as Other in relation to those

prevailing in Western contexts and seen to symbolize a form of diversity that threatens women's dignity and freedom (Fusaschi, 2011). On the contrary, there has yet to be much interest in investigating the 'transcultural' practices characterizing women's shared conditions of oppression¹⁸ across geographical areas. Paradoxically enough, this is probably due to the *obviousness* of such practices, their constant and thus *normal* presence in all cultural traditions. Far from simple and normal practices, however, these *constants* that can be found in the common condition of women, equally widespread in both Eastern and Western contexts, seem to represent the indicator of a common vision of sexuality, a transcultural vision that is pervaded and dominated by male logics. It would thus be much more useful to dispense with the typically Orientalist approach that scrutinizes solely cultural differences and instead work on identifying all the mechanisms of oppression shared across different cultures in order to reveal the common functioning of trans-cultural patriarchal structures. To this end, we

¹⁷ See the essay by Erika Bernacchi in this volume.

¹⁸ See the essay by Dolores Morondo Taramundi in this volume.

must begin by overturning the analytical perspective and stop treating migrant women as a separate category, marginal to the debate *on* and *by* women. In some ways this marginalization is similar to that imposed on women with disabilities:¹⁹ indeed, migrant women and women with disabilities as subjects find themselves experiencing a particular condition, a “state of exception” that appears to be only minimally relevant to the lives of all other women, who supposedly live in a state of *normalcy*.²⁰ However, if we were to overturn our perspective, it would become clear that migrant women – like women with disabilities – represent the highest expression of the tendency to hierarchicalize and stereotype female identity, as well as the ongoing exploitation of women’s labor and sexuality. Indeed, from this perspective, rather than representing a consequence of their being female migrants or disabled women, the domestic and sexual exploitation of female migrants and label of asexuality applied to disabled women’s bodies are revealed as

the fruit of the politics of male domination.

Another enduring distortion revolves around the importance of bringing together investigations into the condition of women and research on masculinity. The “working group on women’s political subjectivity” has attempted to develop the contemporary discussion on this topic – carried out mainly abroad, in Italy this issue remains a niche area – through a seminar devoted to the need to ‘think about masculinity.’ However, I personally believe the real issue is not so much whether or not such an investigation is appropriate, but whether it is even possible. As has been noted, the most important critical theories of law, politics and identity (such as feminist theories and, for instance, Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies) grew out of theoretical analyses and social and political battles for rights and inclusion carried out by subjects (individuals or groups) living under conditions of oppression/discrimination/marginalization. They were also harbingers of many

¹⁹ See the essay by Maria Giulia Bernardini in this volume.

²⁰ The activities of movements such as “If not now, when?” appear to share this

orientation. (see for example the videos posted at <http://www.senonoraquando.eu/>).

of the ‘investigations of difference’ (sexual, cultural, racial) aimed at revealing the hidden identity of law and politics in order to grant visibility to the unacknowledged, marginalized and discriminated-against identities borne by oppressed individuals. Critical theories therefore necessarily seem to grow out of the need to correct a form of disadvantage that critical scholars see as generated by a certain social, economic or policy structure or given cultural model. This is why, as writes Letizia Gianformaggio, the “politics of identity” should be seen as a kind of “childhood illness”: once the obstacle or form of oppression has been overcome, they lose their very reason for being and can be abandoned (Gianformaggio, 2005: 120).

Reflections on masculinity, in contrast, are a form of critical thinking that does not originate from an oppressed subject; rather, they are developed around a dominant identity and from a dominant position. It is thus important to consider whether or not it is possible to formulate genuine critical theory given

that the author or authors of the theory in question are the same subjects who shape, enact, control and manipulate the very identity being critically investigated, and have at their disposal all the tools of domination necessary to mold their own identities and those of others.²¹ I therefore wonder what idea of male difference could possibly be developed given that society as a whole is built on the basis of this difference-dominant identity to such an extent that public discourse equates male ‘difference’ with ‘neutrality.’ Moreover, reflecting on masculinity might involve reaffirming an essentialist vision of identity according to which femaleness and maleness are clearly identified, defined and thus criticized with a view to developing new interpretations of the two genders. However, this type of critique would ultimately serve to maintain a bipolar vision that recognizes only two existential models (women and men) which, by describing identities, continue to generate groups of new subjects that are “identical” to one

²¹ Also in relation to identity politics understood as demanding recognition for the identities of oppressed subjects, Gianformaggio argues that this “has nothing to offer or teach those who already have a voice and words for

representing themselves: those who are already ‘equal’ (and even less, obviously, to those who are the oppressors).” (Gianformaggio, 2005: 120).

another. In the end, would this simply involve imposing new identity-based hegemonies on our current ones?

A third, all but overlooked distortion revolves around the way maternity continues to fuel mythologies that in turn shape public policies, while the true starting point of motherhood, the act of giving birth, remains a taboo subject. Indeed, the only rhetoric that is gradually gaining ground is rhetoric contributing to the mythology of ‘traditional’ motherhood: non-medicalized birth (water birth, home birthing and so on), delivery without the use of painkillers (and thus a distrust of epidural anesthesia), natural childbirth (and thus a condemnation of caesarean sections) seems to be the only argument capable of gaining the attention and support of public institutions.²²

This situation displays countless paradoxes, however. Clearly, the birth of a daughter or son represents an event that literally turns people’s lives upside down: the new responsibilities and duties, the attention and care demanded by children involve a

complete reorganization of parents’ daily lives. And yet the actual act of childbirth is not considered an extraordinary event: women have been giving birth since the dawn of time, and there is nothing particularly special in this recurring event; indeed, childbirth is understood as a ‘natural’ and thus ‘normal’ event. In reality, all the evidence shows that women risk their lives every time they give birth. Childbirth is ‘natural’ in the sense that it is part of human and animal nature, but just because it is ‘natural’ does not mean it is free of risks. Giving birth literally involves risking one’s own life to bring another life into the world. This is not simply a metaphor: women continue to die of childbirth complications even in contexts with more highly advanced healthcare and safeguards, although at lower rates than in other areas of the world where medical and hospital services are insufficient.

Given that risking one’s life for others is usually considered a heroic act,²³ why is the act ‘hidden’ within childbirth largely ignored if not actually

²² Regarding this point and specifically in relation to recent European policies promoting natural breastfeeding, see Badinter, 2010.

²³ Herbert Hart’s observations about heroism and “moral ideals” are interesting, at times even enlightening: «Obligation and duty are only the bedrock of morality, even of social

erased from our perceptions? The moral and political irrelevance of childbirth as well as the complete rejection of its social role are proof of how easy it is to manipulate women's lives on the grounds that they are 'available' and foreshadow the social and political non-recognition that women experience immediately after giving birth. Indeed, the process of neutralizing the extraordinary nature of the event begins right after the act itself, when the mother and newborn are admitted to the maternity ward: as soon as women who have just given birth are assigned a room they are re-inserted in the 'recurrent' character of their lives as women. The extraordinary act of bringing life into the world suddenly loses value in face of the tendency to make being women a 'recurrent' fact.

These distortions – only a few of the many currently operating – have serious legal and political implications

morality, and there are forms of morality which extend beyond the accepted shared morality of particular societies. Two further aspects of morality require attention here. First, even within the morality of a particular society, there exist side by side with the structure of mandatory moral obligations and duties and the relatively clear rules that define them, certain moral *ideals*. The realization of these is not taken, as duty is, as a matter of course, but as an achievement deserving praise. The hero and the saint are

which, if properly analyzed, would probably drive us to reformulate rights and regulations (from a woman's right to health to immigration legislation, to name just a few) that traditionally have not even numbered among the concerns of mainstream feminism, at least in Italy.

The inter-university working group we established is aimed at addressing "women's political subjectivity" because our initial investigations were inspired by Letizia Gianformaggio's essays on women's ability to not only form part of the current public sphere but to act as interpreters of a new political subjectivity:

Indeed, having liberated themselves in private, women will enact in politics their ability to meet needs and establish connections (concrete needs and personal connections). A woman's diversity as a political subject involves the fact that – having freed herself from subjectification without demanding dominion, having publically acquired the impartial use of reason without giving up the selectivity of

extreme types of those who do more than their duty. What they do is not like obligation or duty, something which can be demanded of them, and failure to do it is not regarded as wrong or a matter for censure» (Hart, 2012:182). On the basis of these considerations one could argue that childbirth continues to represent *simply* a moral obligation for women and thus is not deemed worthy of any special consideration.

emotional relationships – she will be a subject, and thus free, without dominating; she will be a subject, and thus rational, without suffocating and/or hiding her feelings and passions (Gianformaggio, 2005:175).

A feminist approach that neglects the necessity of once again rethinking the global structure of society is already a losing proposition in that it does not seek to reveal the mechanisms – all the mechanisms, both public and private – that maintain and sustain male power. In contrast, “a woman who was to individually succeed or even try” to free herself at the expense of other “individuals or groups of individuals,” and therefore other women as well, “would not be a new subject at all, but rather an old, very old political subject; merely parroting man, whose specific way of acting politically has always consisted of constructing his own freedom on the basis of other people’s slavery (slavery in relation to emotional relationships and needs) (Gianformaggio, 2005: 174)”.

Continuing to reflect on women’s political subjectivity therefore means not giving up in the face of its ‘unrepresentability’ and the impossibility of locating the right legal and non-legal tools for abolishing

domination, which remains male regardless of the actual intentions of men themselves: indeed, some structures, politics and behavioral patterns remain sexually specific not so much due to some elusive male will, but rather because they remain in the sphere of the ‘un-thought-about,’ not yet having been subjected to the scrutiny of gender critique.

Ultimately, working on women’s political subjectivity means continuing to reflect with the awareness that patriarchy still exists and even threatens to gain ground, fueled by competitive-type logics of domination such as economic dynamics, racist ideologies and cultural imperialism.

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