Abstract: One of the main features of Italian feminism of “difference,” as seen from an international perspective, is its distinctly political vocation. This vocation is not only, nor especially, limited to the perimeter of a gender politics, but is to be found in the radical critique or in the rethinking of traditional political categories, in the invention of new practices, in the redefinition of the very sphere of politics and in the modes of its transformation. The Italian case, as far as feminism is concerned, is also characterised by the fact that this feminist political critique has been carried on for more than three decades alongside a crisis of traditional politics. The aim of this essay is twofold: one the one hand I analyse the relationship between political crisis and a critique of politics as seen in the larger framework of the relationship between the demise of patriarchy and the end of modern politics; on the other, I examine the resources which may derive from a feminist thought and practice in the present season, which, in Italy, seems marked not only by a crisis but by the collapse of democratic politics.

1. “Politics”

In his essay about and against Sarkozy, the French philosopher Alain Badiou suggests the following definition of politics:

A collective and organized action, consistent with a certain number of principles, which is able to develop in the real the consequences of an unpredictable possibility disavowed by the dominant state of things.\(^2\)

Surprisingly, this definition sounds very distant from the classic ones, which unfailingly link politics to power, order and rules,\(^3\) and at the same time it seems to be a definition of a political upheaval.

---

1  An initial version of this paper was presented at the International Conference “In Dialogue: Italian and Canadian Feminists” organised by the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women and the Italian Institute of Culture, Montreal, 22-23 September 2008. Thanks to Brett Neilson for his kind assistance with the English text.


3  See, for instance, the entry “Politics” in C. Galli and R. Esposito, *Enciclopedia del pensiero politico*,
time it sounds very close to one that might be given by the Italian feminism of sexual difference. After all, what we mean by “politics” is nothing but a relational action, able to develop in the real the consequences of an unpredictable possibility, female freedom, disavowed by the social and symbolic order. I could enter the heart of the matter at once by explaining the sense of this definition and enumerating in contrast what politics of difference is not: it is not a struggle for power or for a fair division of power between men and women; it is not a struggle for women’s inclusion in the given order; it is not a claim for rights or for laws. But all of this, I hope, will be clear later on. At first, I would question this closeness to Badiou, reading it as a good, although rare, omen for feminist dialogue with contemporary male critical thought.

For politics, our time is well known as a time of crisis. Sorely tried by globalization, Western democracies are weakened both on the side of order and on the side of conflict. The crisis of sovereignty, of representation, of participation; the crisis of universalism, the crisis of the rule of law; populism, political apathy, mass-media manipulation: the catalogue of the political pains experienced by democracies is clear to all. It brings into question not only the failed promises but also the constitutive premises of the modern political paradigm, without our catching a glimpse of therapy. Male political thought of the crisis shades into a melancholic thought of the decadence or even more of the end of politics, but it seems unable to mourn for this supposed death of politics or to image a new beginning. This melancholic tonality of political thought is not unrelated to the inability to see, and even conceive, what Badiou calls “unpredictable possibilities disavowed by the dominant state of things.” At stake here is not the utopian advent of “another possible world,” to quote a successful slogan of the no-global movement, but what already exists in the folds of present and operates for change, opening crisis to transformation. Among these unpredictable possibilities there is feminist politics and the female freedom that it has brought into the world, giving to our lives “a thread of happiness,” which although inevitably affected is not darkened by the “black sun” of depression and decline. I will try here to question this sort of emotional dissonance, which lives even within each of us, as a symptom of a larger dissonance between the crisis of modern politics and the politics of sexual difference.

2. **Contexts**

I am speaking, I know, from a specific context, the Italian one, which is different from others, and I am aware of how understanding between different contexts can be obstructed by problems of cultural translation. But I also think that it is at the cross between different contexts, “where the demand for translation is acute and its promise of success uncertain,” that theory can be born. I also feel that reconsidering Italian feminist thought by displacing it in a different language can help me to discern its qualities but also its limits: in other words, to “provincialize” it. Nevertheless I think that what still makes the “Italian case,” as it was called in the Seventies, interesting outside of Italy’s borders is how what was once the most advanced European laboratory for the expansion and reinvention of politics was reduced to the most advanced laboratory for its deformation and reduction. The post-war Italian political system was born with an anti-fascist and socially democratic oriented Constitution; the Italian Communist Party was the greatest in the West; the wave of the 1968 movement lasted for ten years; the feminist movement has always been characterized by a strong political intention. Today, Italy is ravaged by a worrying process of deconstitutionalization; the government is shared by a post-fascist, a post-Fordist and a northern-secessionist Right; the vanishing Left is composed of a moderate Democratic Party and some small communist and radical groups without any influence. Civil society is crossed by rancour against politics; labour is precarious; welfare is under attack. All the symptoms of the crisis of democracy that I have mentioned above have been worsening for the last fifteen years and now risk becoming chronic. Last but not least, the recent discovery of Silvio Berlusconi’s system of exchange among sex, power and money, involving his reward of young women with political nominations, shows a linkage between political and sexual corruption. More than a crisis, it looks like an agony of politics.

Significantly, the institutional and mass media scene of this agony is inhabited mostly by men. Sixty years after female suffrage, despite the repeated declarations of well-meaning parties and despite laws written to favour female representation, there are few women in Parliament and in elective institutions. This fact clashes with another: the growth of female presence and activism in all fields of social life, highlighted by one of the main institutes of social research as one of the most relevant factors of social change. Such a gap is usually interpreted as a proof both of the misogyny of politics and

---

8 Women are the 17% of deputies and senators in Italian Parliament.
9 See Censis Annual Reports of last decade, passim.
democracy’s incompleteness – that is, of democracy’s inability to realize itself by including women in a full citizenship. I will instead suggest that it can be read as a symptom of female distance from the codes and rituals of traditional politics, as a proof of the constitutive limit of the politics of parity between men and women, as a sign not of the incompleteness of democracy but, on the contrary, of its completeness – a completeness fully coherent with its origins.

3. Practices

I must take now a step backwards. Though current opinion dates the Italian crisis from 1989, or from the collapse of political system shaken by corruption and trials in the early Nineties, a finer analysis suggests it should be backdated to the end of the Seventies, when the “cycle of movements” that began in 1968 came to an end. According to the Italian philosopher Giacomo Marramao, it was then that “an unsticking between symbolic and material dimension” took place in the Left, producing an impoverishment and a reduction of politics.¹⁰ That unsticking is also due, maybe first of all, to Left’s deafness towards the revolution of the idea and the practice of politics carried on by feminism. So, it is to the origin of that revolution that we must return to better understand the present.

Italian feminism has never been only a gender-claim movement. Originally, in the early Seventies, it was an unrestrainable process of female presa di coscienza e di parola (self-awareness and speaking-up for oneself). This process revealed at once its disruptive potential on the status of politics as a whole: on the who, what, how of politics. At that time, many of us were active supporters of the 1968 movement, the New Left groups or the Communist Party. We shared their promises of equality and fraternity, until it became clear that the promise of equality required a too high price of homologation to men and the promise of fraternity concealed, as Antoinette Fouque wrote commenting upon May 1968, the construction of a “fratriarchy” which was more narcissist and no less exclusive than the already declining patriarchy.¹¹ When we suddenly separated ourselves from these groups and parties, our cut registered, as Lia Cigarini has recently remembered, a real exodus from traditional politics, an exodus that split the public sphere and gave life to a female agora based only on the free relation between and among women. Then, according to Cigarini, “began male silence, incapacity for understanding, escape from conflict between the sexes.” And then began crisis of politics. Since that time, this crisis has concealed “a disavowed and unsolved

male question,”¹² which heavily weighs on the crisis of politics. How heavily is clear today, if we consider “Berlusconi-gate” as an emblematic case of the “misery of the masculine.”¹³

I agree with Cigarini that male incapacity to come to terms with women’s separation in the Seventies has something to do with the auto-referential separation of politics from society today. Nonetheless, there is something else: that original feminist cut made the announcement of a necessary change both in the boundaries and forms of politics, an announcement that traditional politics was unable to countenance and which it answered not with a disavowal, but worse, with a regression.

Under the slogan “the personal is political,” the female presa di parola broke into the public sphere, introducing a huge set of experiences and materialities that had been unrecognised or repressed by official political language: body, sexuality, affects, desires, fantasies, fears. The unconscious and sexual difference together gave the bill to the neutral, abstract, sovereign and rationalist individual of modern political anthropology. It wasn’t only a question of pulling down the distinction of public and private that grounded Western politics, nor merely of introducing sexist power in the map of power’s micro-physics or of listing women in the catalogue of the oppressed. The question was a jump in the very form of political rationality. New practices and new forms of agency were required to mobilize subjectivity.

I think that it is from this viewpoint that we must consider the so-called “primacy of practices” – self-consciousness, the practice of the unconscious, the practice of relation between women, the practice of disparity – that characterizes Italian feminism on the international map of feminism. There is no time here to give an account of each of these practices and how they have changed our singular and collective lives.¹⁴ I limit myself to underlining some features which are common to all of them. Practice is neither theory’s younger sister nor a means subordinate to an end nor the concrete verification of an abstract ideal. It is – again – a cut in the established social-symbolic order, a cut that opens a space in which it is possible to publicly act and speak of what is repressed, forbidden or disavowed. This introduces to the political sphere questions and feelings usually considered unpolitical and thus shows that “not everything is, but everything can become political.”¹⁵

Practice is, furthermore, a relational act which in turn enacts a relational subject, giving social form and visibility to the primary relationship with the mother that is foreclosed in the patriarchal symbolic order. It is a significant and performative act, which simultaneously modifies the person who performs it and the context in which it is performed. In this way, two divisions that usually block transformative and subversive movements are overcome: the split between the transformation of reality and the transformation of the self and the split between the palingenetic vision of future and repetitive behaviour in the present. Last but not least, practice is an eminently, although not exclusively, linguistic act, which returns to language its function of mediation of social exchange, considering it a priority mediation with respect to those of which traditional politics makes use, such as organization, roles, rules, laws.

We can now come back to the “unsticking” that according to Marramao lies at the origin of the crisis of politics in Italy. In light of the inventive sequence of feminist practices, it can be noted that traditional politics collapses exactly at the point where the politics of sexual difference raises the stakes of the political wager. On one hand, the perimeter of politics becomes larger; on the other, it narrows. On one hand, there is the politicization of the personal, on the other the privatization of the public. On one hand, the female difference from the figure of twenty-century male-militant emerges, on the other hand, political professionalism stiffens to become like an empty parody of that male figure. On one hand, the organizational cage of the party is abandoned in favour of free relationships among women; on the other hand, the vitality of the mass-party is extinguished but the organizational cages remain. On one hand, the linguistic and communicative root of politics – I mean, the same root that Hannah Arendt put at the heart of the life of polis – rises in the foreground; on the other hand, this root dries up in an increasingly auto-referential language, or perverts itself in televisual talk. On one hand, there is political work on the imaginary and symbolic; on the other hand, both the prudent rationalism without imagination of the moderate Left and the colonisation of the imagination by Berlusconi’s television empire allows politics to become the hostage of unelaborated instincts (from xenophobia and securitarian anxieties to compulsive identifications with leaders and blind submission to a trivial ethos of personal appearance and conformist fashion) which do not enter the circle of politicization of experience.

I am fully aware that each of these drifts of the crisis of politics is due to multiple reasons and cannot be traced back just to the irruption of feminism. I also know that the invention of feminist practices answers specific necessities of a subject historically extraneous to the language and forms of modern politics, and is therefore marked by a partiality that cannot be generalized. That invention, however, challenged politics to change, and that challenge
was not taken up. As we know from psychoanalysis, in front of the necessity of a change one can jump ahead or regress. In Italy, when faced with the jump required by the female practice of separation, male politics regressed.

4. Genealogy

But this is not only an Italian story. And I do not think that it is traceable just to a male inability to answer the event of feminism. It needs to be interpreted, in my opinion, as an index of the triangle formed by the decline of modern politics, the end of patriarchy and the birth of the subject of sexual difference. This triangle which took shape in the last decades of the 20th century has since then become ever more decisive in the game called the destiny of politics which is played all over the world. I began with 1968, and today, in the year of its fortieth anniversary, we have the necessary critical distance to rethink that date not only as an explosion of subjectivity, but also as a rupture in the history of modern politics, particularly in the history of the suture between modern politics and patriarchy. As we know from feminist analyses on the social contract and its narrative, this suture is ensured by the Oedipal apparatus: that is, by the symbolic ritual, explored by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, that allows brothers to make a fraternal pact to inherit and share father’s power by sacrificing him and excluding women. During the long history of modernity, this apparatus ensures the continuity of the symbolic order beyond (and in spite of) the discontinuity of political regimes (that is, also in case of political revolutions). To say it by quoting Derrida, it ensures the male genealogy of politics through “the installation of male difference in the hereditary transmission of power” from father to sons. It is this apparatus that breaks with the eruption of feminism from within the anti-authoritarian revolution of 1968.

What happens with this eruption is not simply an addition of the sexual conflict to the anti-authoritarian one. It is rather an earthquake in the symbolic order, as the sister’s revolt against her brothers criss-crosses the son’s revolt against fathers, preventing its closure with a new sexual-social contract among the parricidal brothers that excludes and subdues women with their consent or silence. The Oedipal apparatus is jammed. The male genealogy of modern politics ensured by the installation of male difference in the hereditary transmission of power, which implies the sacrifice of the father, is inter-

---

ruptured by the installation of female difference in the critique of power, which implies the relationship with the mother. The symbolic order is scrambled. The suture between modern politics and patriarchy is broken.

It is this situation we refer to when we speak – in political, not sociological terms – of the “end of patriarchy,” meaning the end of female consent to patriarchal order, a consent that since the beginning of feminism has been faltering and today cannot be taken for granted, either where patriarchal power seems strong or where it seems to be becoming strong again, inside as well as outside the West. And it is from this situation that some sharp analyses of the changing of political subjectivity after 1968 move, taking into account the consequences of the “father’s decline” for the male Bildungsroman but ignoring or undervaluing how the resignification of sexual difference and of the mother plays in this post-oedipal set-up. One could discuss this point from a psychoanalytic point of view. From a political one, I will limit myself to emphasise how the resignification of sexual difference affects the status of democracy and the ontological constitution of the political subject at the end of the era of modern politics. In fact, the breaking of the suture between modern politics and the patriarchal symbolic order, as well as the interruption of male political genealogy, is not without consequences for the crisis of contemporary democracy.

5. Ontology

The necessity to rethink political ontology is emerging today in all the best analyses of the crisis of politics in the global era. These analyses focus correctly not only on the waning of the state form, but more profoundly, on the mutation involving subjectivity, the basic structures of the ego’s formation and of social relations, cultural and trans-cultural codes, violence, precariousness, vulnerability and other affects that circulate in the public sphere. The central point is the exhaustion of the paradigm of modern politics and the ontology it was founded on. In other words, the collapse of that powerful construction based on the individual-Leviathan couple that reigned uncontested over the West from the 17th to the end of the 20th century. The sovereign state and the sovereign individual were born together and are dying together. The contribution brought to, or better, the cut made inside contemporary political theory by the thought of sexual difference needs to be situated at this level.

Before going on, I must introduce an important parenthetic clause about the very expression “thought of sexual difference,” which is often misunderstood in our dialogues with other feminist thinkers. “Sexual difference” is well known as a French notion (Irigaray, Kristeva), which has had its own theoretical and political development in Italy, and which many anglophone feminist theorists distrust, considering it a late-metaphysical and essentialist notion and opposing to it to post-structuralist theories of gender. I cannot enter deeply this debate here: elsewhere I have questioned its cultural and philosophical premises, trying on the one hand to show the convergences and false opposition between these positions, and on the other to outline in a different way the real conflicts that cross this dispute. I limit myself to confirm that “sexual difference” is neither the name of a quintessence of femininity or of a female collective identity, nor – like gender – a mere cultural construction. It is an element of human constitution that stays – or, better, “vacillates,” accepting a formulation by Judith Butler – at the threshold between nature and culture and between the psychic and the social, where it is exposed to historical and political signification. It is not therefore a fixed datum but an open signifier, which is an object as well as an agent of interpretation and signification. In fact, what we call “politics of sexual difference” is nothing but our wager to interpret and signify it freely: that is, independently from the two paradigms which imprisoned it before feminism – the hierarchical paradigm of sexist domination, where “sexual difference” is synonymous of female oppression, and the egalitarian (democratic and/or Marxist) paradigm, where it is destined to dissolve into neutralization or assimilation. Finally, what we call the “thought of sexual difference” is nothing but a theoretical practice corresponding to this wager. It is not a systematic theory of sexual difference, but a style of thinking which does not abstract from it and resignifies it “beginning from oneself,” keeping alive the original feature of feminism as a movement of sexed subjectivity that cannot be reified into a female question or a gender identity.

As I conceive it, the thought of sexual difference is therefore a thought twice marked from both historical and experiential contingencies; a thought which puts forward not the problem of constructing or deconstructing gender according to a sociology of identity, but the problem of rethinking subjectivity according to an ontology of difference. It is a thought which consequently

---


– and not least – works within the political present and within philosophies of present in a clean anti-identitarian sense.  

So, who is the non-identitarian subject that emerges from within this thought? Whereas the modern individual was – as from the word’s very etymology – undivided and one, neutral, sovereign in its rationality, a voluntary actor in the social contract, an independent atom among other independent atoms, the subject of difference is an embodied and sexed singularity, born of tensions between reasons and drives, marked from and depending on relationships to others, first and foremost on the relationship to the mother as the matrix of life. It is so a subject which is no longer one, an individual that is no longer undivided, an identity which is no longer self-identical or self-identified, but always dislocated and crossed in its own constitution by difference and alterity, with regard to the other and even inside itself. Strictly speaking, the subject of sexual difference is no longer an “individual” as conceived by the lexicon of modern politics. Consequently, the whole lexicon of modern politics feels the effects of this shift. Equality, liberty, fraternity, power, authority, representation, right and rights turn out to be marked by the neutralization of sexual difference and need to be rethought in the perspective of the sexed subject.

In this perspective, in fact, we have discovered the homologizing implications of equality as well as the exclusionary feature of a fraternity that erases women from the social pact. We have questioned the abstract nature of juridical mediation, the unfitness for a relational subject of the individualistic grammar of rights, the depoliticizing valence implied in leftist strategies entirely based on claims for and the defence of rights. We have explored the problematic overlapping between power and authority, the secret connections between the totem of power and male sexuality, the possible resignification of authority as a maternal authorization to our desires. We have inquired into the relationship between political and linguistic representation in order to explain why gaining access to representative institutions is so difficult for women, who have been for ages excluded from political language and the political imaginary.

Each of these points would merit serious consideration for which there is insufficient space here. As I have previously used the term “female freedom,” and as the passage from the paradigm of female oppression to that one of female freedom is crucial in Italian feminism, let me spend a few more words about the resignification of freedom carried on within the thought of sexual difference (which is in this, and not only in this, indebted to Hannah Arendt’s

---

thought). Female freedom is far from the advertising of freedom broadcast every day by the American and European neo-liberals and neo-conservatives. It is not a development but a critique both of liberal democratic and Marxist theories of liberation. It is not the freedom of an atomized individual, nor the project of a collective liberation from domination that can always be postponed in the future. It is a relational freedom of in-between singularities, and it is freedom in action, lived in the present, experienced here and now. It is not the delusion of omnipotence of a rational, independent and sovereign subject, but a continuous negotiation between autonomy and dependence. It is not a freedom founded on and guaranteed by formal rights, but an experience exposed to risk and open to the unpredictable. It is an event that is renewed each time a displacement in relations of power takes place, a decentring of phallocentrism, and an opening of new spaces of sense and signification. It is thus a freedom that opens up in the present and modifies it: in brief, “an unpredictable possibility disavowed by the dominant state of things” which the politics of difference has begun to bring into light. How this kind of freedom acts today in the complex landscape of western democracies is the last point I wish to explore.

6. Democracy

As a whole, the critique addressed to the conceptual constellation of modern politics by the thought of sexual difference introduces a grain of healthy diffidence toward the democratic religion that has been pervading the globalised world since 1989. The history of the original exclusion and the later half-inclusion of women into citizenship teaches us that the modern democratic paradigm, entirely constructed to suit the modern individual and its logic of identity and seriality, is undermined from its very beginnings by the disavowal of sexual difference and of difference tout court. It is therefore not endlessly flexible: it does not tolerate the movement of difference and tends either to reduce it to the logic of assimilation, or to bring it back into the logic of identity. In effect, when women are included in citizenship it is either at the price of their assimilation to men, or otherwise at the price of a translation of sexual difference (which concerns the constitution of the subject and the symbolic exchange) into a gender identity (that is, into one among other social groups in competition for recognition and for the distribution of resources, quotas, power and so on). In the first case, the principle of equality shows its neutralizing tendency; in the second case, the logic of identity

---

is reconfirmed under the mask of the democratic pluralism of differences, which strictly speaking is a pluralism of different identities. Moreover, as we know from problems of multicultural societies and from philosophical and political debate on multiculturalism, these dynamics multiply, following the same logic, when ethnic, cultural, religious identities join or cross gender identity. In the global world, the couple difference/identity turns out to be the litmus paper of universalism's paradoxes. And I think it is historically a common merit of both the thought of sexual difference and post-structuralist gender-theories to have shown that difference can play as an opening to alterity and speak the language of freedom when it is conceived and acted upon as a displacing and undoing of identity. Conversely, it can play as a closing in one's own boundaries and speak the language of violence when it is claimed and brandished as the armour of identity. From the history of recent years, we know the consequences for democracy and universalism in this second case. But what could they be in the first one? What does the status of (sexual) difference say about the status and the destiny of democracy today?

When I mentioned a short while ago the "democratic religion" that has been pervading the world in recent decades, I was not referring just to the warmongering propaganda of Western governments, which in the name of democracy's triumphal destiny export it with bombs among the infidels. Also in the field of critical and radical political thought, in spite of complaints for all the symptoms of democracy's crisis that I have enumerated above, the democratic project is confirmed and reasserted. It is as if this crisis was just a betrayal of democracy's premises or a detour from an ideal that must be revitalized. In other words, democracy is becoming today the only horizon of thinkability for our political experience and of desirability for our political imagination.

Nevertheless there are some relevant exceptions in this landscape. It is the case of Badiou in the book I have mentioned above. And this is also the case of the Italian philosopher Mario Tronti. For Tronti, the crisis of democracy we are confronted with today is not a betrayal, degeneration or corruption of the original democratic model, but a realisation of its premises, an outcome inscribed in its very root. The democratic project is not an ideal "to-come." Rather it has been realized and completed. As for socialism, there is no break between the idea and the historical experiment: democracy is real (that is, actually existing) democracy. And in real democracies there are two irreducible factors of conflict: freedom and difference. Freedom because, far from realizing the autonomy and independence of the bourgeois individual, homo democraticus inhabits Western societies like an isolated and massified atom, apathetic and dependent, susceptible to pervasive forms of control (mass media manipulation, colonization of desire by the market, the plebiscitary construction of consensus); and all of this occurs in the shadow of guaranteed consti-
tutional rights, which, in expanding the spectre of juridical freedoms, do not obstruct the hemorrhageing of political freedom that afflicts our democracies.

The second irreducible factor of conflict is sexual difference, and difference tout court, because it questions both the neutral character of the individual and the universalism of the demos, and in this way reveals and attacks the identitarian root of democracy, which in Tronti’s mind must lead back to the identity of demos and kratos. Indeed, it is this identity that in the course of time has realized popular sovereignty as the “kratos of the demos, the power of the mass over anyone” and the “process of homogenization or massification of thoughts, sentiments, tastes, behaviours,” a sort of “auto–dictatorship” close to voluntary servitude. (Sexual) difference is not an element that can be expansively included in democracy; it is its destabilizing element. If the democratic order constructs itself on an identitarian base and consolidates and globalizes itself through the assimilationist and homogenizing valence of equality, difference is the element that disorders this double base. If the identitarian and assimilationist root of the democratic order limits human and political freedom, difference is the refounding element of freedom, or, to put it in other words, the category on the basis of which to rethink the subject. As well as the thought of sexual difference, which Tronti explicitly refers to, the semantics of freedom and the grammar of difference touch each other in his project “for the critique of democracy.”

Tronti is an “apocalyptic” thinker and I am aware that his diagnosis can sound too apocalyptic, or even close to what Jacques Rancière would condemn as an elitist “hate for democracy.” But no one could deny that it presents more than one grain of truth, and that it gives an account of, and rigorously delineates the consequences of, the historical excess of sexual difference from the democratic order. Nevertheless, something to say remains about the question of “completion” of democracy that Tronti justly assumes as a bar against the ideologies of a still-to-come completion of the democratic project or of its reformability. It is indeed a strange completion that contains an element of chronic incompleteness such as the still incomplete inclusion of women in democratic citizenship and in the seats of representation and power. And this is, in my opinion, a question that crucially divides the international panorama of feminism: to say it in a trenchant way, between those – feminists of parity – who read this incompleteness as a deficit and a “not yet,”


and those – feminists of difference – who read it as an excess and a “no more.” In the first case, democracy will be complete only when it will have included women (and parity with men is the measure of this progression). In the second case, democracy is complete insofar as the semi-inclusion (or semi-exclusion) of women fractures it constitutively (and difference is the sign of this original and destined extraneousness, which the feminist revolution has turned into distance and criticism). In the first case feminism is engaged for the coherence and the completion (still-to-come) of the modern project; in the second one, to open the modern project to female excess and, in so doing, to go beyond it.

This conflict that agitates the feminine-feminist democratic scene throughout the 20th century is today no mere secondary matter. At stake is the faith in what I called above the democratic religion, which is sustained by the priestesses of parity as much as it is contested by the disbelievers of difference. The democratic states of the late 20th century responded to the explosion of sexual difference in the Seventies with a strategy of “obsessive parity.” And the democratic Empire of today intensifies the same strategy in the war of conquest of the “infidel” women wherever they hide, in the Western metropolises as much as in Afghan villages and Iraqi cities. The clash of civilizations, or the war for the planetary hegemony of democratic religion, will not be won until the resistance of female difference and the female incredulity toward democratic homogenization, whether pre- or postmodern, is crushed.

But it is hard to crush, as shown by the insolubility of some emblematic conflicts concerning sexual difference within the usual neutralizing democratic prescriptions, such as the struggle over the French law on the veil, or the debate that forced the Quebec government to overturn a decision allowing Muslim women wearing niqabs to vote without showing their faces in the 2007 Quebec election. It is only necessary to recall the ordinary irreducibility of women’s political growth to the parameters of power and of representation, as well as the limits of women’s engagement in work subsumed the capitalistic parameter of value. Or the irreducibility to the contractual form of the birthing power of the mother, which shows the limits of the masculine political generativity celebrated by the narrative of the social contract. In so far as it is complete despite the incompleteness of female inclusion, democracy shows its limits in the light of sexual difference, revealing the partiality of its measures and mediations, and asking our political imagination to think not against, but beyond its horizon.

30 See Diotima, L’ombra della madre.
7. *Threads*

Let me try to pull some threads together. As Luisa Muraro once wrote, what happened with feminism “is something that we have not finished understanding.”\(^31\) It opened a movement of subjectivity that for four decades has changed not only both our personal lives and public sphere, but also and crucially the very measures of change itself. In politics and in the public sphere, according to the measures of power and representation, the change has been limited. But according to the measures of female freedom, of dislocation from phallocentrism, of the end of patriarchy, of the shift “from the exchange of women to the exchange among women,”\(^32\) the change has been enormous. One of the problems of politics today is its blindness in front of this alteration of the measures of change, a blindness which in turns alters perception of current transformations.

As we saw, it is not by accident that the crisis of politics is coeval and coextensive with the rise and development of the politics of women. Undoubtedly, the politics of women have been an active factor in the crisis of politics; but it does not follow that the former works to resolve the latter, nor that female change – which in turn is not exempt from regression – will succeed in marking in a decisive and recognisable way the current larger change in our democracies and in the global world. This paradox has to be explored. It reflects, according to Muraro, the unsolved position of women with respect to the universal:

Who are women, humanity or a part of it? When women change what does change, humanity or a part of it? How can we pass from feminine to universal? Does a female position exist that includes men without bring them back to the maternal womb? Can men assume for themselves what women think? Do men actually feel involved in female change? Or do men go on their own history, in which, as we know, women are and let themselves to be involved even too much?\(^33\)

I report these questions to you, leaving them open.

But Muraro adds that, in periods of transition like this one we live today,


we must know that clashing things can coexist, and that things can seem more clashing than they will seem in the light of future developments that we ignore now.  

I think that the thought and the practice of sexual difference have made us able to see and interpret this coexistence, and that to be able to see this coexistence enlarges in turn our view of the present and the present itself, opening it to developments that a narrower view forecloses. In other words, the asymmetry between the politics of difference and the crisis of politics obliges us to keep a sort of cross-eyed view on the present, both on the best and the worst of our present, keeping in mind that relations between the sexes are also involved in both the best and the worst of this present. According to mythology, Venus’s strabismus is a defect that increases her fascination, but nothing prevents us from supposing that it also increase her sharpness. As for us, strabismus can preserve us from delusions of onnipotence and from considering female freedom as a progressive or definitive conquest, which is not subjected, like it indeed is, to counterthrusts, backlashes, regressions. But strabismus also preserves us from being trapped in the melancholic affect of the decline of modern politics, allowing us to focus female freedom as a possibility at once disavowed and unpredictable which has come to light and which moves the present, complicates and agitates it, makes it breathe, opens it to other disavowed and unpredictable possibilities. This means nothing but opening up again the circle of the generativity of politics.

Ida Dominijanni  
Comunità filosofica “Diotima,” University of Verona  
ida.dominijanni@gmail.com

Ibid.