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Women

Feminism of the Anti-Capitalist Left

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At the beginning of this year the Sinistra Critica (Critical Left) association in Italy had a discussion on drafting a feminist manifesto. While there are elements specific to Italy, the following notes on the discussions by Lydia Cirillo pose many important questions for the updating of a Marxist Feminist analysis.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/womensmarch.jpg>]

1. Feminism and democratic, progressive and revolutionary currents

Feminism must be declined in its plural, feminisms, as women belong to various classes and cultures and have different political reference points. For example, there is a form of feminism in Italy among right-wing parliamentarians and career women, who lay claim to their share of power with the aid of traditional feminist arguments, decry the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization and demand anti-discriminatory measures.

And yet feminism is always born and reborn on the left, alongside revolutionary, democratic or progressive tendencies: on the margins of the 1789 revolution, in the national revolutions of the first half of the 19th Century, within the movement for the abolition of slavery in the United States, alongside the workers' movement, in the radicalisation of the 1960s and 1970s, in the global justice movement...

Right-wing feminism has always and only been the effect of picking up ideas born on the left, a sort of cultural fallout that earlier or later has

had an impact throughout society as a whole. This phenomenon can be explained by the obvious reason that it has been easier (or less difficult) for women to exert pressure on men on the left in the name of liberation, by exposing their contradictions and using their lexicon and patterns of thought. The concepts of equality, self-determination, liberation, difference, revolution etc. have been nothing else than a feminised version of ideas elaborated by the political currents alongside which various forms of feminism were born or re-born.

This observation does not allow us to have any idyllic vision of the relationships between feminism and male revolutionary, democratic and progressive tendencies. Men's resistance to feminism has been tenacious, at times explicit and vulgar, at others subtle or even unconscious.

The early socialist movement included feminist men such as Saint-Simon and Fourier and indescribable misogynists such as Proudhon and Lasalle. Engels laid the conceptual bases for an anticapitalist feminism, comparing women to the proletariat and men to the bourgeoisie and locating in production and reproduction the bases of the social organisation of the human species, but afterwards these intuitions were lost in theory and practices. A full-fledged history of misogyny and anti-feminism in the workers' movement could be written, but in this text we can only touch upon the two most widespread attitudes within today's anticapitalist left.

In general, few men are so uncouth as to fail to render the expected homage to feminism and to envisage a proletarian, feminist and environmentalist future. However, these recognitions are almost always accompanied by a lack of interest. The ins and outs, differences and complex theoretical elaborations of feminism remain little-known the extent to which gender can represent an irreplaceable framework for the understanding of the logic of human relations remains overlooked.

The other attitude, much rarer to tell the truth, is the paternalism of men who claim to teach feminism to women, to

take the lead and set the agenda for their work and discussions. Naturally, we can't rule out the fact that an given male may know and understand more about women's politics and feminism than a given female. However, feminism is born, consolidates and renews itself only in the course of women accessing intellectual and psychological autonomy. It may be a slow and tortuous process, but there is no substitute.

Without autonomy, even the feminism of anticapitalist left women is reduced to falling back on what was theorised and practised in separatist milieus. This feminism has proven itself capable of independent elaboration and a more relevant reading of gender-based power relations. At the same time, it has often represented needs and outlooks of academic circles or in any event female milieus with little interest in class conflicts and always exposed to the temptation to depict their own specific interests as the interests of women in general.

2. Patriarchal structures

Understanding feminism means before all understanding the nature of power relations between women and men. Today, there is a post-feminism that denies that oppression still exists, at least in the parts of the world where formal equality has been achieved. The formula "specific oppression" provides some foothold to that current; moreover, this is not the only reason a new one should be found. It is preferable to say that every human society, excluding none, bears the mark of manifest or latent patriarchal structures, which in different ways discriminate, exclude, oppress and commit violence against women.

Patriarchy in the literal meaning of the word is a system of relations in which property and social position are passed down from the father to the male child, almost always to the first-born son. It is obvious in Northwestern societies (but also in some others) that this type of reproduction of social positions no longer exists and reality is less blatant and more complex.

However, the logic of the male genealogy of power, which remains obvious beyond its legal and formal aspects, has an anthropological dimension and two centuries of struggle for emancipation have still not succeeded in doing away with it. The four UN conferences on women have provided data that at the time surprised even the most pessimistic theorists on oppression, revealing (for example) that the percentage of women owning land and real estate in the world does not exceed 3 – 4 %. Moreover, Amnesty International's data on violence against women have been a bitter surprise and confirmation. But the simplest way to understand patriarchal structures is to follow the thread of a European woman's existence from birth to death.

In other societies we find selective abortion and more little girls than little boys dying from malnutrition; in our societies patriarchal structures begin to act later. In their first years of life, little girls, in their difficult path towards femininity, encounter a phenomenon which Freud called "castration", i.e. the discovery that they did not have a penis, leading to a painful feeling of inferiority and conditioning their intellectual abilities and how they viewing themselves and others view them. At first, feminism responded to the castration thesis by arguing that Freud superimposed the male outlook over the female one, but later the issue has proven far more complex.

If Freud, as some had suspected, only confused little girls' and a little boys' lines of sight, he would have created a banal misunderstanding. Then we could not explain the reasons for his great influence on Western thought, and not only Western. The castration thesis is linked to clinical experiments, to tested outcomes that women also see themselves as castrated, lacking and deprived of something. Therefore, castration plays the role of an ideology: it is the viewpoint of those who are "above" in a power relation, interiorised and incorporated by those who are "under". The inferiority theory does not flow from a male prejudice; it is a reality in the female unconscious. This reality acts every time real and not presumed difference comes into play, the different positions in relation to power. In fact, women do not envy the penis but the phallus, which is power in its diversified and multiple forms, of which the penis

is merely the phallic fetish.

Another example. Violence against women has a scope and spread that Amnesty International data has finally made obvious. However, a particular woman may encounter no instance of violence in her life, other than the violence nature inflicts on us through diseases and death. And yet, her life will be deeply conditioned by violence, because the risk of violence entails precautions, lifestyles and psychological attitudes. The extent to which the world has been made to man's measure is proven by the paradox that the victim is the one who winds up in jail. Patriarchal structures that run through society make the risk of violence one of the main reasons for the segregation of women, especially young women.

Many more examples could be given, for example women's double working day, that is taking on tasks that were once men's domain and the absence of any reciprocity; or the overrepresentation of the masculine in the public sphere, which imposes rhythms and ways, counter to those of women's own existence or again the normative images of femininity constructed and crystallised through millennia of male monopoly over symbolic tradition. It seems that something is changing among the new generations in Italy, but these changes are slow and uncertain

Other effects of these latent structures are more complex, more difficult to pinpoint and define. It is true that we also think with our sex, perhaps less than is assumed by psychoanalysis, but we certainly do also think with our sex. If it is true that men have had a monopoly over culture for millennia, then a disturbing hypothesis is possible. The hypothesis is that every time a woman penetrates particularly structured and formalised fields of knowledge, she must cross a petrified forest of male signs and symbols, in which she will have greater difficulty finding her way.

The very ways women's presence makes itself felt in politics are the consequences of the existence of patriarchal structures. With their silences, their limited presence and their insecurity, women exercise a criticism of every political arena. The greater the male presence and dominance in a given political body, the more that body has to do with the logics of power.

One might set forth a theorem, formulate a proposition or an equation. Political institutions, the army, the clergy etc. are the most male milieus because they are also those deeply involved in power. For various reasons these institutions can co-opt women: to get out of criticisms and glaring absence of women, to recover credibility or because they need a relationship with the social body.

The most significant example of male and female distribution is precisely the Catholic Church. An institution that builds ties to vast popular sectors, even sometimes feeding the hungry and quenching the thirst of the thirsty, it could not do without women's energy and their tendency to view themselves as caregivers. Above a Church open to the feminine side, where it extends deeply into society, rises the dome of a power hierarchy rigidly closed to women, the expression of that capacity to conserve the archaic human relations typical of religions.

3. Three key issues for anticapitalist feminism in Italy

Patriarchal structures condition women's lives and construct gender in rather different ways in different times and locations. The great number of demands – for example those compiled in the platform of the 2000 World March of Women – show the scope of the unresolved problems on a global scale. It is obvious that women in Afghanistan have different problems from those experienced by French or German women and that the central issues in contemporary Italy are not those in the forefront in the decades spanning the 19th and 20th century, which saw the first great wave of feminist movements. It is obvious that in different social milieus, different generations and different women's aspirations, the obstacles that women must overcome are not the same.

However, we must renounce the chronological illusion and not believe that we have almost secured emancipation. If it is true that, where formal equality has been achieved, more complex tasks await feminism, it is also true that battles already won, problems apparently already resolved and archaic relations can re-emerge to face us. Violence against women is the clearest example and its greater visibility has different and complementary explanations. Nowadays, women more frequently speak out against situations which they put up with in earlier years, public opinion becomes increasingly scandalised by matters that used to be laughed off; men react, as often occurs in power relations, with a combination of backward outlooks and punitive violence.

Anticapitalist left feminism must not only refer to the needs and aspirations of proletarian women; it must take on the demands of the entire female sex. Naturally, since our intervention targets certain milieus, it is obvious that the demands of women workers, immigrants, unemployed women, female students, women in left parties, movements and trade unions will be in the forefront.

Here are some examples of issues on which we have worked in recent years and which must remain a priority in the near future.

a. Criticism of war, militarism and violence. Women's politics has the instruments for a specific criticism of the military-virile drift produced by permanent war, without falling back on ideas about women's peaceful nature and female non-violence. Non-violence is the other face of violence: both take the unchanging nature of power relations for granted. Violence is a permanent dissuasive force against those who are challenging them; while non-violence can disarm only one of the two sides, the side that is "beneath", subject to oppression, exploitation and neocolonial plunder. The most obvious proof of this in Italy has been the spokespersons for non-violence, who are intransigent against the violence of the oppressed and then vote in Parliament for new credits for the Italian military mission in Afghanistan.

More astute feminism has already explained that the supposed peaceful nature of women is to a great extent linked to the need to interiorise an aggressivity that power relations with men have not allowed them to display. Criticism of militarism and violence (above all violence against women) is based on many things other than the idealisation of subaltern status and oppression. Women can exercise it first of all because they do not have to conform to the stereotypes on which the construction of masculinity is based. They are not called upon to exhibit hardness and strength, which are phantasms linked to male sexuality. More than men, they are subjected to the devastating impact of human relations dominated by violence.

Against the violence on which power relations are based (between the sexes, between classes, between nations etc.) our feminism counterpoises above all a society in which this type of relations has been abolished. Therefore, it supports resistance, struggles and radical transformation projects.

It is against wars, militarism, armies and their hierarchical organisation. It does not think that violence is necessarily the proper response to violence; it considers the life of any person a precious thing and thus is not only against the death penalty but also against the cruelty and excesses of legitimate self-defence. However, it does not make non-violence a principle, because it recognises the right of subjects of liberation struggles to defend their own paths.

Our feminism also responds to violence against women above all with a logic of self-defence. Naturally, we don't mean women's armed self-defence against men because the relations between the sexes are regulated in a very different way. It does not believe the problem can be resolved via the control of the penis, even if it does consider State protection necessary and for the time being not replaceable by any other form. By self-defence, it means women's initiatives for the establishment and funding of antiviolence centres, so speaking out does not turn against victims and for metropolitan life to be organised starting out from women's needs, so women do not have to bear the cost of its irrationality and manifest or latent violence.

Finally, it remembers that women's politics is only apparently disarmed, as liberation dynamics have often been supported by people in arms in democratic, progressive or revolutionary movements. Resistance to Nazism/Fascism (for example) had an important impact on feminism and women.

b. for secularism and self-determination, against Catholic fundamentalism. We live in a country which the Catholic Church still views as a state entity in which it is exercising its temporal power: it has never resigned itself to the secular state and continues to fight it by all means at its disposal.

In recent years, the rise of right-wing forces and political systems stacked in favour of Catholic political forces' ability to exert blackmail have actually increased the intrusiveness of the clergy with its patriarchal and homophobic implications.

Access to legal and free abortion has been challenged in various ways; it has prevented experimental use of pharmaceutical abortion; it has approved a horrible law, which constitutes the embryo as a legal subject from the very moment of conception. Moreover, we have witnessed a very harsh and often aggressive and racist opposition to any form of recognition of gay and lesbian couples. A short time ago, the ordeal of Piergiorgio Welby, a patient in the terminal phase of muscular dystrophy, concluded with a doctor's act of civil disobedience. For months, Welby had pleaded to be unhooked from the machine that forced him to survive in pain and would have imposed an even more painful death on him in the short term. His request became a clamorous political cause, in which the Vatican bureaucracy exerted all its powers of pressure and intimidation on judges and doctors.

Catholic fundamentalism (like all other forms of fundamentalism) does not represent a threat only to women and homosexual persons, but to all liberation processes, beyond the appearances and humanitarian and pacifist implications of the Church hierarchies' political action. They took a stand against war, but afterwards backed the idea of the Italian army's "peace mission". They advocate a welcoming stance towards migrants, but then support the right-wing governments that enact discriminatory anti-immigration laws. Moreover, we must never forget that the Catholic Church was one of the institutions that favoured the rise of fascism, and shored the regime up for more than twenty years.

Evidently peace, hospitality and democracy are minor concerns for the Catholic clergy in comparison to those that lead it to privilege relations with the right wing, i.e. control over the daily lives not only of the faithful but of the entire country, over which it aims to exert its temporal power. In recent years, the feminist and queer movements have been the only forces resisting Catholic fundamentalism.

As for feminism, a certain disorientation has meant that for a long time this resistance has been weak. At the most delicate moment, when the law on reproduction techniques was put in the pipeline and then approved by the right-wing government, feminist organisations and groups remained entangled in a discussion in which it was obvious that the more sophisticated arguments of the Catholic forces were getting more attention, as were worries about the alarming implications of scientific research.

The spectre of the scientist who created Frankenstein, archaic fears over the loss of female reproductive powers, well-founded concern about the limits of scientific research and the role of multinationals in the embryo traffic all combined to put a brakes on the initiative. As a result, feminists did not succeed in going much beyond discussions on this issue. This is another reason the referendum on the abrogation of this law was lost. In fact, it was lost for two reasons. The first is the very low turnout at the polls, not sufficient to reach the quorum. The question under discussion was complex, and contrary to abortion, direct experiences involved a very limited number of people. The second is that, while the referendum on the law decriminalising abortion in the first three months of pregnancy followed years of disobedience in practice and arguments rooted in women's right to self-determination, the referendum on reproductive techniques played out in the few months prior to the ballot, and in this context, the media played the determining role.

Later, direct attacks on access to legal abortions, in which the misogynistic and regressive stance was clearer, set the women's movement back in motion and in January 2006, a demonstration by hundreds of thousands of women in Milan provided a hard-hitting response. The very same day, the main organisations of the GLBTQ movement, including lesbians, gay men and transgendered people, demonstrated for PACS (recognition of civil unions). And the entire year 2006 was marked by demonstrations, initiatives and struggles on the issues of secularism and self-determination.

c. Defence of women workers' rights

Paradoxically, the defeats of wage labour and globalisation have opened up new job opportunities for women. This is not a new paradox, but something that has already been seen in some ways in the history of class relations.

Women have been preferred in economies when they first appear on the world market, because these economies relied on productions with a high labour-power factor and thus on low wages, restrictions on trade-union organisation and severe limits on rights. In Europe too, when the workers' movement remained weak, it had to contend with the problem of female competition to the male work force, which is at least a partial explanation of the misogynist aspects of the workers' movement during its origins. Defence of women workers' rights thus also had the motive of reducing employers' interest in preferring to hire women.

Women have been preferred in the economies of the most developed countries, in which the service sector has grown and where there have been drastic attacks on the rights of wage labour, above all through the broad, molecular casualisation process.

The other side of the coin is that casualised work, impacting all wage labour, has a preference for women, for whom a steady job seems to have become nearly impossible. Laws protecting maternity act in this context as a strong disincentive to hiring for permanent jobs. Not only that, but in a more and more competitive career dynamic, women remain destined to remain behind or choose between a career and childbearing. To tell the truth, in the majority of cases it is impossible to opt for a profession, whatever a woman's personal life-plans, because being a woman in childbearing years puts limits on the possibilities for partnership in a firm or stable work.

Moreover, there is a crisis in occupational fields such as teaching, which guaranteed modest salaries but working times and rights compatible with the life choices of the majority of women.

Faced with such problems, feminism found itself also in the past dealing with the alternative of demanding specific rights for women, with the risk of increasing difficulties in their getting jobs, or renouncing such rights, putting them sooner or later in unsolvable contradictions.

The issue cannot be solved only from a gender outlook. Protection makes it harder for women to find jobs, when social relations are unfavourable to subordinate classes: it is no accident that fascism was a strong protector of maternity. For that reason, laws that allow women to reconcile work with an existence different from men's are not enough. It is also necessary to impose forms of hiring that make discrimination impossible. In Italy, in the 1970s, a reform of short-term placement forced employers to bring far more women into the factories than they would have wanted to. But many other measures are possible.

In terms of rights, outlooks and philosophies must also be changed. This means demanding the fewest possible specific rights for women and demanding instead that the measure of equality starts from women's point of view not men. From this viewpoint, we refused the European standards repealing the ban on night work for women,

demanding that they be also extended to men, except in the exceptional cases in which night work is absolutely indispensable. Or in the case of early pensions for women, we preferred sabbatical years for caregiving tasks, which could be taken by women and men, just as we preferred parental leave for mothers and fathers.

Such criteria obviously no longer apply when it is a matter of the irreducible difference in human bodies. This means there are specific women's rights such as leaves for pregnancy and childbirth with full income compensation, access to legal abortion without charge, access to assisted reproductive techniques for older women. In this case difference must prevail, as there is no grounds for men having an equal right to decide because it is women's bodies and lives that are involved and disrupted.

Translated by Marie Lagatta