

Casting the ‘Other’: Gender Positionings in Politicians’ Narratives¹

Barbara Poggio

Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale
Università di Trento
bpoggio@soc.unitn.it

Received: 12-09-2007

Accepted: 16-03-2009

Abstract

In the past century the presence of women in the ‘public sphere’ has increased considerably as a result of, amongst other things, the rapid increase in their levels of schooling, professional competences and labour market participation. Much more limited and slower, by contrast, has been the entry of women into the centres of decision-making and power. This makes necessary a reflection on gender citizenship in political arenas, which are precisely those in which actions to sensitize and change the broader social context should be undertaken. The paper presents some findings of a qualitative research which gathered the narratives of men and women —belonging to different Italian political alignments and occupying different positions and roles— relative to their political career paths and the discourses with which they accounted for female under-representation. The analysis of the collected texts allowed to shed light on the discursive practices, symbols, meanings and sexed images with which the symbolic gender order is created and reproduced. Particularly highlighted are the gender positioning performed through the narratives and the tendency to cast women in the role of the ‘Other’ with respect to the political system.

Key words: gender, narratives, gender citizenship.

Resumen. *Casting el «otro»: Posicionamiento de género en políticas narrativas*

Durante el siglo pasado la presencia de la mujer en la “esfera pública” se incrementó considerablemente gracias, entre otras cosas, al rápido ascenso de sus niveles de escolarización, competencias profesionales y participación en el mercado de trabajo. Mucho más lento y limitado, en contraste, ha sido el acceso de la mujer a los puestos ejecutivos y de decisión. Eso nos lleva a una necesaria reflexión sobre la ciudadanía de género en política, necesaria precisamente en cada acción que se ha de emprender para sensibilizar y cambiar el amplio contexto social.

El texto presenta algunos resultados de investigación cualitativa que reunió a las narrativas de hombre y mujeres —pertenecientes a diferentes alineamientos políticos italianos y ocupando diferentes posiciones y roles— en relación con su carrera política y los discursos dirigidos a las mujeres de menor representación. El análisis de los textos recogidos permite arrojar luz sobre las políticas discursivas, símbolos, imágenes y significados sexuales

1. A previous version of the article was published in *Journal of language and politics*, 2004, 3, 2, p. 323-344.

con el que el orden simbólico de género se crea y se reproduce. Destacado, en particular, es el posicionamiento de género a través de las descripciones y la tendencia de encasillar a las mujeres en el papel del «Otro» con respecto al sistema político.

Palabras clave: género, narrativa, política, ciudadanía de género.

Summary

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Introduction | 4. Politicians as professional narrators |
| 2. Constructing gender through discourses and narrations | 5. Casting the 'Other' |
| 3. Methodology | 6. Conclusions |
| | References |

1. Introduction

In the past century important goals have been achieved in increasing the participation of Western women in politics and in the formal recognition of their rights. Nevertheless, there is still a significant gender disparity in the political system and especially in the centres of power and decision-making. In some cases – for example Italy in recent years since the introduction of the majoritarian electoral system and the repeal of the law which stipulated that electoral lists should contain a minimum female quota —the presence of women in elected positions has diminished.

This paper does not examine historical, structural or legislative changes in political participation by women. Rather, it considers the cultural and symbolic level of the social construction of gender within the political system. A useful metaphor for this process is the concept of gender citizenship, which interweaves two symbolic constructs —gender and citizenship— both characterized by contradictory and ambiguous practices expressed through the dichotomies between public and private, individual rights and collective needs, autonomy and dependence, equality and difference. The concept of citizenship has assumed different meanings in different periods and social contexts: Alejandro (1993) has shown some of the various declensions of the construct, from the individualistic assertion of natural law, to recognition, to the moral obligation of citizens to support the community through work. Gherardi (1995) has surveyed these various definitions from within the debate on gender, highlighting overlaps and linkages between the two concepts.

Gender citizenship can be viewed as “a text which expresses what is deemed ‘fair’ in the social relationships in a certain context and in a certain historical-social setting” (Gherardi, 1995: 193). Involved here is a symbolic field open to numerous interpretations and which is therefore a terrain of conflict. This type of reflection opens the way to a view of gender citizenship as civic discourse, as a social practice performed through the discourses and symbols of collective identity, and which concerns those of its components that express the

quality and fairness of relations between the sexes. Examining gender citizenship within a specific cultural context therefore entails analysis of how gender relations are constructed symbolically in social practices.

Against this background, I shall analyse how political discourse constructs 'women' as a problem and as the 'Other'. By analysing texts of narrative interviews conducted with men and women in political functions, I shall seek to answer the question 'who is the "Other"?' and how it is constructed in the discourses of politicians.

2. Constructing gender through discourses and narratives

The attention paid today to discursive practices and narratives by the sociological debate is a consequence of growing interest among social scientists in the narrative form of knowledge, rather than in the scientific form that long monopolized research and theory (Lyotard, 1982; Bruner, 1986). Narrating is an individual, but also interactive and collective action by which individuals produce and reproduce shared and intersubjective knowledge about their reality (Witten, 1993). Individuals are viewed as being constantly reconstructed and redefined by the multiple discursive practices of society (Davies and Harré, 1990).

Analysing discourse and narratives means highlighting the discursive, textual and explanatory strategies by which individuals give sense and meaning to their actions and interactions, and to the context in which they operate (van Dijk, 1985; Potter and Weatherall 1993). Moreover, it involves an endeavour to identify the social discourses available to individuals in a given culture at a certain time (Gavey, 1997).

This interpretative approach provides a useful stimulus for examination of how gender is constructed and reproduced within specific cultures.

Recent years have seen numerous studies on the relationship between gender and discourse (Dundas Todd and Fisher, 1988; Bergvall, Bing and Freed, 1996; Wodak, 1997; Walsh, 2001). These analyses have emphasized the constitutive nature of language in both the conservative and transformative senses (Wodak, 1996); they have furnished empirical examples of the discursive construction of gender identity (Sunderland and Litosseliti, 2002; Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003); they have highlighted how gender is socially constructed through discourse (Wodak, 1997; Weatherall, 2002); they have shown the power relations connected to, and reproduced by, such discourse (Wodak, 1997; Walsh, 2001; Thornborrow, 2002); and they have advocated a recasting of traditional approaches (Bergvall, Bing and Freed 1996) so that they assume a critical and deconstructionist perspective which supersedes the dichotomous view. Various authors have concentrated in particular on the relationship among discourse, gender and political representation, focusing on parliamentary discourse and on the construct of 'politeness' (Shaw 2000, Christie 2002), and on the mediatized representation and construction of the gender identities of women in politics (Walsh, 1998; 2001).

This article shares many of the basic assumptions of this body of literature, and it seeks to respond to some of the stimuli arising from the debate by conducting a narrative analysis of stories of women and men in politics. It is concerned with how gender and the relationship between gender and politics are constructed in the discursive practices and narratives of male and female politicians. The underlying assumption is that gender identity is not something given once and for all; instead, it is a relational construct which is constantly redefined through discursive practices furnished (or imposed) by the culture to which an individual belongs. These practices induce people to position themselves by aligning or contrasting with the positionings of others (Davies 1989). Gender identity is constructed 'by difference' through a process of comparison with the Other in which male and female are positioned as alternative categories to which one either does or does not belong (Gherardi 1995). Derrida has stressed that every binary categorization implies a hierarchy (Derrida 1979). Post-colonial theoreticians have warned against the Western rhetoric of otherness (Suleri 1992, Bhabha 1994), emphasizing the need to go beyond the discourse of original subjectivities. They focus on the process whereby cultural differences are articulated, and they show that there is always a 'third' space of enunciation—hybridity—in which colonizers and colonized are not easily distinguishable, and in which they, in turn, become the 'Other' with respect to their respective cultural identities. The task of deconstructionist analysis is therefore to unmask the dichotomic discourse, to highlight its fictitious nature as situated in relation to power, and to describe the spaces of hybridization.

3. Methodology

In this article I shall seek to show how the narratives and discourses of politicians—both male and female—contribute to the construction of a gender citizenship based mainly on an alterity whose principal outcome is the marginalization of the female. The analyzed narrative are taken from a larger research study on men and women occupying positions of political responsibility at different levels and in various party-political groupings in a province of northern Italy. The research answered to the need to understand the reasons of the persistence of a relevant gender asymmetry in the political arena, one of the main strongholds of "hegemonic maleness"². In particular, the work was interested in analysing the discursive construction of gender in the political sector, collecting the protagonists' (both male and female) narratives. To this end narrative interviews (Atkinson 1998, Poggio 2004) were conducted, in order to stimulate people to tell stories and, in so doing, to attribute meaning to the their experiences and to the events in their life. Analysis of narrative interviews

2. This work was preceded by a quantitative analysis of the presence of women and men in the local political system, that showed the existence of a relevant imbalance.

brings out the ways in which the dominant social practices and cultural models are constructed through comparison among different interlocutors who in their own way, and through their interactions, contribute to a social definition of reality (Schütze, 1987).

Interviews were conducted with six men and six women occupying elective office³ (two town councillors and two municipal executive officers, one provincial councillor and two provincial executive officers, two mayors, two members of the national parliament and one member of the European Parliament), and the secretaries (all men) of the three main political parties in the province. These interviewees were selected in order to look at the 'political context' from the different points of view of gender membership, institutional position and party-political ideology.

The interview outline was constructed so that the interviewees were given ample opportunity to narrate their stories, and with a view to later questioning by the interviewer which focused more closely on the relationship between gender and politics.

The material collected were subject to various kinds of analysis which concentrated on structural and formal aspects of the narratives (like plot, genre, and style) on the one hand, and their contents on the other. Here I shall concentrate on a particular aspect of gender positioning, and of the construction of gender citizenship through the narrative and discursive practices of the politicians interviewed.

To this end, I shall first present some extracts from the interviews in order to illustrate various types of positioning (with respect to political activity, ideology, and gender). I shall then introduce further extracts which show how women (and the quota system introduced by law to encourage their participation in politics) are cast in the role of the Other. More than on the contents of the extracts presented (what was said), my analysis will concentrate on the discursive process by which the interviewees construct gender and otherness (how it was said) and on deconstruction of the discursive practices (why it was said in that way and not another).

4. Politicians as professional narrators

The way in which reality is discursively constructed is evidenced in a particularly interesting manner by the narratives of politicians. One finds, in fact, a greater degree of conscious purposiveness in the use of such narratives. Politicians are 'professional narrators', actors accustomed to dramatizing reality in the theatre of politics (Anderson 1990). Their accounts display awareness of the poetic power of their words: they know that their success depends on their ability to tell good stories, to find evocative images, to produce seductive metaphors,

3. Indicated for each extract is the interviewee's sex, age, and the party coalition to which s/he belongs.

to convey the right degree of pathos. For politicians, recounting and dramatizing are not only devices to construct their identities and to define their positioning with respect to others; they are also ‘tools of the trade’ with which they produce and reproduce imagery which convinces the audience and gains their consensus.

Consequently, their stories are particularly rich and well articulated: for example, they do not display the differences between men and women evinced by their accounts of professional careers in male settings (Gherardi and Poggio 2007). The reason for this is, to some extent, the fact that for both men and women participation in politics is not taken for granted like professional activity is for men. But this is mainly so because the construction of an autobiographical narrative is a key component of a politician’s public persona.

There follow some extracts from the narratives of three interviewees concerning their political careers. In the first, a man seeks to express the meaning of his political experience:

The moral is that you either stay here and do what people expect from you, or you go around buying cups of coffee and glasses of wine so that you become popular and keep your friends. And I must say that as a grafter, as an unwilling leader, elected by accident to this legislature, I don’t regret it [i.e. having worked] because it gives meaning to my political commitment. My work background has always led me to give something concrete and credible to people every day like a journalist, a story in the newspaper or an item on television. I couldn’t finish a day without having done something like that. (Man, 59, Centre-Right⁴[1])

In a few lines the passage furnishes a quite detailed picture of the politician, whose main features are an ability to handle relations and to manage his image (friendship, popularity and credibility), to work hard, to produce concrete results. In recounting his experience as a member of parliament, the narrator defines his position *vis-à-vis* other politicians and ordinary people, emphasizing the value of what he does. By calling himself an “unwilling leader, by accident” he stresses both the gratuitous elective nature of his commitment: the fact that he was chosen and answered the call. Particularly interesting is the passage in which he emphasizes the importance of ‘producing’ something, where the analogy is with the journalist who constructs the news. Behind the insistence on concreteness, therefore, it is the importance of constructing “credible” discourses that is emphasized.

In the following two extracts, which recount respectively the entry of a man and a woman into politics, one notes two different modes of positioning relative to political ideology:

4. Indicated for each extract is the interviewee’s sex, age, and the party coalition to which s/he belongs.

I've followed different but converging cultural paths, those relative to Catholic and Marxist values as criteria with which to interpret reality. It began with my membership of the left-wing political grouping, non-historical, non-traditional, that was the proletarian extreme left (Woman, 45, Left)

You begin when you're a kid. It's a choice due to enthusiasm, typical of young people. In those days you were either right or left. My father was a partisan, so it was certainly not at home that I was steered to the right. It was at school, seeing the bullying by the left-wing kids and seeing the regime-like climate in the school, where the Christian Democrat intelligentsia was nurtured. It came to me just like that, spontaneously, to take the side of the less fortunate, those who were on the right. (Man, 63, Centre-Right)

In the former case, the woman interviewee positions her identity within value-theoretical, de-personalized coordinates. In the latter, the man's narrative uses a more direct kind of rhetoric more closely tied to personal experience. In one case the reference to an ideological matrix gives a more detached and authoritative tone to the account. In the other the use of personal experience makes the narrative more dramatic and richer in pathos (the partisan father, the bullying, the regime-like climate, taking the side of the less fortunate).

I also analysed how the narratives were used to achieve a gender positioning. In the next two extracts first a man and then a woman talk about their political careers, emphasizing this aspect in particular:

Getting ahead requires a great deal of skill, a considerable amount of nerve, and cheek. In the early years it was a matter of overtaking the others. It was a race, it was a contest to be selected as a candidate, to emerge from the pack of those who wanted to get ahead. Perhaps it was this that held a lot of women back. It wasn't a normal process, a choice made calmly on the basis of real values. It was based on an assertiveness which perhaps many women didn't have, also because they were tied to their families or to less demanding jobs. (Man, 59, Centre-Right)

I was asked if I was interested in getting involved. I was quite interested in the group that was being set up and I sometimes worked with it. So they asked me to stand as candidate for mayor, which made me laugh, the thought of standing in that year in a village like mine, where it was already difficult to win as a left-wing mayoral candidate. But a woman candidate, that seemed absolutely impossible. So I said —we can try, but let's do everything possible to win. And we did, by mounting a campaign that was a bit creative and original, which involved the people directly, and we managed to gain the support of the people and they voted for us (Woman, 47, Centre-Left).

In the first of these two extracts, where the narrator describes his rise through the ranks of the party, the factors responsible for his success (skill, nerve, cheek, competitiveness) are explicitly associated with a male gender membership, and thus account for the (self-)exclusion of women. In the second extract, the gen-

der positioning is performed through narration of a challenge: although being a woman is a handicap when running for mayoral office, the narrator describes the type of strategy employed to achieve success. In both extracts, the account of political affirmation underlines exceptional aspects (“it wasn’t a normal process”, “that seemed absolutely impossible”), which are always key elements in narratives: in reality, there are no stories which do not develop around an exceptional event. In other words, narrative is used to explain departures from the ordinary (Bruner 1990).

5. Casting the ‘Other’

In order to analyse how the role of ‘Other’ is cast, I shall now examine two particular aspects of the social construction performed through the narratives and discourses collected: namely how ‘women’ are constructed, and how laws to facilitate their entry into political power-roles are constructed.

5.1 How discourses construct women

Besides the analysis of the narratives relative to political careers, the interview also comprised a part which focused more directly on the object of research, namely the relationship between gender and political career. The following sections will discuss interview extracts which illustrate the arguments most frequently used by the interviewees when they talked about the relationship between gender and active political participation. Discussion will centre on extracts in which the under-representation of women in responsible political roles is seen as the consequence of the lesser interest among women in political commitment; extracts in which reference is made to the difficulties encountered by women in reconciling political activity with other responsibilities; and finally extracts in which the interviewees criticize the quota system introduced to encourage the involvement of women in politics. Each of the extracts has been deconstructed in order to highlight its various components: narrative, explanatory strategies, metaphors, and rhetorical devices. Particular attention will be paid to the explanatory strategies, metaphors and rhetorical devices used.

5.2 Renunciation by women

The theme addressed in the first extracts is gender discrimination in the political and party system. Analysis of the texts reveals a general tendency to deny the existence of any discrimination in the political sphere explicitly or implicitly intended to exclude women from achieving positions of power. Although a marked asymmetry in gender composition is acknowledged, it is attributed mainly to renunciation and self-exclusion by women. Several interviewees describe the difficulty of finding female candidates when party lists are drawn up, an aspect considered in both the texts presented. In the extract that follows, a member of the provincial council talks about this difficulty:

- a) "Though it doesn't mean anything, we have a militant female section. As soon as you try to pump yourself up with this term, you're cut down.
- b) Because it's now accepted in Europe that if a woman is to be able to express herself it shouldn't matter that she is a woman. Female votes are cancelled. Women should be integrated into the general system alongside men, doing the same things and not being ghettoized.
- c) Unfortunately, our party still tends to ghettoize women, in the sense that it creates this female movement alongside a general male movement.
- d) We've tried to integrate, we have a very lively group of women which is often the driving force behind the party. Sometimes this group of women has been more vigorous, more visible, than the male group.
- e) So we've already given more importance to including women in the lists of candidates, but it's difficult to find them. Despite this very militant group, when the municipal elections were held a few weeks ago, for example, or the provincial elections in November, we found it difficult to find these ten or so women. I wanted to respect the 30 percent quota but I couldn't, there weren't enough women around. We couldn't find them...
- f) I couldn't find them, and I had to persuade some female friends to stand,
- g) so it's not that there's a limit imposed by those who draw up the lists or by certain structures. It's that women themselves, from the party ranks, don't bother to stand. That is, they do not feel the need, or they don't give a toss. In short, they're not motivated." (Man, 44, Centre-Right)

The way in which this extract is organized raises various points for discussion. The first concerns the different identities used by the narrator (a "we" which denotes the national party, a "we" which denotes the local party leadership, and an "I" that refers to the narrator). These stand in contrast to various female identities (the national female section, the woman, female votes, the group of women, female friends, women). The narrator begins by clarifying his position as regards gender differences in politics. He dismisses the fact that there is a group of women within the party who advance specific demands (a) (c), and he justifies his dismissal by referring to the European Parliament (of which he is a member), where gender membership should not be emphasized (b). At this point the interviewee shifts attention to the local situation, contrasting the local model which privileges "integration" with the more "ghettoizing" national one. When describing the local situation, he emphasizes the vitality of the "group of women" compared with the "male group". Despite the party's openness to women in order to enhance integration, he stresses its difficulty of finding women willing to stand as candidates. There is space for the greater integration of women, he says, but the problem are the women themselves (e). In order to include women in an electoral list, the interviewee relates, he had to impose his authority over some "female friends" (f). The moral of the story, therefore, is that the blame is not attached to the organization but to the female component, which lacks the motivation to become a protagonist of politics (g).

5.3 *My party no!*

I now discuss an extract from an interview with a municipal councillor, for many years an official in a right-wing party.

- a) “Many people think that the parties want to get rid of women, but that’s absolutely untrue. Indeed, the opposite is the case, we implore them on bended knees to join. It’s not true that the parties want to exclude women.
- b) I can tell you that none of our women has ever come last in the list. They may not have been elected, but they weren’t at the bottom of the list.
- c) I should say, however, as regards women, and this I really have to say, that in our party women have never had to hassle to be candidates. There’s never been one that has had to elbow her way in. Instead, it’s almost as if we’ve had to beg them to stand for election.
- d) Frankly, there are also those who stand as candidates only to make up the numbers, thinking that they won’t be elected, or that if they are elected they’ll stand down.
- e) Our administrative secretary will tell you that, after thirty years of militancy, she has never been discriminated against. Indeed, we had to point a pistol at her head, so to speak, to get her to stand as a candidate, and she stood on the condition that ‘if I’m elected I’ll stand down, so make sure that there’s someone available to take my place.’” (Man, 63, Centre-Right)

In this case, too, the narrator assumes several identities (as the party system, as his own party, as a party official) which highlight his distinction from the female component. The first sentence of the extract sums up its content: the shifting of responsibility for female under-representation from the parties to women themselves (a). Blame is removed from the party system, and then in particular from the party to which the interviewee belongs (b). Then emphasized is the fact that women have never advanced demands (c). At this point the discourse shifts to the lack of interest among women in political militancy: even if they agree to stand as electoral candidates, they do not want to win (d). The point is illustrated by reference to the secretary who stood only “with a gun pointed at her head”, hoping that she would not be elected.

As in the previous extract, here, too, an attempt is made to deny the existence of discriminatory behaviour by the parties against women. The explanatory strategy used is to blame women for their political under-representation and to exonerate the parties. In both cases, however, one notes a gender positioning which, even when integration is extolled, tends to define gender dichotomously by presenting women as the ‘Other’ with respect to males, who have the power to decide. Both narratives convey a patriarchal culture where women are included by dint of male authority (the diktat or a “pistol pointed at the head”). This rhetoric is also used to sustain an ideology, that of the centre-right shared by both interviewees, which propounds a view of the most traditional division of roles.

5.4 *Family or political career?*

Another theme addressed by all the narratives on the relationship between gender membership and political participation is the difficulty of reconciling political activity with domestic and extra-domestic responsibilities. Political commitment is very time-consuming, and it is often—especially in the case of local politics—additional to other work and family responsibilities. Some interviewees, indeed, talked of a 'triple presence', thereby emphasizing that they have assumed an extra workload on top of the other two typically undertaken by women. Unlike their male colleagues, women in politics do not have wives to whom they can delegate reproduction and care tasks, with the consequence that they have to cope with more complex situations. In the first two accounts selected, a woman mayor talks about reconciling her administrative work with her family duties, citing a number of examples:

- a) "The first time I went to an assembly of local mayors, I discovered that I was the only woman there. But I can understand that for a woman deciding to do this work means sacrificing part of their life, even more so if they have children.
- b) I only have a niece, and one day she asked me to stay and play with her, and I told her that I had to go. So she asked me, 'Are you really sure you have to go every evening?' She was my niece, and I felt bad about it, but if she'd been my daughter, the day after I'd probably have quit.
- c) I'm not even married, so I have my freedom and can get involved in a lot of things.
- d) My officer of public works is a woman, with four children and a job. She's also a choir-leader, and she manages to do all these things. But several times she's been on the point of saying: 'I really like what I do, I'll be sorry to stop, but I can't go on'. If she's managed, and with two small children, then it's not impossible.
- e) Then there are some of my female colleagues who have husbands that take care of these things and manage to do what a woman would do. Often the husband doesn't consider the problem of what the children or the wife will do when he's involved in politics or administration, but a woman does consider it, and she's often unable to count on a partner who can support her morally." (Woman, 47, Centre-Left)

The narrator begins by introducing the relation between the under-representation of women (the only woman at the mayor's assembly) and family ties (which those who go into politics may have to sacrifice) (a). In the next paragraph, she exemplifies this relation with an anecdote that shows the difficulty of striking a balance between the time-consuming activity of politics and the needs of family members (b). She concludes that only a woman without family responsibilities can take on a commitment of this kind (c). However, she now cites an example which seemingly contradicts what she has just said: there are mothers with numerous commitments who are also able to handle positions of responsibility (d). Indispensable in this case, how-

ever, is the assent and assistance of the partner, factors which men in politics take for granted.

This form of reasoning therefore contends as a general fact that women cannot be actively involved in politics; and if they are, it is because they do not have women's typical impediments, or are anyway exceptional. The positioning here, therefore, is that of the woman in politics as an 'exception'.

5.5 The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence

The theme of the family reappears in the next extract, where the male interviewee draws on his experience as a member of the European Parliament.

- a) "Women are in the majority, and they could therefore count for more; but since they start from a relatively low cultural base, they think that women should stay at home, that they should think about having children instead of going into politics.
- b) Unfortunately, this mentality is still very common, especially in the Latin countries. In fact, it's no coincidence that you find the majority of women MPs—I'm thinking about the European Parliament at the present time, but also national parliaments—in the Nordic countries.
- c) It's also true that all these women—I've known lots of them over the years—have disastrous family lives. Women in politics, women who really come to the fore in politics, are only rarely able to have equally successful family lives.
- d) Career women lose sight of family values. A woman who goes into politics full-time and distances herself from her family, in the sense that she gives priority to politics, sooner or later opts for her own interest. She's more interested in politics than in her husband at home. She says, 'He's a good man, but I can't compromise my political career to be with my husband'. And sometimes they say the same when they have children." (Man, 59, Centre-Right)

In this case, the narrator starts by specifically allocating blame: if women in politics are in the minority, the fault lies with the female electorate, which does not support them because it adheres to traditionalist convictions deriving from a lower cultural level (a). This situation, described as typical of the Latin countries, is contrasted with that of the Nordic countries, where the political presence of women is greater (b), although this has a correlation ("statistically proven" in the narrator's direct experience) with family failure (c). At this point, the narrative takes on more dramatic overtones, and the narrator claims that political commitment by women inevitably leads to family breakdown, with the final sacrifice—on the altar of the woman's political career—of the husband and even the children. In this extract, the part of the Other is assigned both to women and to the Nordic countries, the proponents of a model which is first cited as exemplary and then demonized. The grass on the other side of the fence, i.e. the mentality of women in the Nordic countries, is initially represented as greener—it is a more advanced mentality, it is more acculturated—but is then described as catastrophic.

Although the two extracts have a number of similarities, in that they both emphasize the difficulties encountered by women in striking a balance between politics and family responsibilities, it is evident that the types of rhetoric used and the types of positioning achieved are very different. In the first case, in which the speaker is a woman belonging to a centre-left political party, the account starts by acknowledging the difficulty of balancing different commitments, but it also provides examples of success, even though it highlights the persistence of different gender opportunities. In the second extract, taken from an interview with a centre-right member of the European Parliament, the rhetorical construction is more complex and provides an ambivalent picture of the female presence in politics: on the one hand, the scarce female presence in politics is blamed on the fact that women are traditionalist and provide little support for female representation; on the other, the speaker stresses a direct correlation between political commitment of women and family breakdown. In this way, the narrator seeks to evade responsibility for what he is saying, which he attributes instead to women. This is a pattern also displayed by other types of prejudice (racial, for example), where those discriminated against are given the blame even though they are the victims.

The overall impression gained from the extracts analysed, therefore, is that women are depicted as the Other with respect to the political system: responsible for their exclusion, or exceptional cases. As will become clearer, one notes the instrumental use made by the parties of women and the female issue: the active presence of women in politics is not really wanted or encouraged, but it is forcefully asserted at certain formal moments like the presentation of electoral lists.

5.6 *How discourses construct laws*

A theme present in many of the discourses collected concerns the appropriateness and legitimacy of rules which ensure the presence of a certain quota of women on electoral lists.⁵ The fate of the law which introduced these quotas—soon repealed because it was deemed discriminatory and therefore unconstitutional—was regarded as a provocation by the interviewed politicians on which everyone should take a stance. Mostly critical opinions were expressed, ranging from more traditional and conservative views opposed in principle to any exogenous change to the *status quo*, to less clear-cut ones which agreed with the intention of the law but not with its method.

5.7 *Don't interfere with nature*

The first extract is taken from the interview with the provincial secretary of a centre-right party:

5. The law stipulating that at least 30% of candidates on an electoral list must be women was introduced in 1993. It was subsequently repealed because the Constitutional Court ruled that it was unconstitutional.

- a) “Women have gradually conquered their place in the world of work without anyone offering them incentives, which were probably thought of afterwards.
- b) In the world of politics this will happen naturally if it happens at all.
- c) It may not happen and politics may be largely confined to the male world, but the law, what I call the ‘panda’ law, required that at least one-third of the candidates on an electoral list should be women.
- d) So one third of the list was made up of women, one third of handicapped people, one third of blacks, one third by hispanics, one third of ..., I don’t think that’s the way to incentivize women.
- e) It should be politics that changes, that extends. Laws which reserve space for women, according to me, induce them to stay out. If there are women, they go in for politics like anyone else. If there aren’t any women then the law is pointless. There will be a reciprocal adjustment, which will happen naturally. No-one can help or hinder this process because if it exists, it will be natural.
- f) Anyway, women have proved that if they are capable they can reach the top. One might think that Hillary Clinton was the real president rather than Bill, or that Albright was one of the most important women or men around. They made it without laws to protect them, they did so because they made a choice.” (Man, 44, Centre-Right)

In this account the narrator begins by citing the example of entry by women into the labour market, stressing the fact that this has happened —at least initially— without the existence of incentives (a). This example serves to draw a parallel with politics, where the presence of women will likewise increase when the time is right (b). But even if this does not happen, the interviewee thinks that it would be wrong to legislate a quota system for women, who he compares first to the panda, an animal on the brink of extinction and therefore to be protected (c), and then other categories like “the handicapped, blacks and hispanics” (d). In criticizing the quota system, the narrator propounds the concept of the “naturalness of the process”, which does not have to be imposed legally (e). The discourse closes with a further example, that of important women who have become such, not because of a law which protects them but because they have made a choice. This is the key point of the discourse: if women do not choose, it is pointless to give them preferential treatment.

The extract’s main emphasis is on the concept of ‘nature’ —some sort of divine nature or destiny with which humans must not interfere. The law on quotas is represented as the Other, as a disturbance in the natural course of things. The examples of successful women furnish a salvatory image reminiscent of the Protestant ethic: only those who are successful will be saved, the others are condemned.

5.8 *A complete nonsense*

In the second extract selected, the interviewee, a member of a left party, tells the story of the law on quotas:

- a) "It's been demanded in the past that half of all constituencies should be allocated to women. More recently, the Constitutional Court has quashed the law that imposed a quota of female candidates.
- b) There are now those who have returned to the attack. But it's absurd, because it was found that it was impossible to draw up the lists because of the reluctance of women, because women didn't want to stand as candidates.
- c) In the end, lists without women were presented. And when the electoral committees rejected them, appeals were lodged which went as far as the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the law was utter nonsense and quite rightly repealed it.
- d) Legally, we can't make distinctions based on sex, race, language or anything else, because in the end it turns into reverse discrimination.
- e) At this point one can only say that drunkards must have a representative who is a drunkard, drug addicts a representative who is a drug addict, and so on. Which is complete nonsense." (Man, 63, Centre-Right)

The narrator's opposition to the law on female quotas is obvious from the outset. His use of the verb "demand" immediately conveys the sense of an injustice which is immediately contrasted —through the use of the semantically loaded verb "quash"— with the Constitutional Court's censure (a). The rhetorical strategy is then to emphasize the practical drawback to a law of this kind: namely, the difficulty of finding women willing to make up the quotas (b). In the next paragraph, the narrator refers again to the Constitutional Court, whose granting of appeals regarding lists rejected because they did not contain the minimum quota of women, finally established the unacceptability of the law (c). He then cites the legal reasons for why the law discriminated against men (d). Finally, he compares the representation of women with the representation of other categories which, even more markedly than in the previous passage, carry an obviously negative connotation: drunkards and drug addicts.

5.9 *A medicine for change*

The third extract is taken from the narrative of a woman occupying an important institutional role and belonging to a centrist political group.

- a) "I've always abhorred the idea of a quota system, I don't agree that there should be a sort of fast track for women; you should win after you've started on an equal footing with the others.
- b) But culturally this parity still doesn't exist. This is proved by the fact that when the quota system was introduced, there was a hunt for women in the municipalities, masses of telephone calls to persuade women to put their names on the lists, because there had to be a certain number of them, a certain quota of women on the lists.
- c) In this province, more than five hundred women stood for election with the quota system. It had never happened before and I don't believe it will ever happen again.

- d) The fact is that the quota system was intended to be a sort of medicine while waiting for change, a stop-gap measure until the presence of women had increased,
- e) because this was the route followed in other countries. Significantly, there is no longer any need for instruments of this kind, because there is now a culture that moves in this direction.” (Woman, 54, Centre-Right)

In this case, too, the discourse begins with a clear statement of the narrator’s position on the issue: the narrator forcefully asserts her opposition to the quota system, for which she uses the metaphor of the “fast track”, emphasizing the privilege afforded by a measure of this kind. According to the narrator, political power should instead be won through competition on an equal footing (a). After this initial assertion, however, her discourse becomes more ambivalent: in reality, parity does not yet exist, and it was precisely the law on quotas that demonstrated this fact because it provoked a “hunt for women” when it became necessary to include a certain number of them on the lists (b). This led to a massive influx of women which probably —now that the law has been changed— will be difficult to repeat (c). At the end of this brief story, the narrator explains the purpose of the law by using the metaphor of “medicine”, describing it as an expedient to be used only until the pathology (the scant presence of women in politics) has been “cured” (d). The conclusion of her discourse entirely contradicts its beginning: in countries where this medicine has been used, it has worked and the culture has changed.

These three accounts use three types of argument which all seem critical of the quota system; yet in reality they use different discourse strategies and refer to different symbolic orders. The first account, which propounds a liberalist view, is constructed around the concept of naturalness, revealing an openness to women, who are deemed able —if they wish— to make their own way into politics without being helped to do so. In the second extract, where the central concept is justice, the argument is developed by recounting the failure of the law both formally and functionally. It, therefore, uses an apparently neutral strategy to propose the outright rejection of an externally-imposed constraint which discriminated against men. In the third case we find yet another combination: although this narrative is the one that most firmly rejects the quota system, it is also the one that justifies the system’s existence and indeed emphasizes its successful results. This extract therefore contains two different positioning processes. Firstly, by immediately and forcefully rejecting the quota system, the interviewee asserts that she has “won” her political status fairly, that she belongs to the political community by merit. Once she has defended her honour, however, she rehabilitates the law, pointing out that its purpose was to remedy a situation of inequality. Thus, she further emphasizes her own success.

Although no explicit reference is made to the existence of outright forms of preclusion —the emphasis being instead on the openness of political parties to women— overall the discursive models of gender construction that emerge from the analysis depict politics as a male preserve. Women’s mar-

ginal position is justified by reference to the models of gender citizenship distinctive of the organizational cultures to which the narrators belong. Each of these models defines what is fair with respect to the relationship between the sexes in the specific culture, and it is used in the narrative to legitimize the current situation. Thus, there are narratives which deny the existence of discrimination by starting from a model of citizenship understood as cultural integration; that is, where "women must be integrated into the general system" although this system then proves to be patriarchal. Or there are narratives which propose notions of citizenship comprising a formal equality which in fact replicates the traditional division of roles. Or again there are narratives which justify a situation of inequality by appealing to a notion of citizenship as a natural right irrespective of gender. To be found in each of the narratives is a specific gender model which is used to explain and legitimize the existence of inequality between men and women in political organizations and parties.

6. Conclusions

If we consider politics as one of the main arenas in which social reality is constructed, and narrative as one of the chief instruments available to politicians, then it is possible to understand the importance of careful analysis of how gender is constructed in the narratives of politicians. In this paper I have tried to provide insights into how gender is narratively produced in the discourses and stories of male and female politicians.

I have focused in particular on how, in the discourses of the politicians interviewed, women are positioned as the Other *vis-à-vis* the narrator and more generally the political system. I have tried to show that this comes about through rhetorical strategies like negation and exclusion, the blaming of women themselves for their exclusion, an emphasis on the exceptional nature of women in politics, the impossibility of reconciling family commitments and politics, and the delegitimation of laws designed to facilitate the entry of women into politics. These strategies reflect and reproduce citizenship models in which gender differences are simultaneously denied and exploited, and in which otherness also entails marginalization and/or subordination.

The impasse in which women find themselves when they have achieved important effective and formal success in their demand for political equality requires greater symbolic and cultural awareness of gender construction. Analysis of the discursive practices with which politicians describe (and therefore construct) gender sheds light on the culturally and historically situated nature of gender citizenship models, and it highlights their intrinsic ambiguity. It, thus, becomes easier to imagine gender citizenship as a symbolic space in which different perspectives are negotiated, an open arena for the expression of a plurality of differences and othernesses or, in the Bhabha's words 'a place of hybridity' (1994, 25) characterized by the elimination of every binary opposition and by the multi-positionality of identity.

References

- ALEJANDRO, Roberto (1993). *Hermeneutics, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- ANDERSON, Walter E. (1990). *Reality isn't what it used to be*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- ATKINSON, Robert (1998). *The Life Story Interview*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- BERGVALL, Victoria L.; BING, Janet M. and FREED, Alice F. (eds.) (1996). *Rethinking Language and Gender Research*. Harlow: Longman.
- BHABHA, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- BRUNER, Jerome (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- BRUNER, Jerome (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- CHRISTIE, Chris (2002). "Politeness and the Linguistic Construction of Gender in Parliament: An Analysis of Transgressions and Apology Behaviour". In: *Working Papers on the Web*, 3, Special issue on Linguistic Politeness and Context, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/politeness/christie.htm>
- CONNELL, Robert (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- DAVIES, Bronwyn (1989). *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales*. North Sidney: Unwin Hyman.
- DAVIES, Bronwyn and HARRÉ, Rom (1990). "Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves". *Journal of the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 1, 43-63.
- DERRIDA, Jacques (1967). *De la Grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit.
- DUNDAS TODD, Alexandra and FISHER, Sue (eds.) (1988). *Gender and Discourse: the Power of Talk*. Norwood: Ablex.
- GAVEY, Nicola (1997) "Feminist Poststructuralism and Discourse Analysis". In: Gergen, Mary M. and Davis, Sara N. (eds.). *Toward a New Psychology of Gender*. New York: Routledge, 49-64.
- GHERARDI, Silvia (1995) *Gender, Symbolism and Organizational Culture*. London: Sage.
- GHERARDI, Silvia and POGGIO, Barbara (2007). *Gendertelling in Organizations: Narratives from Male-dominated Environments*. Stockholm: Liber AB.
- HOLMES, Janet and MEYERHOFF, Miriam (2003). *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- LITOSSELITI, Lia and SUNDERLAND, Jane (eds.) (2002). *Gender Identity and Discourse Analysis*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- LYOTARD, Jean François (1979). *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- MUMBY, Dennis K. (1988). *Communication and Power in Organizations: Discourse, Ideology and Domination*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- POGGIO, Barbara (2004). *Mi racconti una storia. Il metodo narrativo nelle scienze sociali*. Roma: Carocci.
- POTTER, Jonathan and WETHERELL, Margaret (1993). *Analyzing Discourse*. London: Sage.
- SHAW, Sylvia (2000). "Language, gender and floor apportionment in political debates". *Discourse & Society*, 11, 401-418.
- SULERI, Sara (1992). *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- THORNBORROW, Joanna (2002). *Power Talk. Language and Interaction in Institutional Discourse*. Harlow: Longman.

- SCHÜTZE, F. (1987). *Das narrative Interview in Interaktionsstudien*. Hagen: Fernuniversität-Gesamthochschule.
- WALSH, Clare (1998). "Gender and mediatized political discourse : a case study of press coverage of Margaret Beckett's campaign for the Labour leadership in 1994". *Language and Literature*, 7, 199-214.
- WALSH, Clare (2001). *Gender and Discourse. Language and Power in Politics, the Church and Organizations*. London: Longman.
- WEATHERALL, Ann (2002). *Gender, Language and Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- WITTEN, Marsha (1993). "Narrative and the Culture of Obedience at the Workplace". In: MUMBY, Dennis K. *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives*. London: Sage, 97-118.
- WODAK, Ruth (1996). *Disorder of Discourse*. London: Longman.
- WODAK, Ruth (1997). *Gender and Discourse*. London: Sage.