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Feminism

Feminist Organising and the Women's Strike: An Interview with Cinzia Arruzza

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George Souvlis and Ankica akardi of Salvagespoke to Cinzia Arruzza, one of the organizers of the call for the International Women's Strike in the US, about why she came to be an activists, her views on the women's strike, and more broadly her political views.

George Souvlis and Ankica akardi?: What were the formative experiences for you politically and personally?

Cinzia Arruzza: This is a difficult question to answer, as I became an activist at the age of 13, and since then my whole life has been shaped by this fact. If I had to identify the experiences that have most shaped my political commitments and way of thinking, I could come up with the following list. First, coming from a poor working class family from Sicily, which exposed me to class injustice and inequalities, sexism, and Italy's internal soft cultural racism against people from the south (especially in the Nineties, when the Northern League had a surge in the North on an anti-South agenda). When I was a teenager, the turning points in my politicization were my conversations with a Marxist high school teacher of history and philosophy, who was a neighbor and a friend, reading the *Communist Manifesto* and Lenin's *State and Revolution*, and participating as a high school student in the struggle of the workers of a Pirelli plant in my town, which was shutting down and laying off hundreds of workers who had no hope of finding another job, given the level of unemployment in Sicily. Then the years spent organizing the students' movement in Rome and subsequently the global justice movement. On an intellectual level, my encounter with Daniel Bensaïd, spending years reading Marx's *Capital* and Plato, reading Marxist feminist texts and, later, my discovery of black Marxism once I moved to the United States. Also, I would say that moving to New York City has been a turning point on many levels, one of which was my exposure to the US brand of racism, which made me realize how many of my earlier assumptions about capitalism were either wrong or incomplete. But I would say that I'm still in the process of learning, provided this process will ever end...

History of working-class revolutions is always inspiring and motivating, and some of the major struggles of the modern world (French and Russian revolution) began when women went into the streets to protest and demand bread. What is on the international horizon today when it comes to progressive and feminist struggles across the globe? One of the most important actions of contemporary leftist struggles was being build around the call (from Linda MartÅ-n Alcott, Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Fraser, Barbara Ransby, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Rasmae Yousef Odeh, Angela Davis and yourself) for worldwide women's strike on March 8. Is there some chance we may have a new feminist movement?

I think we do already have an international feminist movement. But let me clarify an important fact: we did not call for a worldwide women's strike, in spite of the fact that our statement was interpreted this way by a number of media. We called to support the International Women's Strike that activists around the world had already organized and called for. We also called for organizing the strike in the United States, and from this viewpoint we were quite late in the game, which means that we then had to hurry to organize the women's strike over the course of three weeks. I'm insisting on this point because it is very important to recognize that the women's strike was not a day of action called for in a voluntaristic way by a group of activist intellectuals. It was a world-wide mobilization that had its roots in the Polish women's strike against the abortion ban and its victory, in the wave of women's strikes and demonstrations in Argentina, in the reawakening of the feminist movement in several Latin American countries, and in the women's mobilization in Italy. The call for the international women's strike grew organically from these already existing struggles: the time for a new feminist movement is ripe. We are in the middle of it and we should take this movement very seriously.

You were one of the organizers of the International Women's Strike. Would you like to describe your

experience as an organizer of the strike? One of its slogans was aimed about to represent the 99% of the women, can you tell us what does that mean? Is there a possibility of keeping on this kind of struggle and which are the steps that the movement should make in order to have a continuity?

The idea of organizing the strike in the United States originated from a set of considerations. The first was that the Women's March on Washington had revealed the presence of enormous potentialities for feminist mobilizing. The second is that there were already in the US a number of collectives, networks and national organizations that were developing an alternative feminism to liberal feminism: class-based, anti-racist, and inclusive of trans women, queer and non binary people. Once again, calling for the strike was not just a voluntaristic move in the States, as it came from the awareness that another feminism was already there: the strike served the purpose of creating a national non-sectarian network of organizations and individuals, of making this other feminism visible, of breaking the hegemony of the kind of corporate feminism embodied by Hillary Clinton and her feminist supporters, and finally of empowering working class, migrant and black women. This is what we meant by the slogan "a feminism for the 99%": a class-based feminism capable of articulating demands and political positions that speak to the complexity of the lived experience of the cis and trans women left behind by corporate and lean-in feminism. From this viewpoint, even the adoption of the term "strike" to define our day of action was meant to emphasize the work that women perform not only in the workplace, but also outside of it. To move forward and manage to maintain a continuity, a feminist movement for the 99% needs to be rooted in a general process of reactivation of class struggle. We received some criticisms for using the term "strike", as we are not a union and we did not have sufficient contacts with labor organizations.

Here I would like to make a small digression into the US labor situation so as to better explain the rationale of our mobilization and also because this partially responds to your question about what to do next. As a preliminary remark, it is important not to conflate class struggle with labor struggle in the workplace: class struggle takes many forms and important manifestations of the class as a political actor and an agent of conflict take place in the sphere of reproduction, where these struggles do have the potentiality of attacking capitalist profitability. Think, for example, of struggles around healthcare... But let's have a look at the situation of labor organizing in the States. From 1983 to 2016 the rate of unionization has dropped from 20.1% to 10.7%. The situation is even more depressing if we look at unionization in the private sector, which has dropped in the same period from 16.8% to 6.4%. If we look at data on formal strikes, from 1947 to 2016 the number of days of strike involving more than 1000 workers has dropped from 25.720.000 to 1.543.000, and 2016 has even seen a small surge in days of strike due in particular to the teachers' strike and to the strike of Verizon workers. This depressing situation is the outcome of both anti-union legislation and of the political orientations and practice of business unionism. But does this say everything there is to know about the dynamic of class struggle in the States? Of course, it doesn't. Over the course of recent years we have seen a number of important labor mobilizations organized by non-traditional labor organizations and networks, for example, the campaign Fight for Fifteen or the mobilizations organized by ROC, movements such as Black Lives Matter, and in the past months the migrants' strikes and mobilizations against the Wall and the Muslim Ban. Now, instead of seeing all these forms of mobilizations as in alternative with each other or as in alternative to labor organizing in the workplace, we should see them as all various forms in which class struggle is currently taking place, forms that potentially empower each others and create the conditions for organizing work stoppages in the workplace. The women's strike was part of this process: it has contributed to politically re-legitimize the term "strike" in the States, it has caused non-conventional work stoppage in three school districts, and it has given visibility to labor organizations where the majority of workers are women, such as ROC or NYSNA, or to instances of local labor organizing and workplace struggles led by women and queer people.

Are you worried about today's "left narrative" and articulation of everyday protests against Trump? What is – according to your understanding – important for the question about the contemporary leftist tactic, building its power and radicalisation of struggle when it comes to dangers of anti-Trumpism? In your recent article from Jacobin, you spoke about some "dangers" of anti-Trumpism and lessons we have to take in account in comparison with anti-Berlusconiism, what might be the problems?

Well, the risk is that of not seeing the continuity between Trump's policies and the policies carried on by the Democratic Party under Obama's presidency. I'm not arguing that there are no differences, obviously, but I do think that we need to see Trump's version of neoliberalism as the outcome of decades of neoliberal, anti-immigrant and anti-black policies that have taken place both under Republican and under Democratic administrations. The election of Trump is, in my view, an indictment of eight years of Obama's presidency. For how is it possible that after eight years of a presidency that started with the slogan "Yes, we can", we ended up with a misogynistic and racist authoritarian as the new President? From this viewpoint, while the first months of Trump's presidency have seen a promising surge of struggles and resistance, it would be a strategic mistake to only mobilize against Trump, without also addressing the political bankruptcy of the Democratic Party's politics. In order to defeat Trump, we need to articulate a radical alternative not only to Trump but also to the kind of progressive neoliberalism embodied by Hillary Clinton.

Do you think a Clinton victory would have added anything for the women's movement? Would she represent a true solution against the candidacy of Donald Trump? Are the women who did vote for her partially responsible for the election of Trump?

During the primaries, Sanders' campaign was the target of a constant attack coming from liberal feminists supporting Clinton, who claimed that it was anti-feminist to vote for Sanders and that women should unite under the banner of the "women's revolution" embodied by Clinton. This kind of feminism has utterly failed. At the presidential election the majority of white women, particularly those without college education, preferred to vote for an openly misogynistic candidate rather than voting for the alleged champion of women's rights, Clinton. Of course, plain racism does explain part of this vote. But there are other factors that should be taken into account, and the question we should ask ourselves is: which women have actually benefitted from the kind of liberal feminism embodied by Clinton? In the Seventies a woman with college education still earned on average less than a man without college education. In the decade 2000-2010 the situation appeared entirely changed: while the average income of working class women and men stayed flat, elite women's earnings increased faster than elite men's earnings, and in 2010 a high earning woman made on average more than 1.5 times as much as a middle class man. In a recent piece in *The Nation*, Katha Pollitt has articulated what liberal feminism is about, while also taking for granted that liberal feminism represents the whole of feminism or what feminism in general is and should be. Reproductive rights and – I guess – the fight against gender discrimination are the only demands clearly identifiable as "feminist", unlike the fight against racism, war, poverty, environmental crisis, etc. Looking at the lived reality of working class, migrant women and women of color, I really don't see what this brand of feminism has to actually offer to them. Equal pay, for example, seems to be a worthy cause, but if decoupled from demands concerning minimum wage it means nothing to working class women, as wage equality can also be achieved by feminizing men's labor and compressing men's wages to the bottom. At the end of the day, this brand of feminism turns out to be a project for elite women's self-promotion. We can of course ally and fight together on unifying issues such as reproductive rights, but other than that I'm afraid we want very different things. As you may guess from what I'm saying, I really do not believe that Clinton's victory would have been a solution to women's problems.

Your book *Dangerous Liaisons* functions as a kind of a historical review of feminist struggles but with the emphasis on revolutionary or progressive histories of feminist movement and theory. One of your major theoretical aims was to try to link feminist movement with the class struggle but also bring it closer to organisational and political questions. If we read contemporary Marxist feminism as a threefold story (starting with dual system theories of domestic labour debate, materialism in the line of Christine Delphy and unitary theory) can you argue that the social reproduction theory (as an unitary approach) is the best key to understand gender/sexuality under capitalism?

Well, this is the kind of theory I'm trying to develop, of course my answer is: yes! This question would need a very long explanation, but just to give a short summary: dual systems theories are in my view motivated by the legitimate aspiration to give prominence to gender and racial oppression and avoid the kind of economic reductionism that is at times still supported by some Marxists or socialist activists. The problem with this solution, however, is that it raises

more theoretical difficulties than it can solve. Social reproduction theory tries to do something different, namely to re-conceptualize what we mean by capitalism, challenging the notion that capitalism is an economic system, and rather insisting on seeing capitalism as a totality of social relations, the core of which is capitalist accumulation, but in which production and reproduction are intimately linked. If we look at capitalism in this way, then we can see how racism or sexism are not two systems interacting with a third economic system – capitalism –, but are rather sets of relations of domination and oppression that are integral part of the conditions of capital's reproduction and are constantly produced and reproduced by the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. This also makes the question whether class struggle should have priority over 'identity-based' struggles not only obsolete, but also entirely misleading. On the one hand, if we think of the class as a political agent, then gender, race and sexuality are intrinsic components of the way people experience themselves and their relation to the world and to their conditions of existence, hence they are necessarily part of the way they will get politicized and struggle. People do not experience race, class or gender inequality as separate phenomena, people's lived experience is not compartmentalized in this way: how one person is racialized is going to deeply shape the way she is exploited and will experience her exploitation, and viceversa. Political organizing cannot make abstraction from people's experience, it must actually begin from people's concrete experience, otherwise it ends up into rationalism: into the projection of bookish blueprints about what class struggle means or should mean upon people's lived reality. On the other hand, if feminism and anti-racism want to be projects of liberation for all feminized and racialized people, then the question of capitalism is unavoidable. At this point the real question becomes: what kind of feminism or anti-racism do we need? The problem we had in past decades, for example, is not that identity-based struggles replaced class struggle, it is rather that the liberal position within feminist struggles and debates became hegemonic. How to break this hegemony is what we should discuss today, the debate about identity-based struggle versus class struggle misidentifies the problem, creates unnecessary divisions, and should be dropped once and for all.

In one of her articles from the mid-1990s Bianca Beccalli mentions that the radical feminist movement that was created in Italy during the mid-1970s has almost disappeared. Do you agree with her claim? If yes, why did this happen? And even more, is it possible to say that radical feminism become "handmaiden" of capitalism?

I certainly agree with her. But this is a process that is not specific to Italy and that refers to the decline of class struggle everywhere. What happened in Italy, specifically, is that differentialist feminism became the hegemonic form of feminism, including in left organizations, for example Rifondazione comunista. The wealth of Marxist contributions to feminism, for example coming from the tradition of Operaismo, became mostly neglected. I do not believe that radical feminism became the handmaiden of capitalism, but I do think that differentialist feminism did. Just to give you an example, in a volume published in 2008, the main proponent of differentialist feminism, Libreria delle donne, defended the spread of part-time as a form of work that would allow women to say a double yes: to maternity and to work. Well, from 1993 to 2013 the rate of part-time contracts over the total of women's labor contracts grew from 21% to 32.2% and 80.7% of part-time employees are women. 22.4% of women workers under the age 65 anni drops out the formal labor market because of family-related reasons, and the rate is up to 30% for women with children. As a result, ISTAT predicts that a large mass of women will spend the last decades of their lives in poverty. How feminist is that?

You argue rightfully that one of the most important contribution to queer theory, rethinking of sexuality, sex and gender was done by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. In your work you mention some of the problems with Butler's (or radical feminism and difference theories) stress on ideological character of gender oppression and its psychological implications at the cost of often reducing the complexity of reality to the level of language, or even dehistoricization of the relations of oppression between the sexes. Can you explain shortly your critique?

I do not criticize Butler for addressing gender only from an ideological or psychological viewpoint, because she certainly doesn't do that, as she takes into account the variety of institutions and relations of power that contribute to

constitute gender, and these go well beyond discursive practices. In that article I rather criticize two aspects of her take on performativity. The first is that she presents performativity as the way gender is reified in general and does not take into account the possibility that her description rather refers to a specific form of gender reification, one that takes place within late capitalism and is directly related to mass consumption (an argument made for the reification of sexual identities by Rosemary Hennessy and Kevin Floyd, for example). Capitalism is not even mentioned in her early work on gender. The second is that she adopts Derrida's interpretation of Austin's speech acts as a method of interpretation of social relations and history more in general, for example by applying the notion of 'iteration' to the interpretation of subversive acts, to struggles. What I try to explain in my article is that this application of linguistic notions to extralinguistic reality has serious limitations and does not help understand the historical dynamic of struggles. For example, I don't see how such a thing as a historical event can take place within that conceptual framework.

As a professor of philosophy can you comment on two things: what is it like to be a woman philosopher today in a traditionally very "masculine" discipline, also given the fact that philosophy was historically quite misogynous? And, what do you think about widespread methodology in philosophy that avoids social history, suggesting that we shall understand philosopher better if we deal "only" with his/her text – for example very popular Straussian "esoteric" approach to ancient or modern political philosophy?

I am a historian of philosophy, more specifically of ancient philosophy, and I studied in Italy where the discipline is not particularly masculine, or at least certainly less than in the United States or Germany. In my field there are a number of very prominent women philosophers and from this viewpoint I have been quite lucky, as less exposed to the kind of isolation that, for example, my queer and women students often feel. That said, philosophy clearly has a problem. On the one hand, its canon, and the exclusion from it of non-Western philosophy, for example the various schools of Chinese philosophy, as well as of a number of women philosophers. On the other hand, the predominance of ideal theory in ethics and political thought, especially within the analytic tradition. Charles Mills has articulated a great critique of ideal theory as ideology, and I don't have much to add to his criticisms. Let me just say that if we take the task of political theory and ethics to be to help us address, identify, and clarify actual social, political, and ethical problems, ideal theory is basically useless.

After Syriza had experienced its political defeat, Greece has reverted back to its former model in order to gain back the declining political legitimacy (political and social repression when it comes to dissident groups and austerity at the economic level). Something similar – though not identical – happened with the PCI of the 1970s with the strategy of historical compromise endorsing the policies of Christian Democracy. This period was summed up with austerity measures backed by the IMF and violent repression of the social groups that resisted them. What similarities and differences do you detect between these two cases?

I'm not sure that the historic compromise is a good analogy, although I'm aware that Tsipras and other leaders of Syriza are heavily influenced by Eurocommunism. The historic compromise was one of the Italian Communist Party's major strategic mistakes and failures. It was an attempt to reach a compromise with Democrazia Cristiana in order to overcome the decades long exclusion of the Communist Party from governmental coalitions, and it was also motivated by the largely ungrounded fear of a fascist or reactionary coup in Italy, after the Chilean coup of 1973. It took place in a moment in which the Communist Party was electorally strong, as it had capitalized the shift to the left of the electorate produced by the season of great social mobilizations that began in 1967. With the historic compromise the Communist Party put a halt to the expansion of class struggle, legitimized on the left the beginning of austerity policies, and supported – even invoked and organized – the repression of social movements. Yet they remained excluded from the government. When in 1980 Berlinguer realized the mistake and tried a strategic U-turn, it was too late. Now, Syriza's strategic failure is more paradoxical than that of PCI. In the Seventies, PCI was already a socialdemocratic party, but it was systematically excluded from governments because of its ties with the Soviet Union: Berlinguer's strategy was a disastrous attempt to overcome this situation, by contributing to the social stabilization of the country and becoming in this way a political partner of Democrazia Cristiana. It was all wrong, it

was about to have tragic consequences, but there was a rationale. With Syriza's political choices and behavior we go from tragedy to farce: Syriza actually won the election on the basis of a somewhat radical program and especially of the promise to resist the Troika, it had electoral and social support, it went to the negotiations with the European technocrats in the most amateurish possible way, believing perhaps that rational persuasion would get results, it refused to conceive of a plan B based on Grexit, called for a referendum that it won while perhaps hoping to lose it, and then did the opposite of what it had promised to do the day before the referendum. All of this within six months. After this it was just blood and tears for the Greek people, and apparently it is never enough, Greek people have to suffer yet more. More than a historic compromise this looks like a combination of political imbecility and astonishing opportunism...

The Party of Communist Refoundation experienced a severe defeat in a short time-period from gaining almost 8% of the Italian voters in the 2006 elections in comparison with the current almost political extinction. What are the central causes of this defeat? Do you see any prospect for the political party of Sinistra Italiana that was just founded?

The key cause of the defeat was the alliance with the Center-Left and the participation in the last Prodi government from 2006 to 2008. For a short season, between the end of the Nineties and 2003, Rifondazione played a key role in the anti-war and global justice movements and seemed to be oriented toward a turn to the left and a break with the history of Stalinism and Togliattismo. Then, in 2002, after months of unions' and social struggles against Berlusconi's attempt to abolish art. 18 of the Statuto dei Lavoratori (which forbade layoffs without good cause in companies with more than 15 employees), Bertinotti had the idea of launching a referendum for the application of art. 18 to all workplaces. The referendum was held in 2003 and it was a disaster, because turnout was only around 25%. The lesson that Bertinotti drew from this outcome was that movements can only go so far, then politics must intervene, hence it was necessary to reach an alliance with the Center-Left and form a governmental coalition in order to carry out a great season of social reforms. This was the beginning of the end: from that moment onward, demoralization spread within the party and within social movements, Bertinotti engaged the whole party in a completely instrumental discussion about non-violence, and eventually Rifondazione did manage to be part of the government and lost all of its political credibility over the course of two short years.

From 2008 to today, the remnants of Rifondazione and of other organizations of the electoral left have cyclically come up with new electoral lists and coalitions, with generally abysmal results, and a shift to the right with each new electoral list. Now we have the formation of Sinistra Italiana, which combines together remnants of Sinistra ecologia e libert  (an evolution to the right of a sector of Rifondazione) and outcasts of the Democratic Party. The logic is unfortunately always the same, that of the regroupment of leaderships of previous left organizations, with no relation whatsoever to actual social processes, no roots in the class or in labor organizations, no investment in social mobilizations. Sinistra Italiana may manage to get some some parliamentary seats depending on the nature of the next new electoral law, but I don't see this as a useful project for rebuilding the left and class struggle in Italy. All of these various experiments share in common the presupposition that the best way to rebuild the left is through electoral politics, but the real problem of the left in Italy is that it has little or no social and political connection with the class, it has no class basis. From this viewpoint, I even think that these electoral enterprises, over the course of almost ten years, have been harmful to the possibility of rebuilding a large left in Italy, for they have contributed to convey the impression that at the end of the day securing a parliamentary or a job as political full-timer is all that matters for the alleged leaders of the left, and that from this viewpoint these are no different from the rest of politicians.

Toni Negri's recent political writings endorse the European Union suggesting the possibility of its reform to a "social and democratic Europe" as a political antidote to the emerging nationalisms. Do you think that this "left Europeanism" is the solution to the existing crisis we are experiencing at the moment? Is it feasible and could this kind of reformism be effective from the inside? How can we approach Negri's claims on EU bearing in mind that even the current leaders of EU do not seem to endorse such a plan as a real possibility?

Is it possible to explain his attitude as an integral feature of the wider movement of the late Italian Autonomism?

I honestly don't see how it is possible to think that this European Union can be reformed after seeing how it handled both the Greek crisis and the refugee crisis. Not taking an anti-EU position today contributes, in my view, to the death of the credibility of the ideal of a democratic and social Europe, for the actually existing European Union is the negation in reality of that ideal and is the main cause of the rise of the xenophobic and nationalist right in a number of European countries. You cannot defeat this kind of rightwing formations by opposing to them some vague ideal of a united social Europe that is constantly contradicted by reality, or by appealing to a vague transnationalism. What we would need today in Europe is a left brave enough to frontally oppose the European Union and the Eurozone, denouncing both its economic and social measures and its xenophobic migration policies. In other words, we should articulate a left anti-Europeanism that is opposed to this European Union in the name of an authentic internationalism. As we are not doing this, the political space of the opposition to EU dictated austerity policies remains wide open for the xenophobic right. To go back to Negri, I don't think that his position is symptomatic of the whole spectrum of Italian Autonomism. Postoperaism is only one of the currents descending from the *Autonomia operaia* of the Seventies. Info-aut, for example, is one of the few left organizations in Italy that has taken an anti-Euro and anti-EU position.

In the last Italian referendum PD supported the idea that Italian people should vote for "Yes" because otherwise the populist Five Star movement – that was characterized as fascist – of Beppe Grillo would come to power. Was there such a danger or it was just a discursive technique by PD in order to mislead the Italian electorate? Which were the main political stakes of the referendum? Is this the main danger in the current political scene the possible victory of Grillo in the next elections?

The main political stake of the referendum was to conclude the long transition, which began with the end of the First Republic at the beginning of the Nineties, by moving decisional power away from the Parliament and toward the executive. This referendum was just one of the various attempts at reforming the Constitution in an antidemocratic direction in recent years. It was also combined with a new electoral law for the Chamber of Deputies that would attribute a large majority bonus to the list reaching 40% of the votes. The mind behind the reform was Giorgio Napolitano, whose project for the conclusion of the transition was precisely, on the one hand, a stabilization of the political institutions through an attack on the Constitution and a hyper-majoritarian electoral law, on the other, a significant weakening of the negotiating power of the unions and of the other organizations of the civil society. This was basically the project of Renzi's government. There were also opportunistic considerations relating to the rise of Five Stars Movement, as its very existence is jeopardizing decades of attempts at establishing and consolidating a bipolar electoral system. What is going to happen now is still quite unclear. Five Stars Movement is in principle well positioned to capitalize on the No vote at the referendum and on the growing dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party. However, the troubles and scandals surrounding the mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, risk to cause a great loss of credibility to Five Stars Movement. That said, I would reject the term 'danger'. Five Stars Movement is not a fascist party, it is a catch-all electoral movement, with amateurish traits and contradictory politics. I don't see how their government is going to be significantly worse than Renzi's and now Gentiloni's aggressive neoliberal and antidemocratic governments. Those worried of the 'fascism' of Five Stars Movement should perhaps spend some time reading the plan on security elaborated by the current Minister of Interiors, Marco Minniti and take to the streets to oppose the authoritarians who are already governing the country.

Source [Salvage](#).

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