

Old and New Constraints and Resistances of Feminism: the Role of Past Experiences in Rethinking of Class, Oppression and Patriarchy

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Abstract: In this paper, I try to highlight some key issues involving feminism, its potentials and the obstacles it has been facing from the 1970s onwards. I stress the attention of the enduring left-wing patriarchy and its damaging consequences for feminist movements. I point out the need for to recover the past experiences of struggle, with particular reference to *Lotta Femminista* and the Wage for Housework network to emphasize the role of black feminism in the practice of intersectionality as a structural point of reference. Also, I underline the need to debate the results of state feminism and women's activity within organizations. As well as these, I call attention to the need to analyse the system of oppression within a revolutionary project which aims at overcoming both capitalism *and* patriarchy, as well as the key role that feminism has to play on the elaboration and implementation of this project. In this way, as feminism cannot be a sporadic commitment, women are asked to articulate every day, *wherever they are* and *whatever they do* to produce and reproduce subversion.

Key words: Capitalist Patriarchy, Resistance, Intersectionality

Feminism involves so much more than gender equality. And it involves so much more than gender. Feminism must involve a consciousness of capitalism – I mean, the feminism that I relate to. And there are multiple feminisms, right? It has to involve a consciousness of capitalism, and racism, colonialism, and postcolonialities, and ability, and more genders that we can even imagine, and more sex-ualities than we ever thought we could name. Feminism has helped us not only to recognize a range of connections among discourses, and institutions, and identities, and ideologies that we often tend to consider separately. But it has also helped us to develop epistemological and organizing strategies that take us beyond the categories “women” and “gender”. And, feminist methodologies impel us to explore connections that are not always apparent. And they drive us to inhabit contradictions and discover what is productive in these contradictions. Feminism insists on methods of thought and action that urge us to think about things together that appear to be separate, and to disaggregate things that appear to naturally belong together.¹

Women’s voice(s) and the need of a unifying approach

Can feminism be seen in terms of mere individual identity, separated by a collective reference? Feminism is culturally, historically and materially affected and affecting. Of course, it permeates individual identities but only to the extent that individuals have become aware of the necessity of feminism in a particular moment coinciding with a specific event within their own life experience, often only from this point. Far from a hypostasized conceptualization, feminism is configured, therefore, as a process, from which an (not granted) outcome may draw new identities and collective subjectivities.

How does this process take shape? I think we cannot consider feminism in terms of either a mere theoretical reflection or a mere militant action. I will here offer some reflections addressed to deepen the potentials of feminism, but also its troubles.

Michel De Certeau in *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (1994)² highlighted the indissoluble link existing between the capture of speech and the seizure of power. Capturing the speech itself does not lead to the conquest of power. Indeed, denouncing a lack implies a work (to be done) in order to transform that lacking reality in something else, addressed to fill that

lack. Capturing the speech, as acquiring consciousness, represents a symbolic action that needs to be associated with experience. In this way, capturing the speech opens to a symbolic revolution, crucial, although not enough, for transforming reality. Nevertheless, the contrast between “experience” and “language” remains and this is not easy to overcome. As pointed out by De Certeau: “Every negation is content with inverting the terms of the affirmation that it contradicts [...]. But the main problem today is posed by the disparity between a fundamental experience and the deficit of its language, between the “positivity” of something lived and the “negativity” of an expression that, in the form of a refusal, resembles more the symptom than the elaboration of the reality being designated.”³

De Certeau was referring to the student revolt of the French May, but what he found is a dynamic that could be applied to any movement: “If it is not organized, if it is not inscribed, even as a strategy, *within* the network of national forces in order to effectively change a system, this demand of conscience will be neither reformist nor revolutionary, but it will be extinguished in departures for other nations or in inner exiles, negating its request for participation in order to take refuge in a vagabond emigration or in an ideological and sterile resistance.”⁴ In other words, the dispute remains a minority, emphasized De Certeau, by narrating it in terms of a specific and contingent event:

It is placed under the rubric of the *a/so*: whoever takes speech is *a/so* accepted, no doubt, because of the person’s modesty, and because for that reason he or she can easily be tolerated by a society strong enough to swallow a foreign element and make use of it. Wealth always goes to the rich: a well-structured society takes advantage of a protest by the minority. But the situation changes when, going beyond the fact that some people capture speech in a structure inoculated against this kind of poison, one begins to wonder if the act of taking speech is not or must not become the *constitutive principle* of a society: in short, when the exception assumes the weight of a rule; when the “accident” assumes universal proportions. At that point, it becomes a subversive matter. The whole system is called into question.⁵

Like black people, women have always faced with the problem of identity: “As in every instance where language is no longer adequate to what it claims to state [...]. Prisoners of the culture from which they were already escaping by virtue of an impregnable experience of ‘a certain affective attitude with respect to the world,’ in order to explain their autonomy and to identify themselves, they only

had access to a 'regression' back to ancestral tradition or to a 'marginalization' and a retreat to the borders of modern society."⁶ Nevertheless, as underlined by De Certeau, while this happens, it can also be prevented or overcome: "This, up to the point where their identity is affirmed when they ascribe to themselves the conditions necessary for the constitution of a language of their own, that is, by taking unto themselves the *power* of organizing a *representation*. *Political* autonomy was the basis of a *cultural* identity. Many other examples show how: it is impossible to take speech and to retain it without a taking of power. To want *to be heard* means being committed to *making* history."⁷ In this way, the force that is expressed by speech is not just individual but refers to the political dimension of action and has to do with the desire (and the responsibility) for its potential transformation. Within this political dimension, feminist movements have allowed women to express themselves without asking for permission or feeling inadequate.

Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation [...]. We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us. The fact that we are here and that I speak there words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.⁸

De Certeau remarks that, however, speech implies the acceptance of acquiring power, in order to shape the identity in a new cultural and political unit. The alternative is exile and re-integration into the status quo. Again, this is true also for women. This process is not linear, of course, and it calls into question the relationship between women, hierarchies and power. As highlighted by Jean-Luc Nancy, "So not only you have to say: 'From the moment I rise I take the power' but also: 'From the moment I take the power, I am speaking.' The power is the sensible regime or signifier of power."⁹ Moreover: "For the same reason, the word that cannot speak without even revealing its power can only reveal

its impotence within this power.”¹⁰ However, this power has never been gender-neutral. As underlined by Carla Lonzi, it is the concept of power that needs to be interrogated:

What is meant by woman’s equality is usually her right to share in the exercise of power within society, once it is accepted that she is possessed of the same abilities as man. But in these years women’s real experience has brought about a new awareness, setting into motion a process of global devaluation of the male world. We have come to see that at the level of power there is no need for abilities but only for a particularly effective form of alienation. Existing as a woman does not imply participation in male power, but calls into question the very concept of power. It is in order to avoid this attack that we are now granted inclusion in the form of equality.¹¹

Feminism has not been immune to setbacks that have weakened it and undermined its voice(s). Like all movements, feminism has experienced the risk of the divorce between theory and practice. Amongst feminist movements, this divorce has played a key role in delegitimizing the revolutionary claim supporting political activism. Along this way, an interesting analytical perspective is offered by a critique made by Christine Delphy to those scholars who claim the need to keep separate the theoretical level from the practical and militant one. Delphy underlines that:

This division between theory and practice, so contrary to the principles of the women’s movement, and which should be contrary to those of any revolutionary movement, is also, above all, the establishment of a hierarchy between militants: the ones have to produce the theory, in isolation, the others have to listen it and put it into practice. Unfortunately, this division joins the anti-intellectualism of many feminist activists who refuse any theory, without realizing that their practice incorporates, whether willingly or not, always a theory, whether it has been said or not. This mistrust is understandable when those who produce the theory assure them that the theory has nothing to do with the practice. Here the greatest responsibility belongs to the intellectuals. Their practice, by making the theory the hunting reserve of an elite, explains and justifies the anti-intellectualism of others. The non-intellectuals are right to defend themselves, if they want to make the revolution, from a “theory” presented to them as a means of domination.

However, they are wrong to abdicate in front of the claims of this self-designated elite: everyone must recover the theory, just because everybody makes it, whether you realize it or not.¹²

Anti-intellectualism and elitist feminism, albeit placed on antithetical levels, produces a wide distance between theory and factual reality, with the result of impoverishing the transformative power that any theory and revolutionary practice should possess. Similarly, these positions, when they prevailed within the feminist movement, have produced the separation of feminism from Marxism, with detrimental results for both. Equally, as stated by Delphy: “Marxism is obviously materialistic. To this extent, it is usable for feminism. Insofar as materialism starts from the oppression, and vice versa, if one admits that starting from the oppression defines among other things a materialistic approach.”¹³ Along these lines, it is undeniable that “the non-recognition of sexual division in the analysis of capital does not prevent the application of materialistic concepts to the oppression of women. Conversely, this non-recognition poses a problem not for women but for the analysis of the capitalist mode of production.”¹⁴ In this way,

Thus, a materialistic approach cannot be satisfy by adding the materialistic analysis of the oppression of women to the analysis of the oppression of the workers such as Marx and then Marxists have done. The two cannot simply be added because the former necessarily modifies the second. Feminism necessarily modifies Marxism in several ways. On the one hand, because it is impossible for it to accept the reduction of Marxism solely through the analysis of *Capital*; on the other hand, because the struggle between workers and capitalists is no longer the only struggle, this antagonism can no longer be considered as the sole dynamic of society, finally because it also modifies the analysis of capital within [...]. These two objectives: to extend the principles of Marxism, that is to say, materialism to the analysis of women’s oppression, and to review the analysis of *Capital* on the basis of the feminist analysis, are what should define, if words have a meaning, a Marxist-feminist or feminist-Marxist approach.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the troubles among the left emerge here. These troubles are related to the structural minimisation or removal of the exploitation of women within the household. To the point that, again agreeing with Delphy, the Left: “is materialistic ‘in general’, that is to say, as far as capitalist exploitation is

concerned, it finds itself in the intellectual positions of the right as far as the exploitation of patriarchy is concerned.”¹⁶ On this concern, it must be underlined that even if the concept of patriarchy should be “handle with care”¹⁷, it is also true that it remains the most functional terms to conceptualize male oppression on women in society.

Politicizing housework while struggling against left-wing patriarchy: still an open question

In our age of “sad passions” the analysis and the recovering of the past is crucial to rethink of class, oppression and patriarchy, in order to imagine feasible transformations of the current setting. Along these lines, we should question what the feminization of work has produced since the 1970s onwards in terms of women’s emancipation, working and living conditions within and outside the household, in both private and public spaces. The economic crisis ongoing since 2008 and austerity measures have undoubtedly worsened the conditions of women. Exactly after several decades since the spread of neoliberal ideology, the promotion of the “employability”, especially that one of women, as a key issue for “gender equality” reveals its failure and those false premises that supported it. Indeed, the promotion of female employment outside the household has been associated with an enduring and pervasive reduction of welfare provisions almost across the worldwide. However, measuring women’s work by wages has always hidden the extent to which family and social relations have been subordinated to the relations of production and have thus become relations of production by increasing the capitalist exploitation.¹⁸ In this way, the rethinking of class, oppression and patriarchy cannot avoid structural reflections on the politics of housework.

One interesting experience, combining a theoretical and practical level, has been that of the Wage for Housework (WfH), founded in Italy in the early 1970s. This experience - due to its capacity to produce the intersection between class, gender and race and a rethinking of not only of the relation between capitalism and reproduction, but also of the contradictions amongst left movements - still represents a cornerstone for feminism. As well as this it represents a crucial point of reference for any movement addressed to put in question housework and the gendered division of labour.

The WfH network matured first in Italy, within the *Movimento di Lotta Femminile* (Women’s Struggle Movement), then *Lotta Femminista* (Feminist Struggle) and later *Movimento dei Gruppi e Comitati per il Salario al Lavoro Domestico* (Movement of Groups and Committees for Wages for Housework), henceforward *Gruppi per il Salario per il Lavoro Domestico* (Wages for

Housework network)¹⁹. The WfH network was founded to raise awareness of the functional integration of housework and childcare into the capitalist system and the need to claim payment for reproductive labour. This movement was placed within a peculiar context. In the 1970s, the reorganization of the Italian manufacturing system passed through the expansion of the black economy and illegal employment, homeworking, double jobs and a general proliferation of working activities with no contract. These circumstances took place in a context marked by a deep-rooted patriarchal culture, unemployment and women's economic dependence from their husband's wage. The subaltern condition of women in the most industrialized regions of Italy and the established experience of the *operaismo* (workerism) explained the peculiar conditions that allowed the Wages for Housework network to find more support in Italy, especially in Northern Italy.²⁰ Moreover, in the 1970s introduced divorce law, the *Statuto dei Lavoratori* (Workers' Statute) and abortion became legal but within the extra-parliamentary left parties and movements, the 'woman question' had no place, by forcing many women activists to leave them to form self-managed feminist organizations.

The fundamental work supporting the promotion and diffusion of the Wages for Housework network was *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, written by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James in 1973.²¹ Moving from a historical materialism perspective, the authors aimed at criticizing Marxist disregarding about both the way in which the wage relation mystified the social function of the family and the role of unpaid reproductive labour in the production of workers and accumulation of capital. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* played also a pivotal role in launching the 'domestic labour debate' at international level and, then, stimulating the rise of feminist movements dealing with the domestic and care work for its role on the production of value. From Italy, *Lotta Femminista's* struggles were soon extended at international level. On the basis of works from Mariarosa and Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, Antonella Picchio as well as other activists, *Lotta Femminista* promoted an interaction with Selma James' group of activists based in London, while in the USA and Canada also formed WfH groups, with Silvia Federici in New York and Judith Ramirez in Toronto, then, Ariel Salleh in Australia and Maria Mies in Germany.²²

It must be noted that in the post war period, Fordism - the stability of the employment status, with an inflexible working time, and a rigid gendered division of labour that assigned men to paid activity outside the family and women to unpaid domestic and care work - was harshly coherent with the "ideology of domesticity". This is what happened in almost all industrialized countries. However, during the 1970s the feminist movements broke the

traditional scheme of the patriarchal family that represented women as “The Angel in the House” and man, as the male-breadwinner and absolute sovereign of both the private and public spheres. As highlighted by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, the struggle of women had to fight patriarchy and act as a catalyst for other subjectivities dominated by the patriarchal system. Conversely, the capitalistic acceleration started from the neoliberal turn of the 1980s has strongly reduced this struggle. In Italy, during the 1970s while there were many feminist movements making a claim for the refusal of the androcentrism there was also the refusal of “equality”, being considered as an empty box useful for neglecting women’s conditions. Then, after the legalisation of divorce and abortion and the formal recognition of the “woman question” the feminist movements collapsed. It must be emphasized the season of terrorism played a crucial role in Italy to order (and limit) the political discourse: after that season, the “social conflict” was considered merely as “violence”. This was also a result of the process of “normalisation” undertaken by the Italian Communist Party that needed to be legitimated as a democratic force.

In the 1980s, while the Italian Communist Party and left unionism changed their aims - as a consequence of the political exchange that allowed them to keep their structure with the assurance to decline any revolutionary perspectives - other more radical left movements disappeared. These processes of both institutionalization and weakening concerned also feminism. Both the concept of “equality” and “difference” have mystified that the standard for women, that is, the unit of measure has become men and their behaviours in public and private sphere. This standard also changes on the basis of economic and social contingencies, but it nevertheless continues to dominate. And what about the gender dimension? It has been formally but elusively solved by the “ideology of equal opportunities” while the intersection between class, gender and race has been totally silenced in favour of a major involvement of women in organizations, aiming at removing barriers to positions of power.

Across the world, after the 1970s, feminist movements have got lost in the creation of modern gynaecea, dispersed and powerless, progressively institutionalized. In this new turn, the struggle against patriarchy has been substituted with the fight for “equal opportunities”. At the same time, the working class has been annihilated by many factors, among them: restructuring processes, the individualization of the work relationship and the weakening of mass parties. Feminist movements and the working class should have fought together against the patriarchal system since it has been allied with capitalism to conceal class, gender and divisions. Thus, as Silvia Federici reminds us, the troubles amongst the Left cannot be referred exclusively to the neoliberal turn of the 1980s:

In the name of “class struggle” and “the unified interest of the working class,” the Left has always selected certain sectors of the working class as revolutionary subjects and condemned others to a merely supportive role in the struggles these sectors were waging. The Left has thus reproduced in its organizational and strategic objectives the same divisions of the class that characterize the capitalist division of labor. In this respect, despite the variety of tactical positions, the Left has been strategically united.²³

Federici highlights that the Left offered women “not a struggle against capital, but a struggle for capital, in a more rationalized, developed, and productive form”²⁴ and “not only the ‘right to work’ (this they offer to every worker), but the right to work more, the right to be further exploited.”²⁵ This is still a crucial issue for the Left. Are wageless people condemned to silence? Are they the “Other” from the “real working class”? In this way, as argued by Federici, the Wage for Housework represented a radical step: “Our rejection of leftist ideology is one and the same as our rejection of capitalist development as a road to liberation or, more specifically, our rejection of capitalism in whatever form it takes. Inherent in this rejection is a redefinition of what capitalism is and who the working class is—that is, a new evaluation of class forces and class needs.”²⁶ In the same direction, Claudia von Werlhof emphasizes that the limits of analysis of capitalism made by the Left are due not only to the fact that it has assumed capitalism as the only alternative “but because (the Left) is, thinks and feels in a patriarchal way.”²⁷

Hence, the ideology that opposes the private to the public, productive to reproductive work is deeply rooted not only in the capitalist division of labour but also amongst Left movements. Unions have always marginalized issues like reproductive labour (specifically, its unbalanced burden on women and its consequences on women’s work-discontinuities and economic dependence on men) in the name of a limited (and limiting) idea about the meaning of a universalistic representation of working-class interests. As well as this, they focused almost exclusively on white, adult, male and waged work-force by reproducing class, race and gender discriminations. From this perspective the increasing feminization of unions seems not to have notably contributed to improve women’s working and living conditions. It should be said this is the same of political parties. A serious reflection on the possibility to rethink and transform the existing relationship between class and the gender division of labour has to merge the analysis of the impact of women as transformative agents of positive change within organisations. I think that in the recent

decades, women have more focused on gender quotas and have thus paid less attention to force a structural monitoring of the results of gender politics or the reasons for their failure. The critique of the role of women within organisations is one of the starting points to assess the relationship between theory and practice and, most certainly, the conditions for a real emancipation of women from the patriarchal oppression.

Free from what or free to do what?

Women's unpaid family work has represented a crucial issue among feminist movements, especially for those interested in combining feminism with Marxism. This approach has been addressed to understand women's subordination in private and public sphere, for a materialist analysis of women's subordination. Nevertheless, despite the extensive literature produced and the theoretical and material issues raised, after the 1970s the "domestic labour debate" weakened. This decline has been associated with the raise of the institutional feminism at global level. In this way, the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, despite its ongoing discriminations against women, played a key role in the representation of the "equal opportunities" as a new goal to reach, as already mentioned. This turn produced the oblivion of the struggles of the 1970s, such as those ones promoted by the network of groups grown around the Wages for Housework network (WfH) and many others. We could offer many examples here. However, what is more important is to understand what the 1970s struggles can offer in terms of critique to current feminism. Regarding this concern, I think we have a thick and wide theoretical support to recover.

Starting from the sexual liberation for instance, the feminist movements took for granted that the sexual liberation would have gradually but inexorably reduced gender disparities. Nevertheless, as underlined by Silvia Federici:

Sexual freedom does not help. Certainly it is important that we are not stoned to death if we are "unfaithful," or if it is found that we are not 'virgins.' But "sexual liberation" has intensified our work. In the past, we were just expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double workday, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing. For women the right to have sex is the duty to have sex and to enjoy it.²⁸

The control over women's sexuality has never disappeared. Rather, it has changed in its shape. Even if the economic dependence of women on men

has reduced, the efforts made within the family and by the State to control women's sexuality and reproductive rights across the world have expanded inversely proportional to the fight to end violence against women. About this concern, feminist movements from the 1970s onwards have showed an intense but short-lived mobilization: the institutionalisation of feminism has not helped at all. National legislation aiming at regulating abortion and divorce, even if it represented a crucial step for women's emancipation, has produced a deadlock of women's mobilization against the patriarchal system. There has been an increasing gap between good laws and bad practices that must be thematised and overcome, especially regarding the contemporary attacks on reproductive rights. Another issue being pointed out in a discontinuous way by feminist movements is the commercialization of the female body. Again, as Silvia Federici wrote in the 1975 (although it could be written yesterday):

On how our body looks depends whether we can get a good or bad job (in marriage or out of the home), whether we can gain some social power, some company to defeat the loneliness that awaits us in our old age and often in our youth as well [...] In sum, we are too busy performing, too busy pleasing, too afraid of failing, to enjoy making love. The sense of our value is at stake in every sexual relation. If a man says we make love well, we excite him, whether or not we like making love with him, we feel great, it boosts our sense of power, even if we know that afterwards we still have to do the dishes. But we are never allowed to forget the exchange involved, because we never transcend the value-relation in our love relation with a man.²⁹

Paola Tabet has offered to us a substantial analysis to understanding the relationship between the possession of wealth by men, the economic dependence of women (despite their huge burden of paid and unpaid work) and the sexual-economic exchange. There is a long continuity about this concern and it has always been undeniable that: "The poorest man can pay for the sexual service of the poorest woman, while the poorest woman not only can not afford sexual services, but she has not even the right to her own sexuality; and maybe her job will allow her man to pay for other distractions and other sexual services."³⁰ The gendered division of labour and the different access to resources, means of production and knowledge between men and women, accordingly to Tabet, have supported the reproduction of this gap over time. Then again, one needs to consider the gender wage gap and the incalculable amount of unpaid domestic and care work done by women. The advantage for

men is invaluable as well. On this basis, accordingly to Tabet, it is the surplus of work that makes possible the enduring hegemony of men on women. Consequently, the sexual-economic exchange represents the key element to strengthen and perpetuate, at global level, the sexual oppression, limitations of knowledge and economic exploitation. Tabet expanded and articulated what Claude Meillassoux wrote in *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (1981) with reference to the domestic community. Meillassoux emphasized the exploitation of women's reproductive functions under capitalism and the existing intersection between gender, race and class.³¹ Also addressed is the work of Maria Mies on the role of women in the international division of labour.³²

Today, women are still unable to acquire a status based on the relations of production. Despite the dominant place they occupy in key sectors of the social reproduction such as care, education, health as well as domestic labour, women are not recognized as legitimate producers at all. This fact poses many questions not only for the emancipation of women but also for social reproduction as a whole. As a matter of fact, women are the most involved in the unpaid labour of social reproduction. After the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, the costs of social reproduction have been mostly externalised to families and, specifically, on women. In this way, the increasing profit rate for capital has been associated with a gradual but overwhelming reduction in welfare provisions. David Harvey cogently argues that

Social reproduction is the site where the oppression of and violence against women flourishes in many parts of the world, where educational opportunities for women are denied, where violence and abuse of children all too frequently occur, where intolerance breeds contempt for others, where labour all too often transfers its own bitter experience of violence and oppression in the labour process back on to others in the household [...] It is for this reason that a modicum of social regulation and even, perhaps, state interventionism in the world of social reproduction become so necessary. But this then constitutes a bureaucratic framing of daily life and of social reproduction that leaves very little room for autonomous development. Furthermore, the deeper material embedding of all processes of production, exchange, distribution and consumption in the web of social and biological life has produced a world where a contradiction between a potentially alienating household consumerism of excess and the consumption necessary for adequate social reproduction becomes every bit as

salient as the contradiction between the social reproduction of the labour force and the reproduction of capital.³³

The unbalanced relationship existing between the resources invested in speculative finance and those ones invested in the social reproduction must be assumed as a key point of contention in any feminist (and Left-wing) agenda. After 30 years of neoliberal plague, people got familiar with the idea of a “necessary” reduction of welfare provisions: it is considered and accepted as “sign of the times”, not the symbol of extreme violence of capital. It is by exactly observing how this works that we can fully grasp the results of what Mark Fisher meant for “capitalist realism”³⁴:

Capitalist realism doesn't appear in the first instance, then, as a political position. It emerges instead as a pragmatic adjustment - 'this is the way things are now'. This sense of resignation, of fatalism, is crucial to the 'realism'. Here we can distinguish between neoliberalism and capitalist realism. Capitalist realism isn't the direct endorsement of neoliberal doctrine; it's the idea that, whether we like it or not, the world is governed by neoliberal ideas, and that won't change. There's no point fighting the inevitable.³⁵

Feminism as an everyday struggle

Nancy Fraser - in an article published in 2013 by *The Guardian*, titled “How feminism became capitalism's handmaiden - and how to reclaim it” - after criticising feminism's ambivalence about neoliberal capitalism, concludes as follows:

First, we might break the spurious link between our critique of the family wage and flexible capitalism by *militating for a form of life that de-centres waged work and valorises unwaged activities, including - but not only - carework*. Second, we might disrupt the passage from our critique of economism to identity politics by *integrating the struggle to transform a status order premised on masculinist cultural values with the struggle for economic justice*. Finally, we might sever the bogus bond between our critique of bureaucracy and free-market fundamentalism by *reclaiming the mantle of participatory democracy as a means of strengthening the public powers needed to constrain capital for the sake of justice*.³⁶

The article sparked wide discussion on the state of contemporary feminism. In

this way, it was undoubtedly fruitful for a rethinking of current configurations of identity and gender politics. However, its assumptions are less sharable. Why do we take for granted that feminism would be impermeable to capitalism?

However, I do not think that feminism has contributed to neoliberalism, for many reasons. First, what Fraser hopes regarding the need to break the dangerous liaison between feminism and neoliberalism has been the main concern of the theoretical production and struggles of the second-wave feminism, with particular reference to materialist feminism. There is a deep-rooted legacy of struggles and resistance to bear in mind. It is also evident that the neoliberal turn has produced an adverse context to feminism, especially due to the spread of precarious forms of employment and attacks on social reproduction. Second, it is plausible that like all social and political movements, feminism has been experiencing an increasing atomization which leads to difficulties in mass mobilization but also to a dispersion of the knowledge of feminist struggles across the world. Analysing the relationship between feminism and capitalism implies we cannot hold together different feminisms, often animated by dissimilar political sensibilities and priorities. In addition, as underlined by Sylvia Walby, during the last decades there has been a shift in intellectual inquiry about systems of power towards the practice of agency, which reduce attention to the dynamics of power and, again, weaken both analysis and political synthesis. Conversely, today feminism is less visible also due to its coalition with other social forces, which are not recognizably labelled feminist.³⁷ Finally, if we conceive feminism a process rather than a fix identity, we should consider that as capitalism changes with implications for the form of the gender regime and of feminism, also feminism changes and produces new challenges for capitalism.³⁸

What are more difficult to assess are the results of the institutionalisation of feminism. The proportion of women in senior positions in trade unions, in government boards of public offices and corporations has certainly promoted the articulation of wide range of women's perspectives on economic and distributive issues (Walby, 2004). Nevertheless, the institutionalisation of feminism poses some questions to both radical feminism and intersectionality. Radical tensions are stigmatised while different aspects of identity, not converging with unitary entities, contrast with the need to face with a standardised idea of "woman" and "women's interests". As underlined by Walby:

The future of feminism depends not only on the internal resources of the project, but also on the resources of its wider environment. These offer both threats and opportunities for the development and influence of feminism. As the nature of gender inequalities

changes, so too do feminist projects, and this change involves complex processes of innovation and adaptation. There is no simple, monolithic, timeless category of “woman”, whose “interests” would be obvious; rather there are changes in who women are, in how they are positioned, and also in how they perceive their interests and imagine them being taken forward.³⁹

Nevertheless, there is always an open question about the meaning and the shape of feminist militancy. The results of the capitalist acceleration at material and cultural levels are driving feminism to be a commitment to a permanent struggle, where the precise responsibilities of the State and capitalism supported by the deep-rooted patriarchal culture will give grounds for a new wave of mobilizations. At this point, feminist movements have the great chance to act as catalyst for many other struggles and promote mass mobilization as cyclically occurs in the course of history.

However, there are some obstacles to overcome. In this way, while it is arguable to assume that feminism has fuelled capitalism, it is plausible that feminism has introjected the individualistic culture and subsequently reproduced it. Positioned against individualism, its causes and its effects on the global planet should be addressed feminist movements’ attention and protests. As highlighted by Angela Davis, “Since the rise of global capitalism and related ideologies associated with neoliberalism, it has become especially important to identify the dangers of individualism. Progressive struggles—whether they are focused on racism, repression, poverty, or other issues—are doomed to fail if they do not also attempt to develop a consciousness of the insidious promotion of capitalist individualism.”⁴⁰ To forge a new language and praxis of feminism, past feminist struggles should be taken as models. Black feminism maybe still represents one of the most interesting model, as emphasized by Davis:

Black feminism emerged as a theoretical and practical effort demonstrating that race, gender, and class are inseparable in the social worlds we inhabit. At the time of its emergence, Black women were frequently asked to choose whether the Black movement or the women’s movement was most important. The response was that this was the wrong question. The more appropriate question was how to understand the intersections and interconnections between the two movements. We are still faced with the challenge of understanding the complex ways race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and ability are intertwined—but also how we move beyond these categories to understand the interrelationships of ideas and

processes that seem to be separate and unrelated.⁴¹

Along this line, a key issue is considering the intersectionality as a structural and obliged reference amongst feminist movements, by focusing to “not so much intersectionality of identities, but intersectionality of struggles.”⁴² Regarding this concern, feminist activists and scholars should pay attention “to prevent the term ‘intersectionality’ from erasing essential history of activism” because “behind this concept of intersectionality is a rich history of struggle. A history of conversations among activists within movement formations, and with and among academics as well.”⁴³

As well as this, the analysis of the system of oppression and the rethinking of class and gender and their intersection could be only imagined within a revolutionary project aiming at overcoming both capitalism and patriarchy. As highlighted by Juliet Mitchell “The overthrow of the capitalist economy and the political challenge that effects this, do not in themselves mean a transformation of patriarchal ideology [...]. The change to a socialist economy does not by itself suggest that the end of patriarchy comfortably follows suit. A specific struggle against patriarchy – a cultural revolution – is requisite.”⁴⁴ Feminism has a key role to play on the elaboration and implementation of this project. But then again, it is a matter of holding together theoretical and practical knowledge, private and public sphere, and forging new solidarities based on the common oppression and exploitation to create new political subjects, united to critique and overcome the system of oppression related to the “mutual dependence of capitalism and patriarchy.”⁴⁵ In this way, women are asked to take speech every day, *wherever they are* and *whatever they do* to produce and reproduce subversion. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James remind us:

When women are deprived of wide experience of organizing and planning collectively industrial and other mass struggles, they are denied a basic source of education, the experience of social revolt. And this experience is primarily the experience of learning your own capacities, that is, your power, and the capacities, the power, of your class. Slavery to an assembly line is not a liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink. To deny this is also to deny the slavery of the assembly line itself, proving again that if you don't know how women are exploited, you can never really know how men are.⁴⁶

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