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# Open Forum

## Women and Gender Studies, Italian Style

Veronica Pravadelli

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In March 2009 the University of Roma Tre hosted the conference 'Gendering the Academy: Italian Experiences and Experiments', sponsored and organized by the *European Journal of Women's Studies* via Paola Bono, professor at Roma Tre and associate editor of the journal. The conference focused on the teaching and research on women and gender as well as on the status of the female academic population in Italian universities. It aimed at detailing the 'national specificity' of such experiences in relation to other international contexts. One can indeed argue that there is such a thing as an 'Italian style' in gender studies and that it can be grasped and framed within a cultural, historical and generational perspective. Starting from the conference's premises I would like to present the main contours of these experiences.

It has often been claimed that the peculiarity of Italian feminism resides in its dual nature, namely its mobile position between theory and practice, academic research and politics. In their impressive anthology of Italian feminist writings, in 1991 Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp claimed that the most distinctive feature of Italian feminism is its non-institutional basis, a result of 'the importance of politics for Italian feminism, reflecting the strongly political character of Italian society in general'. In this fashion 'Italian feminism helps bridge an uncomfortable inconsistency between feminism's theoretical refusal to countenance "master narratives" and the political ascendancy of certain canonical texts in France, Britain and America' which rapidly became 'classic feminist texts'. While in these countries feminist theory has become increasingly institutionalized, some have started to blame its supposed results, the 'rift between the theoretical and the personal, writing and life'. On the other hand, so far 'there have been no "women's studies" . . . in Italian universities'. Instead of trying to institutionalize these issues, in Italy feminist scholars 'manage to carve out a space in the curriculum as it is' (Bono and Kemp, 1991: 2-3; on this

topic see also de Lauretis, 1989). Such a position has been the dominant one in Italian feminism: that is, in Italy the lack of institutionalization of women's studies has been consciously decided by feminists. The anti-institutional thrust of Italian feminism has been pursued by relentless separatist strategies. However, a younger generation of female academics, 'around 40', mainly educated abroad, has recently developed. As we see, such a generation supports a different view on these matters. In order to grasp the specificity of the Italian context it is first necessary to dwell on its historical development.

In the 1970s western feminists, not simply Italians, debated their status vis-a-vis any institutional context, especially academia. At that time many believed, on both sides of the Atlantic, that the radical thrust of feminist thought could not develop simply within the institutional arena of the university. Moving in and out of academia and of the women's movement defined the very nature of feminism in *any* western country. In the heyday of 'the personal is the political', feminists working in academia were also active in feminist groups and engaged in the battles for women's rights. The convergence between theory and practice can also be tested at another level: feminist academics worked alongside non-academics in different social contexts and cultural practices. To give just a couple of examples drawn from my specific area of research, we can think of the peculiar convergence of women's cinema and feminist film theory in the 1970s and early 1980s. In those days, filmmakers, academics, cultural critics and activists regularly met at film festivals, at screenings in colleges and artistic venues to discuss, to be brief, the politics and aesthetics of women's experimental cinema (Ruby Rich, 1998). It is important to stress that such debates always involved theoretical concerns to the extent that, for example, many films included a discussion of feminist (and) psychoanalytic theory or a visual representation of psychoanalytic processes. E. Ann Kaplan coined the term 'avant-garde theory-film' for works in which 'theory is worked into the text as an integral part of its form' (Kaplan, 1983: 142). A similar convergence between politics and theory is at the heart of Laura Mulvey's seminal piece 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey, 1975). While Mulvey was not an academic when she wrote the piece, but became one later, we should first of all recall that the strength of her essay resides in its unparalleled fusion of a militant rhetoric with an extremely sophisticated theoretical apparatus. Interestingly, in a recent reassessment, Mandy Merck has interpreted the piece as a political manifesto in the tradition of Futurism and Surrealism (Merck, 2007). And Mulvey was both a theorist and an avant-garde filmmaker. I have brought up these two examples in relation to British and American feminism in order to suggest that the alliance between theory and practice, in the early stages of feminism, was an essential feature of western second-wave feminism. At the time the primary tenets of the debate were clearly

theoretical, in the sense that there was no gap between theory and politics. To put it more clearly, the alliance between theory and practice, institutional and non-institutional contexts, was the historical specificity of 1970s feminism.

In this light, the experience of Italian feminism was totally congruent with that of other western countries. As in other national contexts, Italian academics have been teaching 'women's issues' in many disciplines since the mid-1970s. The international and cosmopolitan thrust of 1970s feminism can also be appreciated if one looks at the reception and translation of important works into Italian. The interdisciplinary journal *dwf.donnawomanfemme*, founded in 1975, has been for many years the most important feminist journal. *Dwf* has pursued a consistent politics of translation. It readily translated the two most quoted feminist essays of the 1970s, Gayle Rubin's 'The Traffic in Women' (1975/1976) and Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975/1978). The journal also translated Adrienne Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980/1981) as well as essays by feminist sociologists and historians such as Linda Gordon, Ruth Milkman and others. Book-length studies were translated with a similar eagerness: we may think of the early Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969/1971) and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970/1971), Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974/1976), Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976/1977), and of the Boston Women's Collective's *Our Body, Ourselves* (1974/1974), which was the first of some 20 translations around the world (Davis, 2007: 214–16). The major exponents of French feminist thought were also made available to the Italian audience: consider Luce Irigaray's *Speculum* (1975/1976) and *Ce sexe qui n'est pas un* (1977/1978), and Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* (1973/1977). In the following decade we should recall at least Joan Scott's fundamental essay 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' (1986/1987), which spurred a lively debate among Italian women historians.

While the impact of Italian feminism abroad cannot be compared to American, British and French thought, we should at least recall the important contribution to the international debate made by major thinkers such as Teresa de Lauretis and Rosi Braidotti. Educated in the Department of Semiotics at the University of Bologna, directed by Umberto Eco, de Lauretis moved to the US and became, in the 1980s, one of the leading feminist cultural theorists. One can safely argue that her first major book in English, *Alice Doesn't: Semiotics, Feminism, Cinema* (de Lauretis, 1984), combines in an original fashion the Italian and the American intellectual contexts she was part of.

While British and American feminist thought has developed evenly in most disciplines of the human and the social sciences, in Italy feminist scholarship has not flourished consistently. Italian feminist thought has produced a massive corpus of scholarship in history, philosophy, psychoanalysis,

literary studies and sociology. Important contributions have been made in other disciplines, for example, anthropology, film and media studies. Yet, in these and other fields feminist work has been more sporadic. In order to capture the status of recent and current trends, I believe it is necessary to map out the basic tenets of the 'Italian tradition' in feminist scholarship (Di Cori and Barazzetti, 2001; Kemp and Bono, 1993). I think that the most original work has been produced mainly in the fields of history and philosophy. For this and other reasons, which can only partially be addressed here, I limit myself to detail briefly the research done in these two disciplines.

From a national and international perspective, I believe we can safely argue that the most famous experience of Italian feminism is the 'theory of sexual difference' associated with the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, the group Diotima and the work of philosophers Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero. Sharing Luce Irigaray's assumption that western philosophy had negated women a place in the Symbolic order, through a severe separatist practice known as 'autocoscienza', Italian theorists devised a conceptual framework aiming at attaining a consciousness of self as sexed subjects. Teresa de Lauretis has suggested that although this practice was adapted from North American feminism, because Italy is not only more pervasively gender-segregated but 'more thoroughly politicized than the United States', the impact of this practice was perhaps more significant for the development of feminist theory in Italy than in the US (de Lauretis, 1990). Like their French counterparts, Italian feminists argued against equality and for difference by building a rhetorical and conceptual apparatus that conjured up notions such as female genealogy and maternal symbolic order. The theory and practice of Italian sexual difference is built around two phases. While the separatism of female groups first produces a collective female subject different from men, in the second phase a relational practice among women establishes and recognizes differences among women. Therefore, 'the signifier Woman gives way to a female symbolic order that links each individual self to other women according to the practice of entrustment and difference' (Cavarero, 2002: 98; see also Cavarero, 1993). In this fashion Italian feminists recuperate the figure of the mother in a totally different way vis-a-vis the psychoanalytic uses of international feminism. Luisa Muraro's notion of the symbolic mother is central: for Muraro the mother-daughter relation is the basis for the construction of female subjectivity. For the daughter the mother is the source both of material and symbolic life, since she fuses on her own body the traditional binary opposition between mother/body and father/language (Muraro, 1991). Thus conceived, the mother-daughter relation is the most important and radical example of entrustment (*affidamento*), in which 'one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor, or point of reference – in short, the figure of symbolic mediation between her and

the world' (de Lauretis, 1990: 8–9). Read in conjunction with French theorists of sexual difference, this project has influenced enormously scholars working in literary and film studies. The most popular paradigm, to be brief, is a consideration of literature and artistic creation as the 'writing of the body' via a formal practice known as 'female language' (on cinema and female language, see Detassis and Grignaffini, 1981; Pravadelli, 2000).

While theorists of sexual difference have dominated the discipline of philosophy, women historians have pursued different lines of investigation. If the relation to the feminist movement has led researchers to take women as their object of study, in order to 'make women visible', from a methodological perspective Italian women's history has positioned itself in the tradition of microhistory, especially in relation to the 16th and 17th centuries. As we know, in all areas of research feminists have had to investigate the past in order to bring to light the work done by women. This strategy is obviously more evident in history. As Annarita Buttafuoco has stated, 'Historiography is that "technique" which is prompted by its specific status to devote itself to dissipating amnesia and cultivating memory. However, it too acts in a selective manner, leaving some experiences in limbo, and bringing others to light, according to the personal and social "point of view" which orientates the researcher' (Buttafuoco, 1993: 172). The relation between women, religion and the church is one of the most popular areas of research. Female historians have studied the lives of nuns, saints, and mystics in the medieval and the modern period along the following lines: women's critical stance towards institutions, women's material life and culture and female agency (Scaraffia and Zarri, 1999; Zarri, 2000). Feminist philosophers such as Luisa Muraro have similarly approached the topic from a theological perspective (Muraro, 1985). The study of the legal system in relation to ownership has led to investigate different status of women and men vis-a-vis such matters. As in other countries, women historians have researched extensively on such fundamental issues as marriage, work and motherhood (Rossi-Doria, 2003). While other areas and topics have been investigated, what interests me at this juncture is another level of the debate. Women historians have been particularly sensitive to reflect on the paradigms of their research and to recognize the validity of foreign contributions as well as their own pitfalls. Simonetta Soldani has pointed out, for example, how works done abroad on totalitarianism have allowed Italians to deal in a less monolithic fashion with such binary terms as public/private, fascism/anti-fascism. She has also lamented the paucity of works in the realm of material culture and in the 'history of everyday life'. Finally, Soldani has called for the transition to 'the cultural turn' in the study of contemporary Italian history (Soldani, 2003). Commenting on the status of gender studies in American history, Raffaella Baritono and Elisabetta Vezzosi have made further suggestions: they claim that Italian women's history 'should start to rebuild the networks among women in a transnational context' by

looking at how similar historical episodes have been experienced by women in different national contexts. They also point to the necessity, for Italian scholars, to broaden their areas of enquiry by working more thoroughly, for example, on the construction of masculinity (Baritono and Vezzosi, 2003).

It seems to me that it is precisely along these lines that a new generation of scholars is moving. The theory of sexual difference has been fundamental to the development of feminist thought and subjectivity. Its method and practice were congruent with the historical moment, namely, they were fit to rescue women from the position of the object and promote the construction of woman as subject. The present historical moment calls us to a different approach. In many disciplines of the human and the social sciences, a generation of gender scholars 'around 40' is thriving with new ideas and strong passions. These women (and a few men) have often been educated abroad, especially in the US, but also in England or France. They are part of a cosmopolitan academic milieu, a transnational gender studies approach that has slowly shaped up; for this reason, they often feel closer to certain foreign experiences than to the Italian feminist tradition. Their work is integrated within their specific disciplines since no women's studies programme exists in Italy. Yet, the study of gender is approached from a cultural and historical perspective in the attempt to preserve the specificity of 'local' contexts and experiences. The convergence between gender, cultural and historical perspectives is, to my mind, the most viable approach for understanding the status of women and gender in different cultural and/or national contexts. But it is also, for Italian gender scholars, the only way to affect their fields of enquiry and to rescue gender from the marginal position it has always had in Italian academia.

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