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# A CALL TO LOYALTY: WOMEN'S BODIES, PLAYGROUNDS AND BATTLEFIELDS

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## **Abstract**

The article aims at analysing how the use of “feminist” arguments by xenophobic, right –wing and populist discourses– constitutes a specific form of neutralisation of feminism. In European public discourse, women’s freedom is becoming a pawn in a political game that has nothing to do with women themselves. Women’s bodies –possessed, re-appropriated, impregnated, covered and uncovered– become battlefields for the “identity conflicts” of late modernity. On the other hand, the aspiration to autonomy, re-narrated in late capitalism in terms of freedom to consume, causes women bodies, exposed, spectacularised, commodified, to become the playgrounds of neo-liberal order (Fraser, 2009). Some trends in contemporary feminism reflect this mimetic version of freedom, thus contributing to make feminist critique suitable to the spirit of new capitalism and easily manipulated by xenophobic, right-wing populist discourses.

## **Keywords**

Gender, difference, xenophobia, neoliberal order.

## **Resumen**

Este artículo muestra cómo los argumentos feministas utilizados por discursos de derecha populistas y xenofóbicos contribuyen a la neutralización del feminismo en el discurso público europeo, la libertad de la mujer se invoca para fines que tienen poco que ver con ellas mismas. El cuerpo de la mujer se queda exterior y ajeno a la esfera moderna de la autonomía y sigue siendo una posesión: poseído, reapropiado, cubierto y expuesto, se convierte en campo de batalla para los conflictos identitarios de la modernidad tardía. Por otro lado, la aspiración a la autonomía, transformada en deseo de consumo, causa que se convierta en un espectáculo y en una mercancía, es decir, en un patio de recreo del orden neoliberal. Ciertas tendencias en el feminismo contemporáneo reflejan esta versión mimética de la libertad, haciendo al feminismo vulnerable al nuevo espíritu del capitalismo (Fraser, 2009) y a los discursos populistas y xenófobos de la derecha.

## **Palabras clave**

Género, diferencia, xenofobia, orden neoliberal.

## Introduction: The call to loyalty

We are at war: after Paris, Bruxelles, Manchester this sentence is becoming increasingly familiar in the European context. Populist and right wing movements make constant use of a war vocabulary, and not only in the case of terrorist attacks. The imagery of invasion, occupation, resistance is used in reaction to immigration flows in general and more specifically to represent the refugee crisis; and as all those involved in such processes are almost invariably (although incorrectly) associated with Islam, this vocabulary assumes the character of a call to arms against Islam. The war vocabulary is not a prerogative of the far right, as testified, to quote but one example by the speech of the former French President Hollande on November 17, 2016. Women and their bodies seem to be a primary target of this conflict. Our eyes are full of images of violence against women, amplified, repeated, spectacularised. We all have vivid in our memory famous cover of *Times*: “This is what happens if we leave Afghanistan”, the images of girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in chains, and the horror of Yazidi women reduced into sexual slavery by Daesh. We saw images of women going through a double-lined tunnel of aggressive men –dark men– in Köln.

These images match with an apparent victory of feminism worldwide. “One of the effects of globalization has been a new visibility of women issues on the world stage.”<sup>1</sup> Summed up in the slogan “women’s rights are human rights”, gender equality appears as a core value of Western modernity, a kind of new common sense that has presented “going to war for women as a plausible program.”<sup>2</sup> Abu Lughod provides the very appropriate definition of ‘international’ to this version of feminism, which in fact embraces a view of women’s rights as to be obtained by extension from a centre to a periphery, a conquest celebrated first of all in the West, to be exported to the rest of the world, borne by the wings of globalisation in the name of ‘global’ solidarity. This international feminism is now well-established in the “global market of ideas”<sup>3</sup> as it is very well exemplified by Theresa May’s t-shirt.

A situation of war –such as the current humanitarian crisis is depicted– requires a call to loyalty. Questions such as “where are the feminists?”, “why are feminists not speaking up?” recur more and more frequently in the European scenario. Feminists are

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1. A. Jacqui Alexander, C. Talpade Mohanti, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, Taylor and Francis, Abingdon, 1996, p. 494.

2. L. Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2013.

3. A. Jacqui Alexander, C. Talpade Mohanti, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, p. 494.

constantly required to take sides, to speak up (“what do you feminists say about, crimes of honour, about arranged marriages, marital rape, genital mutilation?”), or to show their solidarity and ‘help’ other women.

A particularly brutal version of this call to loyalty is that developed by right wing and populist movements by appropriating feminist arguments as a tool in their xenophobic and nationalistic political strategy. The well-mannered version –voiced by more moderate political forces, such as mainstream ‘liberals’ (those in a French context would be called “républicains”) and by international feminism, is no less penetrating for being softer. In this context, women’s bodies are turned into the battlefields, where political conflicts are fought, or into playgrounds, where games are enacted that do not really have to do with women’s freedom.

This essay identifies both forms of this call to loyalty –the overt manipulation operated by far right movements as well as the identification of women’s freedom with Western modernity– as a leading to a domestication of feminism. First of all, both minimise the potential of feminism as a form of critique, and furthermore they substantially reduce the spaces to create networks of dialogue and solidarity among women. The refusal to participate in this game constitutes a first and most immediate form of resistance; but a more needed work for feminist theory is a renewed engagement to critically assess the ambiguities of modernity, and of the place of women’s subjectivity within it, in order to explore the chances open for feminism as a form of critique. This work may provide the ground to explore new grounds for women freedom that may escape the risk of a crypto-colonial normativism.

## **Bellum of whom against whom**

Fears, insecurity, anxieties are common features of Western societies in this time of crisis of late modernity. In a scenario where Western democracies find it hard to maintain their promises, the narrative of the clash of civilizations and of the war against modernity provides a comforting explicative framework, that spares the painful confrontation with the undesired, unforeseen consequences of modernity. The refusal to engage with the complexity of the present is the breeding ground where right-wing, xenophobic movements thrive, in an only apparent opposition with the globalising impulses of late modern capitalism. Women’s status, their rights, and their freedom, have become a pivotal element in this narrative of modernity under attack.

Just as Aisha's once beautiful and now devastated face was used to justify the military presence in Afghanistan,<sup>4</sup> Köln –and other similar episodes– are constantly invoked as a ground for political choices that have nothing to do with women self-determination, from anti-immigration to Euroskepticism to reaffirmation of populist sovereignty. As mentioned in the introductory remarks, a state of war requires loyalty: feminism is summoned to defend the 'conquests' of women from distinct and apparently opposed sides. Right-wing, xenophobic and populist movements co-opt feminism in order to reinforce nationalism, demonstrate the impossibility of integrating 'aliens'; their effort of domestication is evident as they operate a kind of political blackmail in the name of a feminist agenda. The other form of domestication of feminism is much harder to read, as it is embedded in a series of political discourses that aim at the inclusion of women from 'other cultures' into the home and fortress of women's liberty –the West. By identifying Western modernity as the point of origin (as well as the final destination) of women's freedom this softer call to loyalty undermines the potential of feminism as a form of critique.

Both deploy mechanisms of othering well-known to postcolonial literature. The construction of the 'Muslim woman' –as all immigrant women are supposed to be– follows the script used to construct the 'third world' woman.<sup>5</sup> The image of a weak, oppressed victim matches that of aggressive masculinity, that rolls into one refugees, asylum seekers, or first and second generation immigrants. The *garçons des banlieues* are the epitome of this spectre. The imaginary of war, attack and resistance necessarily evokes rape. The references to sexual violence are a recurring feature in political communication, as a way of expressing deep-set anguishes and anxieties. American president Trump makes extensive use of the language of rape to justify protectionist policies. America is described as being 'raped', either by China aggressive trade or by the TTP. Nigel Farage has described Sweden as a "rape capital" because of a large number of refugees admitted. As the refugee crisis is described as an "invasion", rape becomes the ultimate fear-causing card that can be played by a xenophobic discourse aimed at reinforcing an image of the closely-knit community. In the aftermath of Köln, a most

4. R. L. Riley, *Depicting the Veil. Transnational Sexism and the War on Terror*, Zed Books, London, 2013.

5. G. C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1999; C. Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in *Feminist Review*, 30, November 1988, pp 61-88; "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, 2, 2002, pp. 459-535. See also J. W. Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007, and E. Said, *The Myth of the Clash of Civilization*, Media Education Foundation, Northampton, 1993.

popular Italian anchorman invited guests of his talk show to debate whether “our women should be afraid of the gangs of immigrants.”<sup>6</sup>

The annihilation of all differences, always a crucial component of the colonial script, and is punctually reproduced here. The Muslim woman is defined solely by her religion, which determines the whole dimension of ‘culture’; Muslim women are all alike, as regardless if they come from Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, Bosnia or Indonesia they all belong to the fictional entity of “Islamland.”<sup>7</sup> No autonomous agency is open for the Muslim woman –is simply a victim of her ‘culture’, and therefore presented to Western women as the epitome of all that ‘we are not’; she becomes a “marker of community’s place.”<sup>8</sup> By xenophobic movements, the image of victimised, oppressed –veiled– women is used as a memento to rally consensus: this is what happens if we lower the guard. This ‘other woman’ also becomes a recipient of compassion, as she is definitely in need of being rescued. Her defence becomes a justification in international conflicts as well as a tassel in domestic political games. Just as Bibi Aisha’s once beautiful and now devastated face was waved as a flag to justify the military presence in Afghanistan, the dark myth of Islamland “anoints the call to arms for women with transparent goodness [and] enables those who advocate for women right to accrue moral capital.”<sup>9</sup>

In both cases, sexuality and the use of the body are indicated as marking features of Western civilisation: as phrased by Norris and Inglehardt, “the real clash of civilization is not about democracy is about sex”, or at least seems to be “more bout eros than demos.”<sup>10</sup> Western societies have undergone a process of ‘democratisation’ of sexuality, whereby sexual norms are no longer determined by nature but are on the contrary perceived as the result of historicised political processes.<sup>11</sup> This politicisation of formerly private issues, undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of post World War II feminism, is now deeply entangled with Eurocentric biases and becomes a very useful tassel in the process of othering.<sup>12</sup> ‘Sexual Democracy’ becomes the identity marker between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and is consequently indicated as the main target of the war against the West. However, these

6. The night of Cologne is a turning point: see A. Bocchetti, I. Dominijanni, B. Pomeranzi, B. Sarrasini, “Speculum. L’altro uomo. Otto punti sugli spettri di Colonia”, in *Internazionale*, February 3, 2016, available at <http://www.internazionale.it/opinione/bocchetti-dominijanni-pomeranzi-sarasini/2016/02/03/speculum-altro-uomo-spettri-colonia> (accessed May 31, 2017).

7. L. Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, p. 69.

8. S. Razack, *Casting Out. The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2007, p. 103.

9. L. Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, p. 69; R. L. Riley, *Depicting the Veil*.

10. R. Inglehart, P. Norris, “The True Clash of Civilization”, in *Foreign Policy*, 135, 2003, pp. 64-65.

11. E. Fassin, “La démocratie sexuelle et le conflit des civilisations”, in *Multitudes*, 26, 2006, p. 126.

12. L. Sabsay, *The Political Imaginary of Sexual Freedom. Subjectivity and Power in the New Sexual Democratic Turn*, Palgrave-Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2016, p. 97.

debates about sexual democracy are drastically different from the struggles to affirm that the personal is political, as they are essentially instrumental and hetero-directed. Women's bodies are brought the centre of public debates to be turned into the locus of discussions on identity, right, values, to re-affirm a colonial ('Manichean') view of the world where "women's bodies remain the terrain on which men sought to articulate their desires and fears."<sup>13</sup> The *vexata quaestio* of what Butler defines as "sartorial politics of the public sphere"<sup>14</sup> is a typical example of how the management of women's bodies becomes one of the key criteria to separate 'us' from 'them': whilst authorities of all kinds still bury women behind cloths, on a French beach policemen tried to force women to unveil themselves.

France appears as a very good point to observe the combination of apparently contradicting phenomena: on the one hand, the immediate and evident the cooption of feminism by far right that Farris<sup>15</sup> brands as *femonationalism*,<sup>16</sup> and on the other, a matching mechanism of re-appropriation of a more marked neoliberal character, which makes extensive use progressive, cosmopolitan and inclusive arguments. In fact, xenophobic and ultra-nationalist populism have literally "hijacked" gender,<sup>17</sup> even more than they did with religion, by impressing a drastic turn to their reservoir of political vocabulary. Traditionally, right and far-right political forces had a very clear-cut discourse on gender, as they presented themselves as defenders of 'old school' values and iron-cast definitions of masculinity and femininity. The galaxy of xenophobic populism instead has demonstrated a great capacity of integrating feminist agendas in their identity politics discourse. With a most skilful operation of table turning, they tend to present themselves as the real defenders of gender equality and of women's 'conquests.' As a strategy to reinforce a 'us and them' dichotomy *femonationalism* sets up feminist claims versus 'multiculturalism', meaning by this the supine acceptance of any kind of form of life. In this sense, 'cultures' are articulated monolithic, extra-historical and un-mutable systems of beliefs, and women as deprived of any negotiating capacity and autonomous agency.

The Front National of Marine Le Pen is an almost ideal-typical case, as it combines many characteristic elements. In her efforts to make the FN more presentable, Le Pen has included in her program many elements inherited from the historical feminist struggles, and has even flirted with gay rights, to the point of justifying a definition of

13. S. Razack *Casting Out. The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*, p. 103.

14. J. Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2015, p. 82.

15. S. R. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2017.

16. Farris does not limit femonationalism to populism.

17. I am borrowing this expression from the title of N. Marzouki, D. McDonnell, O. Roy (eds.), *Saving the People How populists have Hijacked religion*, Hurst & Company, London, 2016. For a general definition of populism, see at least C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.



“homonationalism.” Particularly interesting is how Le Pen juggles with different components of French identity, creatively positioning women equality into a wider picture that reconciles the defence of secularism with the appeal to Christian roots: an interesting rendering of French identity which erases all conflicts. Although in the best style of third millennium populism<sup>18</sup> this combination of Christianity and Secularism is not entirely new, as it was already part of Sarkozy’s rhetorical arsenal.<sup>19</sup> In her cooptation work, Le Pen capitalizes upon the heritage of that process of institutionalisation undergone by feminist fights which has been defined as *Féminisme d’État*. As shown by Sylvie Tissot, feminist claims have been integrated by the State, and are now part of a top ‘top-down’ dynamic, reinforcing a construction of identity that racialises feminism by associating gender equality, sexual democracy and so on to an ethnicist version of French identity. Feminist arguments are thus becoming a powerful legitimizing factor which makes racism more respectable.<sup>20</sup> State feminism however is not the sole province of the right, but has become a part of a wider representation of republican identity, where the condition of women is the criterion to measure integration, membership, inclusion. I cite the words of a more ‘presentable’ politician, Sarkozy: “To every martyred woman in the world, I want to say that France offers a protection by making it possible for her to become French”, as in France *la femme est libre depuis toujours*.<sup>21</sup>

The call to loyalty is not only repeated but powerfully revived in the more inclusive and cosmopolitan version, which results in the appeal to solidarity and sisterhood. Whilst right wing *femonationalism* plays openly the game of setting up feminism against multiculturalism, the liberal, or neoliberal, project of emancipation follows a more sophisticated strategy. The ‘other woman’ is waiting to become the receiving end of integration policies<sup>22</sup> that will ‘emancipate’ her. Women are recognised agency insofar as they will be able to leave their ‘cultures’<sup>23</sup> and learn how to be free by imitation. The ‘liberal’ project of integration rests evidently on a beautified image of the West:

18. F. Scrinzi, A ‘New’ National Front? *Gender, Religion, Secularism and the French Populist Radical Right*, in A. Petö, M. Köttig, R. Bitzan (eds.), *Gender, Religion, Secularism and the “Newness” of Marine Le Pen’s Party, Gender, and Far Right Politics in Europe*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2014, pp. 127-140.

19. E. Fassin, “National Identities and Transnational Intimacies: Sexual Democracy and the Politics of Immigration in Europe”, in *Public Culture*, 22, 2010, pp. 507 and ff.

20. S. Tyssot, “Bilan d’un féminisme d’État”, in *Plein droit*, 75, 2007, p. 16.

21. Quoted in E. Fassin, “National Identities and Transnational Intimacies”, p. 511.

22. K. Steiner, “Pitied Women, Aggressive Men. Images of Muslims” in *Swedish Christian and Secular News Discourse* in M. Kötting, R. Bitzan, A. Petö (eds.), *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, pp. 253-270.

23. See Moller Okin and her famous essay *Is Multiculturalism bad for women?*, in S. Moller Okin, J. Cohen, M. Howard, M. C. Nussbaum (eds.), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999. Okin’s way of posing the question is determined by that conception of modernity as Westernization and of a view of cultures as carved in marble, a perspective that Benhabib defined as reification of culture (S. Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2002).

Western society and well-integrated immigrants are granted a monopoly on liberal and human values. The implication is that the West does not include in itself any illiberal values, whether chastity, religious moralism, intolerance, racism, incarceration, sexism, economic exploitation, or inequality.<sup>24</sup>

And as a view of 'culture' as all that is out of the West<sup>25</sup> whilst Western modernity is associated with both individual autonomy and potentially universal values. Only within Western modernity women have the chance to develop reflexive capacities and autonomous agency: "They' have cultural traditions; 'I' have moral values."<sup>26</sup>

### **Battlefield or playgrounds: in either case, periphery**

In both cases –the obvious red-neckish discourse of right wing populism or the more well-bred version of *femocrats*– the call to loyalty assumes there is an 'elsewhere' where we (Westerners) shall do something.<sup>27</sup> In other terms, the appeal to loyalty rests on the assumption that modernity is the home of women's freedom and that there is an 'outside' that is non-modern or anti-modern; in turn this view assumes that modernity equals West, and that modernisation is a process that stems from a centre towards a periphery. Adopting the alternative paradigm of a multiplicity of modernities and of a variety of modernisation processes as a lens of observation, helps re-arranging the terms of the question and avoiding over-simplified polarisations<sup>28</sup>. That modernity originated in the West does not mean that it is now one and the same thing with 'Western culture' (admitting, for the sake of argument, the existence of one such thing). Albeit Western patterns "enjoy historic preference and continue to be the point of reference for others" should not be considered as the one and only authentic form of modernity,<sup>29</sup> which rather manifests itself in a multifarious array of versions. This perspective makes better sense of the so-called revival of religion, even in its extreme, manifestations. Religious radicalism is not pre-modern (traditional); in spite of the extensive use of an

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24. L. Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, p. 125.

25. AbuLughod attributes such an identification also to Okin, p. 32.

26. A. Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007, p. 32.

27. L. Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*.

28. S. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities. A paradigm of cultural and social evaluation", in *Protosociology*, 24, 2007, pp. 20 - 203.

29. S. N. Eisenstadt, *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution: The Jacobin Dimension of Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 3.

anti-modern vocabulary is quintessentially modern, exactly for the emphasis on the active, reflexive reappropriation of religious identity –which would not be possible without modern authenticity– and of its ‘Jacobin’ confidence in the possibility of constructing a political community over new foundations.<sup>30</sup>

The following step is to investigate the positioning of women and women’s subjectivity within political modernity, so as to bring up to light the contradictions and the ambiguities. The renewed fight over women’s bodies, alternatively the playgrounds or battlefields shows how ambiguous modernity has been and still is, in its relationship with women. Both battlefields and playgrounds, however, are always located at the periphery of the city, neither of them being the centre of the polis: and in fact women have been, and to a certain extent still are, alien in the political space of Western modernity.

Feminist theory has provided a number of paradigms that reconstruct how it was not only in the ancient polis that the feminine body had to remain outside of the walls, or be buried alive,<sup>31</sup> and that the simultaneous exclusion and appropriation of Women’s bodies is constitutive to Western modernity: this literature is so vast as well as well-known as to make it superfluous to be discussed in detail.<sup>32</sup> It will suffice here to remind that the foundational event of modern politics, the political covenant, is exclusively a men’s affair: a pact establishing a fraternal order which decrees equality and autonomy for men whilst simultaneously confirming their domination over women.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps more helpful for this reflection to recall how women have not been only the victims of manifest exclusion or the object of explicit forms of constraining, but also the target of the ‘soft’ but irresistible power of seduction of modernity. Words such as freedom, autonomy, individualization, exercise a mighty yet soft power of attraction on women’s subjectivity: the attraction of a forbidden land. For a long time women have been excluded from the magic circle of political autonomy because of their being ‘different’ from men; and again, the difference is linked to their body. The identity marker of man is the capacity of exercising moral autonomy, which results from keeping the dark, magmatic dimension of passions that originate from the body under control through the exercise of rationality. This capacity of moral self-government is also the passport for political autonomy: men can claim political freedom and autonomous agency because they are capable of *control and domination* over themselves. The self-government

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30. Ibid.

31. A. Cavarero, *Corpo in figure: filosofia e politica della corporeità*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1995, p. 20.

32. The first and obvious reference is to the seminal work by C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988.

33. A. Cavarero, *Corpo in figure*, p. 209; C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*.

of the modern rational individual mirrors and reflects the sovereignty of the political body, *artificial man* and *mortal god*. The one shapes the other, as the freedom of the political agent of modernity is grounded in the capacity to exercise upon oneself the same kind of domination, mastership, sovereignty that characterises the modern political community.

Women being identified essentially with their bodies, and with the dimension of passions that are its product, are irredeemably alien with this space of self-government. The obligation to *prove* that women could exercise such self-domination has been a constant stumbling stone on the way of early feminism. In order to prove to be eligible into the sphere of light and public, and to 'deserve' the freedom of the modern individual, the female subject had to shed and recant all that was distinctively feminine. The woman who may aspire to be considered 'subject' and 'agent' is a woman that has relinquished her body in order to demonstrate the capacity for self-domination and self-government: and the sacrifice of 'passions' and sexuality is a crucial passage. Authors such as Wollstonecraft or John Stuart Mill provide abundant evidence of this more or less explicit 'trade-off', whereby women have been allowed to bring their intellectual/rational part into the public sphere, although at the cost of leaving the 'physical' part behind.<sup>34</sup> Women have been required to operate a series of self-inflicted amputations,<sup>35</sup> so as to school themselves in all those moral capacities that could permit them to become 'as good as man' and consequently to be granted admission into the sphere of modern politics. The feminine subject, trapped in a mirror-like game of recognition and mis-recognition shaped itself in a mimetic relationship with the masculine. Democracy responded to their requests for admittance with a series of waves of inclusions, that allowed their entrance into the public domain, but that left interiorised structures of domination mostly untouched.<sup>36</sup>

The body has never been truly re-appropriated by women: confined outside of the public sphere, continues to be someone else's property. This explains permanence of violence in 'modernised' contexts –such as the case of domestic violence, as well as of greatest episodes of mass violence against women, from the India Pakistan partition to Rwanda or –to look closer in time and space– Bosnia. Violence against women is not

34. G. C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

35. I take this expression from E. Pulcini, *Il potere di unire. Femminile, desiderio, cura*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2003, here used in a slightly different sense.

36. Habermas listed gender equality as one of a series of struggle for recognition, whereby women were 'included' in the structures of the democratic state. Habermas' theory has been the object of a long series of critiques by Fraser, Young, Benhabib, and many others.

the residue of a pre-modern condition or a sudden gush of anti-modernity: it is integral to modernity, as it permits putting things ‘back in place’, reaffirming the masculine domination over women’s bodies which has never been eradicated –on the contrary, re-affirmed– by the modern political covenant. Most specifically, female bodies are identified with the nation –which gives flesh and blood to the political contract, which explains why rape is such a pivotal instrument in the construction of collective identities, either as an obsession, a threat, or a war tool.<sup>37</sup>

A crucial passage in the development of a mimetic feminine self occurs with the reshaping of the notion of autonomy into that of self –ownership which accompanied the affirmation of modern capitalism. The capacity of autonomy (both moral and political) translates into a notion of self-ownership. This shift becomes evident with the affirmation of a liberal model of subject functional to the needs of the ever-expanding capitalist market. The dimension of property (self-ownership) becomes an integral component of individual freedom. The free agent of the contractualist political theory is now represented chiefly as ‘owner of himself’, and as such able to buy, sell and rent, in a word, of disposing of his property as he deems appropriate. The transition towards a post-Fordist model displays all the potential of the neoliberal government rationality, where the economic logic permeates and shapes all forms of interaction.<sup>38</sup> Postindustrial, consumption based capitalism is clad in much brighter colours than its predecessor, and is correspondingly much more elusive in its forms of domination. As the marking feature of the new spirit of capitalism,<sup>39</sup> is the capacity to metabolise different forms of critique, feminism, who had strived to demonstrate its potential as a form of critique<sup>40</sup> is confronted with a new set of challenges, initially the risk of providing neoliberal capitalism with an impressive toolkit.<sup>41</sup> The sirens’ song –freedom– changes of tune, in a context where the aspiration to autonomy is re-narrated essentially in terms of those capacities that permit individuals to participate in the great fair of consumption based-capitalism, that keeps open the trap of mimesis with the masculine. The list could be long and would deserve a careful and thorough analysis; nonetheless, there is a distinct specificity in the mechanism of reappropriation of women’s bodies typical of the neoliberal order; here the point is to analyse how the use of women’s bodies

37. M. C. Nussbaum, “Body of the Nation. Why Women Were Mutilated in Gujarat”, in *Boston Review*, Jun 1, 2004, available at <http://bostonreview.net/martha-nussbaum-women-mutilated-gujarat>.

38. L. Bazzicalupo, *Il governo delle vite. Biopolitica ed economia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2006.

39. L. Boltanski, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Gallimard, Paris, 1999.

40. S. Benhabib, D. Cornell (eds.), *Feminism As Critique: On the Politics of Gender*, University Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987.

41. N. Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History”, in *The New Left Review*, 56, 2009, pp. 97 and ff.

–playgrounds or battlefields– becomes a tool in the domestication of feminism through the call to loyalty. Women bodies do not necessarily have to be turned into battlefields, as they may become playgrounds; do not have to be colonised –they should become available of their own volition. Freedom of desire becomes an interiorised imperative instead of a ground of conquest; the other side of the coin of sexual democracy is the imperative of pleasure. Not only sexuality,<sup>42</sup> but more in general the use of the body becomes a major showcase for the re-appropriation of feminism by neoliberal order. As noted by Riley,<sup>43</sup> women are targeted simultaneously by the demands of nationalism and the imperatives of global capitalism: beyond *lois foulardières* of various kind there is not only fear,<sup>44</sup> but an imperative of visibility and of availability.

## Beyond *Rumspringa*

Refusing the shallow ‘sisterhood’ of those who want to ‘save’ Muslim –or in general the project of constructing meaningful networks of solidarity across cultural borders? Can feminists in the first world engage in meaningful discussions –even to the point of mutual critique of forms of life– without falling into the dangers of falling into a naïf, moralistic kind of normativism<sup>45</sup> –whilst nonetheless reclaiming that “Feminists *do* need to make normative judgments and to offer emancipatory alternatives. We are not for ‘anything goes’”.<sup>46</sup>

42. As noted by M. Esposito, “La libertà femminile nel passaggio dalla governamentalità biopolitica alla governamentalità liberale”, in T. Dini, S. Tarantino (eds.), *Femminismo e neoliberalismo. Libertà femminile versus imprenditoria di sé e precarietà*, Natan edizioni, Benevento, 2014.

43. R. L. Riley, “Women and War: Militarism, Bodies and the Practice of Gender” in *Sociology Compass*, 2, 2008, pp. 1192 and ff.

44. A. Badiou, “Derrière la Loi foulardière, la peur”, in *Le Monde*, February 21, 2004, available at [http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2004/02/21/derriere-la-loi-foulardiere-la-peur-par-alain-badiou\\_353904\\_1819218.html#hcoKKF-F7yOMK1yyJ.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2004/02/21/derriere-la-loi-foulardiere-la-peur-par-alain-badiou_353904_1819218.html#hcoKKF-F7yOMK1yyJ.99).

45. This question moves Rahel Jaeggy in her work *Critique of Forms of Life, Forms of Life as Instances of Problem-solving*, available at <http://cef.pucp.edu.pe/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Rahel-Jaeggy-Critique-of-Forms-of-Life-Brasil-2013.pdf>. Jaeggy suggests taking the quality of the transformative dynamics which are present in each form of life, assessing whether or not they may cause “blockages of experience (Erfahrungsblockaden)” that prevent individuals from developing internal criticism and re-discuss the adherence to the norms of a given community. See also R. Jaeggy, *Kritik von Lebensformen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 2014.

46. N. Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History”, p. 116. See also N. Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, Verso, London-New York, 2013. N. Fraser, L. Nicholson, “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism”, in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5, 1988, pp. 373-394; L. Nicholson, S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell, N. Fraser, *Feminist Contentions. A Philosophical Exchange*, Routledge, London-New York, 1995.

The first answer is that of Bartleby politics, “I prefer not”: refusing to comply with what Žižek calls the *Rumspringa*,<sup>47</sup> in other words abstaining from “all the forms of resisting which help the system to reproduce itself by ensuring our participation in it.”<sup>48</sup> The colonial mechanism of othering previously explored make it possible to think of a somewhere where we can do something, as in the words of Abu Lughod quoted before: in this sense, a refusal to be caught in the game of the call to loyalty allows first of all to identify and safeguard a free space. “The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw. Those in power often prefer even a ‘critical’ participation, a dialogue, to silence –just to engage us in ‘dialogue’, to make sure our ominous passivity is broken.”<sup>49</sup> Escaping the *Rumspringa* sounds enticing –especially in this time of late capitalism that has demonstrated to possess such excellent capacity of domesticating feminism. Answering ‘no’ is a first move towards the assumption of a critical position.<sup>50</sup> However, this is not the only possible path; rather it is a first step that may lead to further commitments.

Both right-wing *femonationalism* and mainstream ‘international’ feminism turn away from structural analysis, from the need to engage with the analysis of late capitalism: this is, as Fraser indicated, the crucial step for reclaiming of all those feminist claims reappropriated by late capitalism. The first item on the to-do list of Western feminism is, therefore, to regain the immanent dimension of critique, digging its roots in a “robust, updated sense of social totality” and reconnecting with the critique of capitalism.<sup>51</sup> Adopting a genuine postcolonial, intersectional perspective allows to fall into the trap of identifying ‘feminism’ with the ‘values’ of a given society, and of the call to a shallow sisterhood hides the agency of non-Western women by eradicating their differences, and demonstrate the possibility to differentiate between a contextual understanding as cultures as framework that provide meaning and an essentialist, a-historical communalism.<sup>52</sup> To conclude with the words of Mohanty and Alexander: “In place of relativism, this critical application of feminist praxis in global contexts would substitute responsibility accountability, engagement, and solidarity.”<sup>53</sup> Given these conditions, feminism not only maintains but strengthens its potential as a form of immanent critique, that responds to the ‘call of the present’ and makes a genuine quest of autonomy possible.

47. Žižek refers to the practice of Amish communities of allowing young adults to test life outside of their communities.

48. S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2006, p. 282.

49. S. Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Picador, New York, 2008, p. 190.

50. E. Donaggio, *Direi di no. Desideri di migliori libertà*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2016.

51. N. Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History”.

52. A. Phillips, *Multiculturalism without Culture*.

53. A. Jacqui Alexander, C. Talpade Mohanti, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, p. XIX.