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The Challenge of the Italian 'Thought of Sexual Difference' within Gender Mainstreaming.

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ABSTRACT

My article intends to participate to the theoretical debate within gender mainstreaming focusing in particular on the epistemological basis of the feminist dichotomy sameness/difference within the conceptualization of gender equality.

I look, in the first instance, at the conceptualization of the sameness/ difference distinction within feminist philosophy. Then I analyze the paradoxes of equality within the logic of exclusion and homologation and the limits of liberal feminism theoretical framework. The core of my article is based on the 'Thought of Sexual Difference' elaborated by Italian feminist philosophers. Through their work I intend to highlight the potential long-term risks of gender policies that fail to integrate sexual difference within a dual conceptualization of being.

Key words: gender mainstreaming, thought of sexual difference, Italian feminist philosophy, gender equality, second wave feminism.

İtalyan cinsiyet farklılık düşüncesinin cinsiyet kaynaşmasına karşı duruşu

ÖZ

Bu makale, cinsiyet kaynaşımının teorik açıdan, özellikle feminist dikotomisi– aynılık/farklılık– konusunun cinsiyet eşitliliğinin kavramsallaştırılması düşüncesinin epistomolojik temellere dayanılarak yapılan tartışmasına açıklık getirme amacı gütmektedir.

Makalede ilk olarak feminist felsefesine göre aynılık/farklılık terimlerini ayırt etme durumunun kavramsalllaştırılması incelenmektedir. Sonrasında dışlama ve onaylama mantığındaki eşitlik paradoksunu ve özgürlükçü feminizmin teorik çerçevesinin limitleri tartışılmaktadır. Makalenin özü, İtalyan feminist felsefecilerinin üzerinde durduğu "Cinsel Farklılık Düşüncesi" ne dayanmaktadır. Bu düşünce ışığında cinsiyet farklılığını varoluşun ikili kavramlaştırılması düşüncesiyle entegre etmeyi başaramamış olan cinsiyet politikalarının uzun vadeli potensiyel riskleri incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cinsiyet Kaynaşımı, Cinsiyet Farklılığı, İtalyan Feminist Felsefesi, Cinsiyet Eşitliliği, İkinci Feminizm Dalgası

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My article intends to participate to the theoretical debate within gender mainstreaming focusing in particular on the epistemological basis of the feminist dichotomy sameness/difference within the conceptualization of gender equality by integrating within the debate the perspectives drawn from the Italian feminist philosophy known as 'Thought of Sexual Difference'. Gender mainstreaming, as devised by Mieke Verloo as chair of the Council of Europe Group of Experts on Gender Mainstreaming, is:

the (re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all level at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy making. (Council of Europe, 1998: 15)

However, there are different forms of gender mainstreaming related to different theories of gender equality and its conceptualization as sameness or difference. This dichotomy has been subject to a multifaceted debate within feminist theory that draws from different domains: philosophy, social and political theory, science, cultural studies, postmodernist theory etc. (Braidotti 1994; Falbre 2001; Felsky 1997; Fraser 1997; Larber 2000; Nussbaum 2000; Scott 1998; Sevenhuijsen 1998; Walby 2004). As a practice, gender mainstreaming aims to promote gender equality but one of the main issues is whether the vision of gender equality invoked by the gender mainstreaming process draws on notions of "sameness", "difference" or "transformations" (Walby 2005). In 1998, the Council of Europe has established that:

Gender equality means an equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. […] Gender equality is not synonymous with sameness, with establishing men, their life style and conditions as the norm. […] Gender equality means accepting and valuing equally the differences between women and men and the diverse roles they play in society. (Council of Europe, 1998: 7-8)

In this way, the Council of Europe has written off the traditional equal opportunity policies, which argued that women could only gain equality with men if they were able to perform according to universal standards set by men. However, this theoretical stance has been followed by a two-fold application as the text sets the equal participation in political and public life, education and economic independence as universal goals while leaving the spheres related to the family and care-work within the sites of difference. According to the text of the Council of Europe, it is therefore possible to have a model of gender equality based on sameness in some domains while keeping equality within difference in others. The issue at stake is then to understand if and how the decisions taken within one domain are going to have an influence on the others. And, in a more radical move, if it would be possible to go further and work towards a change of the mainstream, articulating a new paradigm based on modifying the standards of "sameness" instead of integrating gender within it.

To try to answer these questions I look, in the first instance, at the conceptualization of the sameness/difference distinction within feminist philosophy with their respective roots within the Anglo-American "sex/gender" and Franco-Italian "sexual difference" theories. Then I analyze the paradoxes of equality within the logic of exclusion and homologation and the limits of liberal feminism theoretical framework in relation to modifications of the symbolic order and of the question of the subject within the binary logic that assigns to man the place of subject and to woman the one of object. As a first step, to place the debate related to gender equality and sexual difference within the broader issue of the relation between sexes, I briefly investigate the very roots and reasons of a sexual differentiation in nature.

The construction of difference

The question of sexual identity and of the relations between sexes is nowadays the focal point around which are reorganized individual existences and are entrenched political and social arrangements in various domains of our lives. The claim of equality between the sexes, a question discussed from a philosophical perspective in France and in Europe in the 17th century and become political and social from the 20th century, carries over a certain number of questions and different ways to conceive the problem.

To summarize the issue we can say that, in a constant way, human societies, from the most "primitive" (according to the judgement of the ones who consider themselves civilized) to the most developed, present the same organizing structure: a hierarchy of the categories of sex (male/female) in which the male sex and the characters, functions and prerogatives that are attributed to it collectively are considered as superior to the female sex and to its related characters, functions and fields. A hierarchy that is translated in what is called "male domination" (Bourdieu 1998; Bordo 1999; Gardiner 2003; Lorber 1994; Mac Kinnon 1987; Mercader 1994;).

It appears clearly that to the category "sex" are superimposed a series of characteristics which are presumed to stem from a biological root but whose organic link cannot be clearly determined. Values, hierarchy, characters, behaviors, functions, prerogatives are all construction of the human spirit, cultural elaborations and representations that cannot be said to depend directly from the sexual character of the subject (Dorlin 2000; Héritier 1996; Gouyon 1997;). We need to say that this biological or "naturalistic" illusion comes back constantly in the discussion. It aims to give to assessed social inequalities a biological/-natural justification that would be lurking in the body and that would be illusory to deny. The central element that seems to come back is the existence in the body of women of a hidden cause of their inferiority that would be at the same time natural and intangible. In the coarser form of this argument the cause is set in the relative physical weakness (difference of size, weight, strength); in a more developed form it is located

in the handicap caused by maternity (pregnancy, caring of small children, breastfeeding); at a third level, the first two justifications are added together to the postulate of a specific feminine nature (made of routine, indolence, passivity, frivolity etc.), that can be explained by the hormonal cycle; finally, following the progress of biology, some look for this cause directly in the functioning of the brain.

To reject these hypothesis, however, neurobiology has demonstrated that the same areas of the brain are concerned in the two sexes when they perform similar activities and the inter-individual differences are more considerable than the ones a priori imputable to the specific sex. Moreover, when some particular functioning involve other areas of the brain than the habitual ones, this is the consequence, in the two sexes, of the creation of new synapses originated from the process of learning and specialization (Maccoby 1998; Gardiner 2003; Gould 1997; Ponchelet 1996; Vidal & Benoit-Browaeys 2005). As demonstrated by many studies the weight of the brain, the division right/left of the hemispheres and the utilization that everyone does of it have nothing to do with the competences linked to a specific sex: it is the creation and the utilization of particular synapses, linked to learning, that are at the origin of different competences. We are born with few synapses that are necessary (10%) and they develop all along our life according to the experiences we make. We are programmed to learn and the learning that we endure, different according to our specific sex, is at the basis of the emergence, in people's view, of the qualities and behaviors expected and codified for each sex. (Vidal 2010).

What is then the use of sexual differences as characteristic of living beings? The basic answer seems to be the reproduction of species. Nonetheless, sex as differential among individuals, the formula opposing male sex to female one is not the only alternative available in nature. In the vegetable world, there are species that show more than hundred sexes and some species, as bacteria, exchange genetic information without recurring to sexual reproduction. The common points of all modes of reproduction is the transmission, from one generation to the other, of the genetic information. However, the reproduction obtained through the union of two different sexes is the best vector as by provoking the recombination of the exchanged genetic patrimonies allows a more rapid evolution of the species.

It appears, though, that in the animal world females pay the heaviest price of sexual reproduction. If they would keep and transmit their patrimony integrally, this would reproduce indefinitely and in greater number than happens with the sexual reproduction. Within this optic males are considered as parasites: they place half of their genes in the offspring of the females, without paying the price of reproduction. If this parasitize is useful it is because it facilitates every time the production of a new combination and this accelerated novelty is necessary to evolution (Fausto-Sterling 1992; Harding 86; Héritier 2010; Smuts 1991;).

Sex/ gender vs. Sexual Difference

Starting from the 1970s, in coincidence with the development of the second wave feminism two radically new ways to understand the question of sexual difference have been developing. In the first – originated within the Anglo-Saxon world – a new category has seen the light, the one of "gender", that implies that the social expectations regarding the child and the adult are normed, framed in the collective and individual imaginary in function of the sex and so, in a certain way, the gender, this collective expectation, pre-exists the sex and shapes it (Delphy 1993; Gayle 1975; Nicholson 1994; Oakley 1972;).The second, coming from French and Italian feminist philosophy is called the "thought of sexual difference" and sees the concept of gender as insufficient to capture the interplay between the specificity of women's embodiment and the social and cultural definition of women as devalued 'other'. Therefore, if 'sex' indicates the biological difference between man and woman, and 'gender' the cultural construction that defines men and women, masculine/feminine, 'sexual difference', indicates both the biological data and the symbolic order, i.e. both the body morphology and the work of the imaginary, alluding to their indivisibility.

The patriarchal order works on a mechanism of exclusion: women belong to a subordinated sphere and are excluded from the male domains of knowledge and power. Western tradition assumes the sexual difference as opposition between masculine and feminine where the two terms are not placed on the same level, one facing the other, but are structured according to a hierarchical order of subordination and exclusion. The theory of sexual difference aims to denounce the sexist structure of patriarchal order and deconstruct the complex system of meanings and powers that is generally called symbolic order. This deconstruction shows that the patriarchal symbolic order is founded on a singular logic that, despite the fact that human beings belong to the one or to the other sex, assumes only the male sex as paradigm of the whole human race. So doing the male sex is set as representative of the human being while the feminine one results not fully human, that is to say human but of an inferior order, not completed. In the patriarchal symbolic order, the sexual difference is not understood as a difference that divides the human beings in man and women but as a difference that makes women differ from men. As the human being is modelled on the universal concept of Man, the difference of women from men becomes a difference that corresponds to a lack or inferiority. As man is endowed fully with the qualities considered human (for example reason) man is considered superior to woman who instead misses them. By "nature" man is able to rule and woman to obey. Always by nature, man occupies the places of knowledge and politics while women belong to the domestic sphere and to the nurture works. Women seem to belong naturally to the domestic and care domain so natural becomes in the course of different eras synonym of normal, that is to say compliant to the norm.

Nature is thus a concept that depends from a process of normalization carried out by the ones who decide the norms (Cavarero 2003; Cavarero & Restaino 2002).

The paradox of equality

Since two centuries, from the equalitarian drive led by French Revolution, formal equality, though ratified by laws and by Constitution, does not correspond to a substantial equality in actions. In all fields where power counts (politics, economy, finance etc.), women are few and in subordinated roles. This situation is a coherent effect of the logic paradox that informs the principle of equality. This paradox is incorporated in the same historical origin of the equalitarian model that, though declaring null the differences among men, does not declare null the sexual difference. The equality principle is extremely revolutionary in what concerns men but, at the same time, radically conservative regarding women. In respect to women in fact it does not touch the old distinctions between the public sphere, reserved to men, and the domestic sphere reserved to women. So for example, the expression "universal suffrage" used to mean "all men with exclusion of women", is very eloquent. It is the old patriarchal language that assumes man as one of the two genders but, at the same time, as universal paradigm of the whole species. Women are so the absent ones within the new political imaginary. They belong naturally to the domestic sphere and only within this they are visible. So politics regards the subject and the subject is male.

However to say that the principle of equality is from the beginning unjust or incomplete because excludes women is not enough. It is not an accidental exclusion, related to a gradual historical process by which equality has extended to all men but it is about a primary exclusion, inscribed within the exclusively male substance of the principle. Thought by men for men, the equality principle leaves untouched and reinforced the natural distinction between the male public sphere and the female domestic one that makes of women inconceivable political subjects, namely non-subjects. Despite the formal enlargement of the equality principle to women, the current state is known. Politics and all the powers surrounding it are still "thought as male" so as "thought as female" is the domestic sphere. There should be than no surprise in the exclusion of women from the spheres of powers as the equalitarian model founds its formal principle within the patriarchal symbolic order that in real terms excludes and discriminates women. More interesting is the paradox that works within the form of the equalitarian model when it is applied also to women. This paradox consists essentially in a logic that tries to conciliate exclusion with homologation.

Between exclusion and homologation

According to modern Constitutions, the principle of equality declares that all citizens are equal without distinction of sex. The principle of equality includes also women in the sense of considering them as men so

performing a homologation of women to the male paradigm that models the principle. The sexual difference is so deleted, considered as something that is not important or that can be ignored. Previously ignored women are then included within a logic of homologation that disregards the fact that they are women and not men. In its best intentions, equality is a principle that aims to mend a sexist discrimination incompatible with the ideals of freedom and democracy that should characterize modernity but, in its logic, it is a paradox as formal equality does not correspond to a substantial one. Despite the homologation principle women continue to remain different both in the visible data related to sexual difference and within the symbolic order that continues to represent them naturally domestic and un-political. The formal principle of equality that deletes the female sexual difference homologating women to men is so clearly, but coherently, contradicted by a patriarchal symbolic order that instead continues to highlight the female sexual difference according to the old stereotypes of binary economy. The symbolic order, and so the social codes and the conventional beliefs are in fact much more effective than any formal declaration. By virtue of this contradiction, women have to adapt to accept a dual schizophrenic identity: one that declares them men under juridical and legal system so expecting them to act as men; the other declaring them as women under the practical and symbolic system so expecting them to behave as women. This equality model is however considered by women as a point of no return because emancipation carries with it undeniable advantages, though partial, and because the "going back" is reasonably considered as a return to the pre-modern patriarchy.

Within liberal feminism, women continue to be naturally different, though they re-enter within the rational parameters of the human being whose universality is modelled on men. Sexual differences are considered null so it is often employed the term "person" thus meaning a neuter subject whose characteristics overlook sex. So if society is still patriarchal because discriminates women while constitutional laws are not because declare them equal to men, this is considered as a historical delay of society in respect to laws, something that will change with time as the Man of the future will not discriminate anymore between men and women. This paradox shows its theoretical naivety within which is inscribed the anti-discrimination of the form and the discriminatory reality of the substance. The enthusiastic elimination of sexual difference within the neuter concept of person, suggested by the equality principle, corresponds to the desirable elimination of a sexual difference that works in society as a discriminatory factor (Braidotti 2002; Cavarero & Restaino 2002 ;).

The thought of sexual difference does not claim for women the equality with men but counterpoises, or build, next to the male subject, a female one. Next to Man is added the Woman i.e. to the Man of all men is added the Woman of all women.

Within the philosophical logic of the Cartesian model, the term Man intends to designate a universal and a-temporal essence where single individuals are comprised and nullified. By contrasting to the Man the Woman, a new duality of the subject is introduced. A duality that works as a subversive strategy aiming to deconstruct the androgenic logic of the subject. Women are so located in the symbolic place of subject instead of object. This moves women away from the passive sphere of complaint to the active sphere of auto-representation. The logic of equality and the traditional politics of emancipation are replaced. It is not anymore a work towards the homologation of patriarchal codes but for the establishment of a female symbolic order generated by the practices and words of women.

Conclusion

When we think about sex/gender and sexual difference, we reflect on two questions: What is a man? What is a woman?

According to the thought of sexual difference, Western philosophy and culture have assumed man as both the subject sexed as male and the universal neuter, the Man, so positioning the woman as the Other, comprised within the universal neuter, but incomplete respect to the universal. Western philosophy is epistemologically based on the man as the universal neuter so claiming the neutrality of thought: a universal and objective thought. According to the thought of sexual difference the first step towards a repositioning of woman as subject and precisely as subject who can think itself, is to unveil the false neutrality of this thought and its power of estrangement of woman. To the universal neutrality of man, it opposes a thought that considers the human being and the being woman as originating factors and that needs a dual conceptualization, an absolute duality. The thought of sexual difference by recognizing the original duality as an indispensable premise, excludes the logic of the assimilation of the Other. This dual logic is conflictual in respect to the logic of the One, as it requires a suspension of the trust in the neutrality of language and in its scientific objectivity. The thought of sexual difference is not concentrated on a critic of the patriarchal system but looks for the affirmation of the positivity of the experience of women. It criticizes the notion of gender as this is too centered on the social and material factors with detriment to the semiotic and symbolic aspects. Theorists of sexual difference have concentrated on the "female" side of the sexual dichotomy with the aim of creating new meanings and representation of women.

From a political perspective this project implies the refusal of emancipationism as it leads to homologation, that is to say assimilation of women to male thought and praxis and to a series of value connected to them. The alternative way is to try to elaborate alternative forms of subjectivity for women in a process that is also an affirmation of the positivity of sexual difference. This aspect has created many polemics and

critics that have denounced the anti-emancipationist stance and accused the thought of sexual difference of "essentialism". Far from considering women within a fixed and ahistorical "essence", sexual difference theorists try to define "woman" as other from a "non-man", so trying to represent the multiplicity of the alternative forms of female subjectivities. The thought of sexual difference denies the gendered stereotypes of women as relational, caring and nurturing and man as aggressive, dominant and competitive. Through gender theories men and women can be either "gendered masculine" or "gendered feminine" and such gender theories are all too easy to appropriate for sexist purposes so, for example, opposing a masculine 'ethics of justice' to a feminine 'ethics of care' (Gilligan 1982). As affirmed by Toril Moi: "It is important to stress that gender is always oppressive, as in human society there can be no such thing as non-oppressive gender differences" (1999, 24).

The issue is not to delete gender and forget about sexual difference nor to reduce social life to biological factors. It means that as long as technology has not made the usual method of human reproduction obsolete, the biological requirements of pregnancy, childbirth and childcare will have to be accommodated within any social structure. Although our biology forces us to organize human societies with child rearing in mind, it does not impose any specific way of doing this. There is nothing to prevent us from placing an extremely high or an extremely low social value on the task. What we may not do is to claim that it follows from the fact that women give birth that they should therefore spend twenty years of their lives doing nothing but child-rearing. One might just as well claim that since men are the fathers they should spend the rest of their lives looking after their offspring. The question is that simply integrating gender in the mainstream without modifying the symbolic order, without positioning man and woman as primary, dual, different but equal subjectivities, without modifying the sexual stereotypes linked to male and female genders will lead only to partial results with the risk, that is nowadays a reality, of equality policies being nullified by an overbearing and suffused indirect discrimination.

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