

INTRODUCTION**“IMPASSE” OR “WORK IN PROGRESS”? : NOTES ON THE ACTUAL FEMINIST
DEBATE IN ITALY****Lucia Re¹**

Abstract: The essay illustrates some aspects of the more recent feminist debate in Italy, connecting it with the international debate and presenting the origin and design of this special issue of the Journal “Genero e direito”.

Keywords: Italian feminism, social movements

Feminist organizations in Italy appear to have achieved greater public visibility in recent years. The movement “Se non ora quando?”² in particular succeeded in shifting media and political agendas to once again address issues that had long been the subject of debate within women’s movements. The demonstration that initiated this process was held on February 13, 2011 and, for many women, it represented an opportunity to express a sense of collective outrage against forms of public rhetoric and behavior – as well as an aesthetic model prevalent in the mass media – that convey a demeaning image of women, representing them as either housewives devoted to meeting the needs of their husbands and children or as pretty showgirls, as provocative as they are

subservient to men of wealth and power. What is wholly missing from this imaginary are all the other figures, including – as the 13 February movement stressed – the many workers, professionals, scholars, magistrates, etc. who do their part to help our society function, often improving it as well.

As Lorella Zanardo (2009, 2011) and Michela Marzano (2010) have so effectively demonstrated, these images of the “housemaid” and “toy-woman” spill over from Italy’s most-watched TV broadcasts to invade various areas of women’s daily lives, contaminating their interpersonal relationships at work, at home and in their spare time.

“Se non ora quando?” has given rise to campaigns, projects and legislative initiatives aimed at promoting a female presence in top institutional positions and when decisions that are key to the life of the country are taken. The movement has captured widespread sentiments and catalyzed initiatives that were already

¹ Prof. University of Florence, Italy, mail: lucia.re@unifi.it

² “If not now, then when?”, <http://www.senonoraquando.eu>. A critical analysis of this movement’s politics can be found in the essay by Sandra Rossetti in this volume.

present in women's civic associations, universities, spaces of political discussion, etc. For example, ten days before February 13, 2011, we met with a group of researchers from several Italian universities and many female students to discuss "Representations of femininity, post-feminism and sexism" as part of an inter-university seminar we had set up a few months earlier and planned during the summer of 2010, motivated by the same sentiments that went on to draw protesters to take to the streets throughout Italy. This seminar, which has been held multiple years now, hosted by various universities (Florence, Bologna, Genoa, Ferrara, Milan, Brescia, Naples), is titled "Representations of gender and political subjectivity: notes for a critical vocabulary" and put on by the "Inter-university working group on women's political subjectivity."³

The group began its work motivated by the conviction that the Italian university system remains insufficiently open to feminist thought in terms of research and teaching as well as internal organization and women's presence in

governing bodies. Our aim has been and continues to be that of bringing the radical critical perspective proposed by feminist theories to the center of scientific debate. To this end we have organized a series of meetings primarily aimed at discussing the language of contemporary feminism while at the same time working to strengthen the link between theoretical reflection and political practice. In this context, many of us have taken a step back from the language (both textual and visual) of "Se non ora quando?,"⁴ criticizing its unintended adherence to widespread stereotypes (especially the opposition between "respectable women" and "prostitutes"), its appeal to "Italian women," the risk of slipping into moralism and its silence regarding the claims made by lesbian movements.⁵ The essays presented in this volume grow out of this process of reflection.

If I have lingered on "Se non ora quando?" it is because, as I note above, this movement succeeded in bringing significant media attention to bear on the claims and proposals put forward by

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For a description of the group, see Casalini, Fanlo Cortes, Giolo, Giovannetti, Guglielmi, Morondo Taramundi, Persano, Poneti, Pozzolo, Re, Urso, Verdolini, Vida (2011). Mention of our work can also be found in Faralli (2012).

4 The movement produced commercials inviting women to participate and showed them on national TV channels.

5 Regarding the position many group members take in relation to this issue, see Casalini, Fanlo Cortes, Giolo, Giovannetti, Guglielmi, Morondo Taramundi, Persano, Poneti, Pozzolo, Re, Urso, Verdolini, Vida (2011).

feminist groups. Other initiatives coming out of both historical movements and new women's associations have followed a somewhat different trajectory: for instance, the *Filomena* network⁶ and the groups *Femminile plurale*⁷, *Libera università delle donne*⁸ and *Unione donne in Italia* (UDI).⁹ In recent years these organizations, well known among feminists, have begun to engage more intensively with each other and with other new associations.

In addition to images of women, the recent debate among Italian feminist movements has focused on the issue of female representation. This topic has long been the focus of discussion in feminist circles; it is only in recent years, however, that the demand for a greater female institutional presence has been met with some reforms, albeit limited.¹⁰ One of the main divergences within the movement has emerged in relation to this particular issue: supporters of legislative measures aimed at establishing a *quota rosa* or “pink quota” of female representation in multiple areas, first

and foremost electoral rolls, considered by many to be the *conditio sine qua non* for achieving a gender-balanced democracy, face off against women who are convinced that such measures are incapable of altering relations between representatives and the represented and that we should struggle instead for a much more radical transformation of politics and society.

Is it possible to reconcile a “reformist” approach with the need to achieve recognition for women's political subjectivity? And, even if it were possible, would such reconciliation be desirable? Is it useful to promote legal reforms even knowing that the law is not an adequate instrument for recognizing and meeting women's needs? Women are once again considering these questions, the same questions that fueled debates in Italian feminism and legal feminism in particular for decades.¹¹ This act of returning to such frequently addressed issues, this ongoing debate with its associated tendency to division and conflict, would appear to be the

⁶ <http://www.filomenainrete.com/>

⁷ <http://www.femminileplurale.net/>

⁸ <http://www.universitadelledonne.it/>

⁹ <http://www.udinazionale.org/>. These are only a few examples; it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of the numerous, diverse women's movements.

¹⁰ For example, Law no. 120 of July 20, 2011 regarding equal access to the administrative and governing bodies of publicly-traded corporations;

and Law no. 215 of November 23, 2012, “Legal provisions to promote correcting the gender balance of local and regional agencies' councils and governing committees” and “Legal provisions on equal opportunity in the membership of competitive exam committees in public administrations.”

¹¹ Regarding this issue see for example Pitch (1998; 2010); Gianformaggio (2005); Smart (1992), Pateman (1988), Minow (1990).

product of the excessive fragmentation of women's groups with their overblown passion for arguing fine points if not actual controversy. And yet this continuing self-interrogation, debate and conflict actually hold the meaning of feminism itself, in the words of Tamar Pitch (2010: 94): "it is a self-reflexive political practice. And in this sense constitutive of subjects". This "beginning from oneself" and continually deconstructing theoretical as well as political and institutional questions and answers (*Ibid.*) constitutes the foundation of any politics that defines itself as feminist. Feminist "discourse" does not aim to 'remake the world with words;' rather, it seeks to make clear the fact that women speak together *as women* and that they speak together about themselves.

As Luisa Muraro (2011: 11) has argued, "with the feminist movement initiated in the sixties, real women began to exist as autonomously desiring and speaking subjects" and it was this act of manifesting themselves that gained "the upper hand over the [model of] Femininity dreamed up by men, and put by so many men in the place of what flesh and blood women are" (*Ibid.*). Speaking up, manifesting and expressing ourselves are thus inherently political acts, acts which

indicate a more radical position than might appear from a merely superficial analysis. Some men and women might see these considerations as outdated, seeing as women today have multiple opportunities to make themselves heard. And yet the fact that they would do so collectively, asserting that dominant political discourse must take gender differences into account, still provokes surprise and, in many cases, even discomfort.

Women are not a lobby, much less a minority group seeking special rights¹². Rather, they ask to be seen, to be recognized as women, to assert their perspective on the world, a perspective that remains largely ignored even today. Of course women can talk, but if they attempt to claim that their gazes and "discourses" differ from the dominant gazes and "discourses" – which remain those of men, elevated to the status of universal – they are generally dismissed. Feminist "discourse" is silenced. It is framed as uninteresting on the grounds that it is partial or even self-referential. When this attempt at marginalization fails, the usual fallback is labeling: feminist "discourse" is considered old and surly, the fruit of an outdated conflict-oriented political stance.

¹² Regarding this point see Pitch (2010).

A more subtle strategy involves restricting feminist debates to certain delimited, specialized or sectarian spaces that will keep them from spreading, or from which they will emerge only in an encrypted form indecipherable to the majority of people.¹³ It therefore makes sense even today to dwell on the importance of the feminist practice of collective discussion, carried out among women; often demeaned and opposed, this practice risks, if not extinction, then certainly a future of continuing marginalization, in part as a result of the difficulties inherent in communicating among women of different generations.

Developing feminist theory and practice is by its very nature a work in progress that cannot culminate in a permanently demarcated agenda, much less solidify into a set ideological stance. I believe this is the best legacy that the generation of “historical feminists” has left for the generations that follow. And yet it is precisely this aspect of feminist “discourse” that (primarily younger) women now view as a possible source of weakness and, sometimes, even inconclusiveness. In this

“postmodern” age, a movement that prioritizes the need to valorize subjective experience and locates factual reality at the center of its theories and politics¹⁴ might easily be judged obsolete. Or it might instead help women and men move beyond the horizon of “simulation” (Baudrillard, 1988, 1993) that continues to dominate much of our lives. In the “flat world” (Friedman, 2005) the dominant culture, inspired by false pragmatism, glorifies decisiveness and simplification. When we are not being crushed by the mantra of “there is no alternative,”¹⁵ we mostly find ourselves facing either-or choices that we are expected to make instantaneously.

The disruptive power of feminist practices was at the center of an important gathering of women held in Paestum in late October, 2012. The site was not chosen at random: in 1976, Paestum hosted one of the last big meetings of Italian feminists. Nearly a thousand women came together to discuss, in both groups and plenary meetings, the issues most dear to them, choosing to call the event “Primum Vivere” (“to live, first”), in order to emphasize that feminist reflection begins from everyday

¹³ Some women, zealous guardians of an orthodox feminism that resists contamination from outside, also contribute more or less intentionally to this delimitation.

¹⁴ This is a reformulation of an idea developed by Luisa Muraro (2011: 33, 35).

¹⁵ Among contemporary sociologists, Zygmunt Bauman (1988) has been the most explicit in locating the dominant ideology of globalization in “TINA” (*there is no alternative*).

life and its practical needs, a particularly important assertion in the face of the contemporary economic crisis.¹⁶ During the days of Paestum, in 2012, women reaffirmed the need to prioritize personal experiences and find a way of doing politics differently than the prevailing model. To this end, no specific presentations were scheduled, even though there were many women among the organizers who had played leading roles in shaping the history of Italian feminism; there was an overall effort, even in the chosen discussion format, to break with age or prestige-based hierarchies. In addition, the conference was independently organized and financed.

The women of Paestum used the internet to post videos, transcripts of the discussions and comments and observations by the media as well as their own notes and reflections.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the event appears to have had a limited resonance outside of feminist circles. The conference was restaged in October of 2013, this time taking as its motto “*Libera ergo sum*” (“I am free, therefore, I am”). In this second edition, attention focused on the consequences of the economic crisis and the issue of employment insecurity, key issues for everyone, not only women. Paestum

2013 also offered the chance for an initial moment of dialogue between different generations of women and feminists. And yet this second gathering did not receive – and perhaps did not even seek – the attention it deserved in public opinion.

The demonstrations held by the movement “*Se non ora quando?*” had garnered more media attention, probably due to the fact that the contestation was initially directed at the Berlusconi government. We cannot avoid asking, however, whether the greater attention achieved by this movement was not in part a product of the organizers’ choice to use conventional communicational channels, such as TV commercials, and to involve well-known journalistic and cinematic figures. I believe this communicational strategy conditioned not only the relative diffusion of the movement’s message, but also its nature. “*Se non ora quando?*” chose to focus on several key issues such as employment, political representation, and – more recently – violence against women. It involved high-profile women of various political orientations and set them up as spokeswomen for the movement. The issues selected, along with the choice to entrust the movement’s message to familiar

¹⁶ <http://paestum2012.wordpress.com/>. See also Sandra Rossetti in this volume.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

faces, proved to be effective strategies in terms of communication. However, in these choices as well “Se non ora quando?” seems to have shrugged off the weightiest legacy of Italian feminism, namely its character of a radical proposition aimed at subverting the male order. The slogan itself – “If not now, when?” – alludes to the idea that women in recent decades have gotten lost along the way, have discussed too much and failed to reach the degree of incisiveness necessary to achieve gender equality. In short, they chose self-awareness at the expense of focused and effective political action.

In many respects “Se non ora quando?” might look more like capitulation than a comeback for women, but the movement has raised a problem that cannot be ignored even by feminists who refuse to consider giving up the historical legacy of feminism and the richness of its proposals: why we are still so far achieving the goals we had established? Does all blame lie with the patriarchal system and its ability to change in response to the feminist challenge, or might it reside, at least in part, with women’s movements themselves?

While in Italy women’s movements were once again taking the floor, from the United States Anne-Marie Slaughter made a provocative announcement indicating that women

elsewhere share in this belief that we still have a long road ahead of us. In an article published August 2012 in the “Atlantic” (Slaughter, 2012) the well-known international political analyst explained her decision to step down as the first female director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department. Slaughter resigned in order to take care of her teenage son, who was having problems in school.

The article had wide-ranging reverberations and Slaughter’s choice was discussed extensively in the U.S.A. Indeed, many women of Slaughter’s generation could not help but view this conclusion by the foreign policy expert, who had been engaged in feminist battles for decades, as an admission of defeat, and younger could not help but see it as a call to abandon the fight for equality. Slaughter argues that family and work are incompatible for women in many cases. This is true for women working in positions that do not allow for flexible scheduling at all levels, but in particular at the highest levels of professional and institutional employment. In her view, it is crucial to look first to this level because only female leadership is capable of identifying the reforms necessary to enable reconciliation between work commitments and family life. A female presence in the seats of power is the

prerequisite for social change.¹⁸ According to her argument, without changes in the organization of work, women “can’t have it all,” even when familial organization and men’s participation in childcare would seem to make it possible. In Slaughter’s view, for women who have children, the role of mother takes precedence over all other roles. For many women, giving up an active role in the family means giving up a part of their identity that is simply too important. In such cases, therefore, women prefer to quit their jobs.

Slaughter’s critique concerns the plight of women who can afford to work rather than staying home; it consciously does not speak to the situation faced by many women who cannot enter the labor market because they are obliged to look after their families.¹⁹ One might criticize the “elitist” idea behind such an argument, that is, the belief that changing society requires changing the elite class. At the same time, however, the argument that it is useless to demand greater female representation in

leading institutional positions if our ways of organizing work and managing “power” fail to account for gender difference, does appear convincing. Too often the women we see achieving high-level public and private careers have lives that are either exceptional – women who have succeeded in spite of everything – or exactly the same as those of their male counterparts: single women without children or the wives or daughters of powerful men chosen in that they represent their male relatives²⁰. Not to mention the fact that, even when women do manage to work in male-dominated environments, they often end up “assimilating”²¹. Sooner or later every woman who has worked in a male-dominated environment finds herself being praised for not making her gender “a burden” with phrases like “you’re good, you’re just like a man!”

Women’s personal experiences – which, incidentally, have been investigated in a substantial body of sociological literature²² – clearly indicate how far we

¹⁸ Slaughter’s position on this point appears to be the same as the “*Se non ora quando?*” movement. The article also conceals a more directly political scope, that of launching Hillary Clinton’s campaign for the presidency of the United States.

¹⁹ There are many studies on this issue; here, I would like to cite a recent special issue of the periodical *About Gender* (2013), 4, <http://www.aboutgender.unige.it/ojs/index.php/generis>

²⁰ It is obviously not my intention to argue that single women or those without children should not rise to the highest levels of public or private office. I only wish to emphasize that such success can be easier for them than it would be for women who have familial responsibilities.

²¹ Regarding the “assimilationist” strategy, see (Gianformaggio, 2005: 165-189).

²² Here I limit myself to citing an article by Rossana Trifiletti (2010) that brilliantly references this body of literature.

remain from so-called gender equality and, even more so, a valorization of gender difference. Slaughter's analysis is interesting in that, like many historic feminist battles, its proposed solution involves constructing a society that makes it possible to integrate work and family, reorganizing the latter according to the rhythms of life.²³ Perhaps there is a way to maintain the perspective of the “feminism of difference”²⁴ and prioritize an “ethics of care”²⁵ orientation while at the same time tackling the issue of female representation in politics and society.

It is also possible to critique Slaughter's idea that all mothers are so absorbed by their parental responsibilities as to experience work-related commitments as a sacrifice. And yet, in a historical moment when motherhood for many western women represents a conscious choice – if not a dream they have dedicated a great deal of energy to achieve – not being able to be with their children long enough to see them grow represents for many women not only an impairment in terms of identity but also the renouncement of a source of happiness. Perhaps we can also outstrip Slaughter in arguing that this

applies equally to many men, especially young men for whom fatherhood is often not only a choice but a true accomplishment, achieved in spite of unemployment, job insecurity and the condition of perennial “youth” imposed by the contemporary labor market and dominant culture. Organizing society and work on the basis of the demands of family life – not only child care, but also the care of other loved ones (partners, parents, brothers, sisters, etc.) – would therefore meet not only the needs of women, but also those of many men.

It would be worthwhile to valorize care-based relations not only in recognition of the needy and interdependent nature of all subjects, but also and especially because such relations bring us joy and are capable of liberating us from the bio-political exploitation of the market; at the same time, especially in Italy, such a project should be accompanied by a secular interpretation of family. In Italy, this term immediately evokes the battles waged in certain conservative Catholic circles. To speak of “family” is to speak of locking individuals up inside the claustrophobic cage of the traditional family. Placing family life at the

²³ There are many publications on this topic as well; I limit myself to mentioning a recent article by Brunella Casalini (2013) that outlines the main positions established by international feminism on the ethic of care.

²⁴ See the classic essay by Carol Gilligan (1982).

²⁵ There is a copious bibliography on this issue; besides Gilligan (1982), see for instance Tronto (1993).

center of social organization in the present age, however, must necessarily involve valorizing forms of care relations, beginning from the obvious fact that “family” comes in many shapes. In a country such as ours, the traditional family continues to represent a powerful regulatory model despite the fact that real-life examples of it are now few and far between. This is not only a product of the spread of certain conservative ideologies or the strategic, interested way a component of the political class deploys Catholicism; it is also due to the material difficulties weighing on the younger generations.

Belonging to the generation of women who, in order enter the workplace and achieve a minimum degree of economic stability, gave birth at the threshold of age forty, I have seen for myself the contemporary importance of so-called family welfare and how my peers and I were forced to organize our lives based on the economic and personal support of grandparents (and grandmothers in particular). While young men and women also follow different family patterns, ignoring the normative model of the traditional family in a significant part of

their life trajectories, they are seldom able to manage their lives without the help of the previous generations. And so in many cases the traditional model of the family regains its dominant position, undermining young couples’ independence and (sometimes unconsciously) reasserting archaic models that often work to absolve men from participating in family life. In Italy at least, rather than “wanting it all,” contemporary women “must take care of everything,” including embodying the traditional model of the “good mother, wife and daughter,” perhaps reinterpreted in the light of environmentalist or new age philosophies that celebrate the re-naturalization of the mother-child relationship and freedom from the constraints of traditional work, encouraging them to organize their lives in the name of “creativity.”²⁶

Slaughter’s agenda of valorizing gender must therefore be accompanied by a move to valorize the younger generations. This would primarily involve taking specific, material measures capable of counteracting the economic and employment insecurity faced by young women and men. For this to be conceivable, however, we must first come to grips with

²⁶ Here I would simply mention the bombardment targeting young mothers, who are blamed if they choose not to give birth naturally, breastfeed their children, eat and cook organic

products, maintain their homes as healthy environments, struggle against the many forms of pollution that besiege their children, etc. Of the many articles addressing these issues, one relevant publication is Forti, Guaraldo (2006).

the fact that generational turnover cannot be deferred and must necessarily involve a break with the past. As the psychoanalyst Francesco Stoppa has noted, it is precisely the discontinuities between the experiences of different generations that characterize generational transition. Such “gaps” are the only thing that allows the youngest men and women to construct forms of familiarity and spaces of human resistance within the current-day and future developments of globalization’s symbolic apparatuses, dominated as they are by the market and technology.²⁷ Perhaps feminism ought to take this need into account as well. As of today, this issue seems to surface only rarely in feminist debate.²⁸

This volume opens with an essay by Dolores Morondo Taramundi dedicated to reappraising the relevance and practical value of some time-honored ways of making feminist demands. In particular, the

author considers the contemporary significance of certain historical feminist terms such as “freedom,” “independence” and “emancipation”. Octavio Salazar discusses these same concepts in his text, analyzing the perspective of legal feminism and the answers it may give to the issue of cultural diversity. Sandra Rossetti likewise focuses on women’s political language, comparing the discourse of contemporary movements with that of 1970s movements as well as the political thought of Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil.

In her essay, Silvia Vida begins from a recognition of how difficult it is to reconcile liberation and women’s political subjectivity; she thus addresses the issue from two distinct yet connected perspectives: the essentialism often attributed to the particularistic positions maintained by certain threads of feminism, and the Hegelian-derived perspective put forward by Ernesto Laclau, focused on the

²⁷ Stoppa (2011). I cite Stoppa’s book because I found some of his theses interesting. This does not imply, however, that I agree with the general framework of his work, much less certain tenets of psychoanalysis that he appears to reaffirm.

²⁸ A hint of this was already visible at Paestum 2012 in the divergence between younger women interested in discussing employment insecurity and some historical feminist leaders who considered this issue less central. This clash emerged again in 2013, in part through the flash mob that a group of young women calling themselves *Femministe nove* (f9) used to present a manifesto at the first plenary session (for a discussion about this, see

<http://paestum2012.wordpress.com/tag/paestum-2013/> and the video footage of the plenary sessions that show this group’s action and the comments it provoked:

<http://paestum2012.wordpress.com/2013/10/11/vid-eo-assemblee-plenarie-paestum-2013-libera-ergo-sum/>). I personally do not agree with f9’s chosen modes of action or watchwords, but they did succeed in raising the generational issue. Perhaps what was missing in Paestum was the realization that this conflict is not between women of different generations, but rather between women and the manner of organizing relations between generations that is specific to contemporary (neo)patriarchy.

notion of “hegemony”. The article by Anca Gheaus offers an interesting point of view on gender justice, by proposing “a principle of gender justice meant to capture the nature of a variety of injustices based on gender”, focusing on the different costs of gender neutral and gendered lifestyles in contemporary societies.

The essays by Brunella Casalini, Maria Giulia Bernardini and Erika Bernacchi dwell on specific issues that are central to contemporary women’s movements and debates. Casalini analyzes the apparent re-emergence of biology in many contemporary feminist theories. Bernardini examines the impact of the insights developed by Feminist Disability Studies, while Bernacchi focuses on the challenges female migrants’ activism poses in relation to the feminist theories and practices that have taken root in Italy. Orsetta Giolo wraps up the volume by re-raising certain issues that remain unresolved. Beginning from a reflection on the persistence of patriarchy, she revisits many of the key topics addressed in the preceding essays.

(translated from Italian by Angelina Zontine and Chiara Masini)

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