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Women

Catherine Deneuve, 'puritanism' and women's freedom

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A letter was published in *Le Monde* newspaper on January 9th signed by artists and intellectuals of whom the most well-known was Catherine Deneuve. It is an unacceptable and mistaken reaction to something which is itself debatable. The letter is a call to women not to give in to the 'new puritanism'. The letter argues that while rape is a crime, insistent or unsubtle flirting is not – and neither is gentlemanly courtship equal to macho aggression. For the signatories, the legitimate and necessary awareness of sexual violence against women has been transformed into a conformist moralism:

"Puritanism uses arguments about protecting women and their emancipation in order to better chain them to a status of eternal victims, of poor souls dominated by sexist demons, just as in the period of witch hunts." (...) while "public confessions and the interference of self-proclaimed prosecutors into the private sphere is equivalent to a crime worthy of a totalitarian society."

The first observation to be made is that the letter is politically mistaken and seems to reflect the thinking of women who do not really know in what world they are living. In reality, in the last few weeks we are celebrating the end of the legitimacy of a generalised phenomenon – that of the sexual molesting that every woman experiences in her life. Here we are not talking about murdering women nor of rape but something else which is not the persistent or clumsy flirting which the letter brings up and absolves.

Someone has written on Facebook that importuning someone and flirting are not synonyms and has published the respective dictionary definitions. Importuning someone means to molest, to disturb, to pester, to bother ten times a day. Having our bottom pinched, touching to which we haven't consented on the underground, being followed and – what is obviously more serious, the blackmail of male power over women's aspirations – are all part of our daily lives.

During the very same days that extracts of the letter began to circulate, the Italian press reported on the Bellomo case – the magistrate who wanted girl students to wear miniskirts. The fact that all this is beginning to be challenged is just one of the long term consequences of feminism which is now embedded in society and has been able to change behaviour and everyday consciousness. As in all revolutions, there is revolutionary excess and processes that at times we may dislike, but any judgement must distinguish between what is primary and what is secondary.

At the same time, as the signatories of this letter are unable to relate to the real world, they also overestimate the results of the campaign against harassment. At least on this side of the Alps we are still taking the first steps and this criticism of feminist excess has come before such 'excessive' positions have been thought up even less put forward. Furthermore, the letter makes the error of naturalising a cultural phenomenon: sexual desires – it says – are by their very nature offensive and savage. This may be the case, but harassment is something else. The fact that this is tolerated, on display or even encouraged is part of culture as can be seen from the fact that its degree and frequency changes over time as contexts mutate.

The problem is that victories are often recuperated by questionable leaders and this also happens with the campaign opposing violence against and the harassment of women.

Take for example what has happened with respect to the dramatic reality, the murder of women. Ten years ago a banner in a big women's demonstration explained that the 'assassin has the house keys'. At that time, this was not generally accepted because the myth still persisted that it was usually a stranger who raped and killed women. It was

thanks to our demonstrations, our explanations and our insistence that the prosecutors began to investigate the actual places where the assassins were hiding in the majority of cases. It was only later that we saw the media take up and even sensationalise the harassment of women; the identification of male violence against women as criminal acts; the supposed feminist campaign on Berlusconi's TV stations and all the rest that we know so well

We should not forget that the success of the 25 November 2017 demonstration was partly helped by the way the media has taken the issue up in a big way and we should not apologise for this. But the problems of the victories oblige us to keep our guard up. The Italian *Non Una de Meno* (Not one less) movement has kept up its guard and has not fallen into the fatal trap of demanding more laws and more repression. We should adopt the same approach for the campaign against harassment, within which there is a real risk of what the letter calls the 'new puritanism'.

But we need to be careful. Some women in Italy (Angela Azzaro for example), while not agreeing with all the content of the letter, have supported at least the denunciation of moralism as a worrying effect of the campaign. It would be better not to use the appeal signed by Deneuve as some sort of bulwark against this phenomenon we fear. This 'puritanism' goes far beyond any 'revolutionary excess' of the campaign against harassment. It has led to a call for the total ban on surrogacy and the prosecution of prostitutes. It has given form to a prescriptive feminism which claims to be following a 'feminist ethics' that it seeks to impose on others through developing an orthodoxy of our desires. On the contrary, women's freedom presupposes above all the recognition that in reality a *Woman* does not exist but rather *women with diverse* desires and with various positions in society. Let us continue to discuss these issues but only after binning this letter!

11th January 2018

PS:

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