

‘Femminicidio’ in Italy: A critique of feminist gender discourse and constructivist reading of the human identity

Daniela Bandelli

The University of Queensland, Australia

Giorgio Porcelli

Università degli Studi di Trieste, Italy

Abstract

In recent years a feminist gender discourse of femicide has become established in Italian political debate. Stereotypical and sexist representations of women are singled out as key issues to be addressed in the fight against Violence Against Women (VAW). Gender discourse and associated cultural/linguistic enterprise simplify heterosexual (violent) relational dynamics, overshadow different situational, relational and socio-psychological readings of violence and foreground a cultural understanding of the human being as a self-determined artificially constructed identity. The authors of this article suggest that this discourse on femicide can be read through the lens of Foucault’s theory of biopolitics, as a device of manipulation of human identity. Furthermore the authors borrow from Habermas’s theory of public sphere and argue that the hegemonic gender interpretation of femicide reflects the specific vantage point of feminist groups while it is not the result of any inclusive public reflections on the causes of this social phenomenon. Their core argument is that a gender discourse of femicide contributes to the advancement of a social constructivist paradigm in the interpretation of self in postmodern society, a society that, as warned by sociologist David Riesman and Jungian psychologist Tony Wolff, is populated by individuals that conform to cultural values.

Keywords

Discourse, domestic violence, femicide, gender, Italy, social constructivism, sociology, Violence Against Women

Corresponding author:

Daniela Bandelli, The University of Queensland, School of Communication and Arts, St Lucia QLD 4072, Brisbane, Australia.

Email: daniela.bandelli@gmail.com

Introduction

On 19 June 2013 the Italian parliament converted into national law the ‘Council of Europe’s Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence’, also known as the Istanbul Convention. During a related institutional event, the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Laura Boldrini, publicly expressed her wish that a reflection on the role of the media in ‘raising social awareness on the intolerable seriousness of violence against women [VAW]’ might start in Italy. As an example of the role of the media in the cultural normalization of VAW she mentioned the stereotypes conveyed by TV advertisements where ‘dads and kids are sitting around the table while mum stands and serves everyone’.¹ A few days later, Guido Barilla, chairman of the renowned Italian pasta company singled out for its well-established lasting marketing strategy centring on traditional Mediterranean family values, made a remark that sparked the righteous indignation of feminists and left-wing intellectuals as well as a global boycott promoted by the international LGBTQI community. He said: ‘Laura Boldrini does not understand the role of women in advertising well: a woman is mother, grandmother, lover, she takes care of the house, she takes care of her beloved and does different actions and activities that ennoble her role.’ Later, he remarked that he would not portray a homosexual family in his advertisements because ‘the family which we address is a classic family’ and he reiterated that ‘the woman is fundamental’.²

This incident occurred at the same time as a moral panic about men killing their partners and ex-partners was being fuelled in Italy (Giomi and Tonello, 2013; Osservatorio Europeo sulla Sicurezza, 2013). The media emergency was not triggered by any real increase in homicides of women, which instead remained almost stable (Corradi, 2014b). The media wave was rather the result of enhanced exposure in the public debate of the social problem of VAW and femicide, an emphasis which originally stemmed from feminist mobilization³ advocating for the adoption of a new term: ‘femminicidio’, a politically correct replacement of the gender neutral term homicide and more colloquial expressions such as ‘crime of passion’ and ‘raptus/loss of control’ (Signoretti and Lanzoni, 2011).⁴ The intent of these initiatives was to stress that women are killed because they belong to a precise gender category that in contemporary patriarchal society is assigned an inferior, killable status. Various opinion leaders joined the feminist cause of ‘femminicidio’ and contributed to the construction of the phenomenon of femicide as a social plague that is pervasive in heterosexual couples and rooted in a patriarchal culture in which stereotypical representations of sex roles and women’s bodies are normalized.⁵ During the 2012–2013 electoral campaign the topic of VAW became central to the political discourse, which rapidly adopted the neologism to the extent that ‘femminicidio’ has entered the common language as signifier of ‘male murder of women because they are women’.⁶ Cultural change, including a change in language, was presented as key spheres of intervention to tackle the femicide emergency and eradicate VAW (Council of Europe, 2011). The Boldrini/Barilla incident is an iconic case revealing key topics of discourse on femicide in Italy: gender stereotypes and cultural roots of VAW.

Analysed through critical discourse theory, ‘femminicidio’ is read in this study as a narrative through which specific representations of social reality (discourses) are deployed in social life through texts and practices (Foucault and Gordon, 1980). In this

perspective, discourses are understood, not as constructive of non-existing objects and subjects, but rather as representations (or construals) of a social reality that in turn influence representations through a process of selection of meanings and sedimentation of knowledge (Fairclough, 2003; Foucault, 1970; Mills, 2004; Sunderland, 2004). More specifically, we look at ‘femminicidio’ as a narrative that redefines the neutral category of homicide of women in feminist/political terms and in doing so constructs the social phenomenon of male VAW and intimate partner violence (IPV) as a gender issue, in other words as a social issue whose origins and possible solutions rest in the identity and role ascribed to sexual beings by cultural norms.

International literature shows that the gender reading of VAW, which originates from a feminist elaboration of the theory of power, has become dominant in institutional policies as well as several areas of academia (Baden and Goetz, 1997; Bumiller, 2009; Zalewski and Runyan, 2013). Scholars as well as civil society raise criticisms on the mainstreaming of gender framework at policy and scholarly level by pointing out that the complex sociological phenomenon of violence is reduced to a partial interpretation under this hegemonic framework (Bawer, 2012; Corradi, 2009; Dutton and Nicholls, 2005; Payne, 2014; Walby, 2013). Another specific stream of critique focuses on the selective attention towards female victims of male violence while heterosexual men’s suffering remains ignored (Cook, 2009; Gelles and Straus, 1979). In addition, other authors argue that the symbolic role of the Father is eroded by a normalized depiction of men as a social threat to women (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1986; Risé, 2010). Finally, some intellectuals argue that a post-humanist order is advanced by gender discourses (Becchi, 2013; O’Leary, 2006).

This article sets out to contribute to the existing corpus of critiques with a discussion on the implications of the affirmation of the gender/cultural discourse in the Italian public debate on IPV and femicide. We argue that repetition and normalization of a simple gender formula might encourage a superficial and oversimplified reading of violence as a merely cultural product and stop us from taking a wider view which enables us to grasp the complexity of a phenomenon that is both social (relational) and psychological (Collins, 2009; Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967). This oversimplification is not limited only to the understanding of violence but more broadly to the conceptualization of humankind. Indeed, the ‘femminicidio’ discourse advances the radical social constructivist paradigm, an approach that denies the relational dimensions of biology and culture in the construction of sexed identity and conceptualizes human beings as malleable subjects who are encouraged to modify their identity according to discourses floating in the external society. To sum up, we believe that pretending that women are killed for solely cultural motivations would be incomplete and might result in ineffective institutional strategies against femicide (Corradi, 2012). Additionally, this gender ‘tale’ is ideological insofar as it imposes a partial reading of human identity and heterosexual relations, a tale that neglects any reference to the psyche, as a milieu of nature and culture, and on the contrary infuses a radical constructivist philosophy in the public arena (de Benoist, 2014).

Therefore, by borrowing from Foucault’s theory of biopolitics and Habermas’s theory of public sphere we suggest looking at ‘femminicidio’ as a technology of power that colonizes contemporary domains of life. In this framework, ‘femminicidio’ and gender discourse of violence could be read as specific readings of the social phenomena of

VAW, IPV and homicide that stem from a specific political vantage point (i.e. a feminist perspective on society), which do not necessarily reflect values and visions of the broader society. The media and the political elites amplified this specific discourse while engagement of the public sphere in the production of discourse/knowledge did not occur.

The first part of the article deals with the analysis of gender discourse, and in particular its underlying theoretical assumptions and the implications of the gender discourse in terms of public representation of the social phenomena of femicide and IPV. The discussion starts with an explanation of the concept of gender in relation to sexual difference and the application of the gender paradigm to the study of violence. Later we explain how the gender discourse has been deployed in the Italian public debate on femicide and how political and feminist elites have contributed to normalizing the assumption that VAW and representation of women and gender roles are part and parcel of the same phenomenon of gender violence. We then elaborate a possible theoretical path for a sociological elaboration of femicide, IPV and gender discourses: we run through theories of other-direction (Riesman) and archetypes (Wolff), biopolitics (Foucault), colonization of lifeworlds (Habermas), social system (Luhmann) and family (Donati), theories that read the individual as the sacrificial victim of the struggle between social and system integration.

Unsettled meanings of ‘gender’: From cultural roles to radical negation of biological sex

Defining the boundaries between gender theories and gender discourse is no easy task since the concept of gender has been elaborated through copious production of literature, not exclusively under the auspices of verifiable scientific enquiry but at the same time also in the domain of activism (Bauer, 2012; Gitlin, 1995; Kuby, 2007). However, as clarified earlier, in the light of our vantage point that is discourse studies, our core interest is to understand the conceptual implications of the normalization of a certain discourse on femicide revolving around the concept of gender. Not necessarily do gender discourses of violence reflect the entire diversity of intellectual positions within gender and feminist studies and it is not our pretension to analyse each of these several positions. In fact discourse is by its very nature partial and selective (Foucault and Gordon, 1980). To this regard, let us reiterate once again, that the focus of our analysis remains the representations on femicide, which we argue are inspired by a feminist gender theory of violence. Let us begin our discussion on the main features of gender discourse of femicide by first exploring some of many different meanings that have been attached to the term ‘gender’, both by scholars and politically.

From a linguistic point of view, gender is a grammatical system of noun classification that organizes knowledge about the outside world (de Saussure, 1957). In anthropology and sociology gender is regarded as a set of behaviours (roles) that society prescribes to men and women within a specific cultural context (Parsons and Bales, 1955). This concept of gender was embraced by second wave feminists and intertwined with a critique of inequality between the sexes in patriarchal society (Piccone Stella and Salmieri, 2012; Vance, 1984). Hence, gender served the feminist core mission to show how traditional

culture sets women in specific roles and attaches to these roles a value of inferiority and subordination to men.

As long as we maintain that gender is the cultural representation of male and female sexes the definition is not problematic (Scott, 1986; Sunderland, 2004). Indeed, this 'mild' interpretation entails acknowledging the binomial sex/gender: in other words it is recognized the existence of a sexed biological body as well as a set of roles that are attached to each sex in a given culture and society (Paglia, 1991). It becomes more complicated as soon as the existence of a sexually differentiated biological body is rendered questionable (Butler, 1990; De Lauretis, 1987; Wittig, 1992). This philosophical endeavour is carried out by radical constructivist feminist and queer theorists who contend that a newborn becomes a male or a female in the precise moment that someone utters a speech such as 'it is a boy' or 'it is a girl' (Wetherell and Mohanty, 2010). In this perspective gender is nothing other than a 'performance' which constructs (biological) sex as 'prediscursive' (Butler, 1990: 7). This approach, which has spread in cultural studies and humanities with the convergence of LGBTQI activism into third wave feminist movements and gender studies, underpins an understanding of individuals as merely cultural beings whose path to emancipation is hindered by their nature (Bawer, 2012). The radical outcome of this stream of thought is that the body is redefined as a malleable object that can be modified to free the subject from a discursively imposed identity (Braidotti, 1995; Haraway, 1991).

Italian sociologist Pierpaolo Donati points out that the term gender, as long as the binomial sex/gender is maintained, enables us to investigate cultural situations shaped by society as part of biological data (Donati, 2006). However Donati thinks that the blooming constructivist tendency that pretends that 'relations between the sexes are variables of one's own liking' is an ideological position (2006: 84, our translation). In the same vein, Elisabetta Ruspini maintains that gender can be a useful analytic device to investigate the relation and disparity between men and women and between micro and macrosocial, an endeavour that is doable as long as the interdependence between biology and societal environment is maintained in the development of individual identity (2009: 9–17).

We agree with these authors and believe that gender is certainly a useful analytical device to study the influence of culture on identity and society. This position entails recognizing the biological nature of the human being, which in relation to culture and with their interactions with other beings, shapes sociality. Having said that, we disassociate from radical speculations that pretend that sexual identity is nothing other than discursive and from an understanding of human beings as *tabula rasa* entirely shaped by cultural entities and fully self-determinable. Moreover, this social constructivist discourse once normalized in contemporary culture might encourage men and women to perceive their *self* as merely cultural, detached from their biological component. Paradoxically, a discourse that preaches the liberation of human beings from biological constraints could lead to the opposite result: involving individuals in continuous incitements to affirm cultural-determined identities and relationships.

Having clarified the spectrum of meanings of the term gender let us now turn our attention to how gender in its social constructivist version intertwines with a feminist

discourse on VAW; afterwards we will see how the gender cultural framework has been deployed through the ‘femminicidio’ discourse in Italy.

Gender violence umbrella and femicide: Everything is violence

The gender lens (with the binomial sex/gender in place) has been extensively applied internationally by feminist advocates since the early 1950s mobilization against domestic violence and rape (Harrington, 2010). The feminist public denunciation of silenced abuses suffered by women has greatly contributed to cultural change and a redefinition of the social acceptance of male domination and violence (Connell, 2005; Willson, 2010). In addition, the discourse on VAW has expanded to the extent that disparate typologies of discriminations are placed under the same semantic category, which is gender violence (Corradi and Stöckl, 2014; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2010; Jenkins, 1992). Gender discourse of violence maintains that men kill women for the same reasons that induce them to rape, batter, humiliate, watch pornography and buy sex from prostitutes: authorization from their culture to express control over women (Jeffreys, 2009; MacKinnon, 1989; Radford and Russell, 1992).

From a social constructivist standpoint, all acts within the broad signifier labelled gender violence are byproducts of a male construction of human knowledge; it is therefore maintained by authors influenced by this paradigm that any meaning characterized by the gendered representation of women is a patriarchal construction of women as lacking, inferior and hetero-normative (Cameron and Frazer, 1987; Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Irigaray, 1985). Therefore, representation itself is discrimination. Therefore, it is violence. As a result, femicide – which implies physical destruction of female beings – is placed under the same umbrella with sexist representation of female bodies. This paradigmatic relation between the real and the symbolic orders – which can be effectively summed up with anti-porn advocates Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon’s slogan ‘rape is the practice and porn is the theory’ – is the theoretical rationale of radical feminists’ crusade for reforming sexist language and erasing gender stereotypes in the media (Dworkin, 1981). In this vein, any marker of sexed identity is understood in terms of discrimination, even when these traits are not merely imposed by culture but also reflect anthropological roles developed through the interconnection of culture and human biology (Echols, 1984). Hence, these markers are regarded as gender stereotypes that should be erased.

This paradigmatic discourse stems from and contributes to popularizing what in social sciences is usually identified as gender theory of violence, a theory that builds upon a macrosocial critique of patriarchy and reads VAW as a structural cultural phenomenon of gender inequality (Bates et al., 2014; Corradi, 2012). According to this theory men and women learn throughout their life normative gendered identities and roles: women establish their femininity as submissive whereas men are encouraged to be assertive and use physical force (Danna, 2007; Messerschmidt, 1993). It is also suggested that VAW could decrease with an enhanced status of women and that male violence increases in reaction to women’s assertion of independence (Gartner et al., 1990; Pitch, 2008).

In a nutshell, the theory of gender violence can be clearly summarized with Dutton and Nicholls's words, as follows:

... this theory views all social relations through the prism of gender relations and holds, in its neo-Marxist view, that men (the bourgeoisie) hold power advantages over women (the proletariat) in patriarchal societies and that all domestic violence is either male physical abuse to maintain that power advantage or female defensive violence, used for self protection. (2005: 683–684)

Gender theories of VAW are criticized mainly in three aspects: for the equation power/violence, for being partial and outdated. Postcolonial feminist scholar bell hooks reads human relations through racial dimensions and shows that violence cuts across genders which are both involved as victims and perpetrators (hooks, 1984). By exposing the pervasiveness of violence, and by shedding light on the role of women in maintaining it, hooks dismantles the equation violence/maleness. American sociologist Richard Felson questions the axiom of power underpinning feminist theories of violence and says that,

Power is a characteristic of the relationships between people, rather than a characteristic of individuals. As a result, power in one sphere of life does not necessarily transfer into other spheres. (2002: 52)

Felson warns that we cannot apply the same reasoning to power that we do with race and socioeconomic status and suggests looking at gender relationships in terms of interdependence rather than power.

Italian sociologist Consuelo Corradi points out the equation power/violence is no longer plausible in Italy today insofar as it fails to grasp important changes in women's status and male identity over the last 40 years. Maintaining that men as a social class indulge in violence to defend their power advantage over women is, according to Corradi, a theoretical position that does not offer any kind of heuristic vantage (Corradi, 2011). Let us clarify that Corradi does not claim that in Italy patriarchal culture is fully uprooted; she argues that patriarchy is not the dominant relational model and therefore it would be anachronistic to continue to interpret contemporary violence with theoretical lenses that were elaborated in a very different previous social context (Corradi, 2009).

Corradi's critique of a gender reading of femicide underlines the necessity need to consider the multiplicity of variables that coincide to render each case of violence unique (Corradi, 2009). Similarly, Randall Collins also stresses the importance of the micro-dimensions of violence, different situational, relational and psychological factors of homicidal dynamics, such as loss of control, cyclical patterns of abuse/honeymoon (Collins, 2009). Corradi suggests analysing the multiplicity of factors that concur with the expression of violence across three categories: macro (social policies, tolerance threshold on violent incidents and the role of community), meso (gender roles in society and in the specific couple, the power position of the aggressor and the victim, socioeconomic characteristics) and micro factors (specific characteristics of relation, communication and emotional status of the subjects involved) (Corradi, 2011).

Corradi (2014a) warns that there is a risk that the hegemony of such a gender paradigm might transform into ideology. Along these lines, we argue that the ‘femminicidio’ discourse in Italy has contributed to that process insofar as it deploys a specific gender explanation on all cases of male homicide of women, an explanation that is based on an outdated equation power/violence and on the exclusion of a multiplicity of variables that are in fact debated by sociologists. Our contribution to this existing critique of the gender paradigm focuses on the implications that a certain emphasis on the macrocultural dimension of VAW, which is realized through the ‘femminicidio’ discourse, could have on public understanding of gender relations. More specifically, our aim is to draw attention to the overculturalization of public understanding of gender relationships.

Gender discourse in Italy: The cultural fight against femicide

The previous section shows that the gender discourse of violence rests on two implicit assumptions: ‘male violence against women originates in patriarchal culture’ and ‘an association (paradigmatic or causal) between VAW and representations (of women) exists’. In this section we will show how these assumptions are entrenched in the ‘femminicidio’ narrative. Before this discussion, we feel it is necessary to provide some more details on the complex semantics of the term.

In English femicide has two main meanings. A neutral meaning, also employed in sociology and criminology, is homicide of a female, it does not imply any reference as to the causes of the murder, it simply highlights the sex of the murdered subject while the crime can be perpetrated by either males or females (Muftić and Baumann, 2012). The second meaning is political and gendered insofar as it implies that the murder is committed for reasons ascribable to the victim’s gender. In this sense femicide is defined by the United Nations as ‘the killing of women and girls because of their gender’ (International Council of Women, 2012). The political use of femicide can be dated back as early as 1976, in a speech by feminist social psychologist Diana Russell at the first International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels. Her intention was to reveal the ‘sexual politics of murder’ of women in particular: ‘from the burning of witches in the past, to the more recent widespread custom of female infanticide in many societies, to the killing of women for “honour” ’ (Russell and Van de Ven, 1976: 104). In Italy femicide has been translated approximately since the 1990s with the two different yet similar terms ‘femicidio’ and ‘femminicidio’. These two terms have been used in Italian feminist circles and specific academic publications but never erupted in the public and media discourse with the same frequency and power as the newer neologism ‘femminicidio’ has.⁷

The newer version was introduced in Italy in 2006 within a feminist reflection led by lawyer Barbara Spinelli on the political frameworks employed by Latin American activists who in the 1990s popularized the term ‘femicide’ with the Spanish translation of ‘feminicidio’ (in English femicide) (Spinelli, 2008). These activists were seeking to bring national and international attention to the ‘mass murders’ of hundreds of working women in the border town Ciudad Juarez (Mexico), a ‘peculiar VAW, a violence wherein organized crime and Juarez’s political and economic powers converge’ (González

Rodríguez, 2012: 73). Therefore, ‘femminicidio’ has been adopted in Italian political discourse with the meaning popularized by Ciudad Juárez’s activists, that is to say as the misogynistic male murders of women. However, contrary to the Ciudad Juárez case where these atrocities are linked to contexts of intricate criminal networks, the ‘femminicidio-made-in-Italy’ is predominately constructed as an issue of intimate and family violence.⁸

The problem with this term is that whenever we use the word ‘femminicidio’ we automatically signify that a woman was killed because of her gender while other factors and theoretical frameworks to make sense of violence are overlooked.⁹ In other words, the uncritical adoption of this term and subsequent popularization enabled a parallel normalization of the gender/cultural discourse of VAW and femicide, which as we saw earlier suggests that male violence originates in sexist representations typical of patriarchal society. In the following paragraphs we will see how this assumption is conveyed and deployed by the ‘femminicidio’ discourse.

First of all, the narrative of VAW intersected with a feminist critique on sexual stereotypes and media objectification of women’s bodies, a critique that was popularized with a documentary by Lorella Zanardo entitled *Il Corpo delle Donne* (The Body of Women) and culminated in 2011 with an unprecedented mobilization against the normalization of sexism in institutions and media (Ottonelli, 2011). An historical feminist group called UDI participated in the mobilization with the slogan ‘STOP TELEFEMMINICIDIO’, literally meaning stop the (symbolic) femicide (perpetrated by) television representations.¹⁰

The link between media culture and femicide was later appropriated by politicians during the 2012–2013 electoral campaign. Exemplificative is the following statement made by Nichi Vendola, leader of the Left and Freedom Party, during an electoral rally: ‘VAW originates in language: in recent years we have witnessed femminicidio and a continuous aggression against the image of woman ... 102 women killed by their male master, a country devastated by femicides and by 20 years of pornographic dictatorship’.¹¹

The repertoire received validation also at an institutional level. A case in point is Boldrini’s speech that we reported earlier in the introduction. Likewise, on the occasion of a conference on VAW convened by the Italian General Confederation of Labour in Milan, Boldrini applauded the decision of parliament that the Italian public television service RAI could no longer broadcast the beauty contest Miss Italia. She said: ‘We need to reason on the objectified-woman model that is repeatedly conveyed by Television. Through this reasoning we can teach them (males) the respect for their (female) peers and prevent them from becoming violent adults. Because once a woman is objectified violence is just around the corner.’¹²

Finally, the same plot is reiterated by blogger Sabatini’s commentary on the Boldrini/Barilla case: he commented on Barilla’s statement as ‘inconceivably serious because it happens at a time characterized by ferocious sexist drives that cause daily femicides ... Women are killed because they are women: because men have expectations based on her role that she disregards. He feels authorized to perpetrate violence because he thinks that she is not abiding [to] a series of obligations ... Man regards woman as a supplier of services and as soon as she stops supplying violence springs as a form of punishment.’¹³ It is worth noting that this commentary was not published in a radical forum but in a political magazine for liberal left intellectuals.

Discourse theory teaches that the reproduction of sets of assumptions, which gradually gain consensus and become common sense, leads to affirmation of a fixed and partial representation of reality and the parallel marginalization of other competing discourses (Foucault, 1986). We have briefly seen how ‘femminicidio’ reproduces the theoretical framework of gender violence by assuming that femicide and VAW originates in sexist culture. In the following section we will reflect, by the means of sociological and psychological theories, on the partiality of this representation and on related implications.

Theoretical paths for a sociological analysis of gender cultural discourse

The ‘femminicidio’ discourse narrates the concept of violence, which is so complex and yet to be fully understood by sociology, by tapping only into a specific theory of violence. In a nutshell, the ‘femminicidio’ discourse in Italy frames femicide as a social problem with certain macro causes (sexist culture and gendered power relations). We believe that the ‘femminicidio’ narrative, by excluding that multitude of variables of violence studied by sociologists, and in particular by excluding the inner psychological dimension of the individuals, contributes to advancing a constructivist paradigm of humanity and society. Sociology has long warned against the affirmation of constructivism as the dominant paradigm. For example David Riesman in his classic text *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman, 1989) argues that the paramount trait of postmodern society is what he calls the ‘other-directed’ individual: an individual with an inner gyroscope that points to the external environment to conform to societal cultural values, an individual ‘who takes his norm not from his own inner compulsions but from external social pressures’ (Riesman, 1976 edn: 19).

Interestingly, Riesman’s concept of other-directed man was anticipated 30 years earlier, in a different paradigm of knowledge, namely psychoanalysis, by Toni Wolff, student and assistant of Carl Gustav Jung. She published in 1934 a sort of *esquisse* in which she describes four types or female archetypes, i.e. four models of cultural articulation of the feminine as they manifested in Western history. Wolff identified four models that are equally ingrained in the collective psyche and achievable through the individuation process.¹⁴ The predominance of one or the other feminine archetype thus depends on cultural models circulating in the societal environment at a time in history. Cultural trends are, if they refer to the archetypes, the fuse that makes these subconscious forces explode (Wolff, 1956: 5). One of these four models, namely the archetype of medial woman, seems to be very similar to the feminine version of Riesman’s other-directed man: feminine character that is not individuated while on the contrary it is haunted by external instances of social control, ‘immersed in the psychic atmosphere of her environment and the spirit of her period’ (Wolff, 1956: 12).

The heterosexual relationship represented in the gender discourse of femicide seems to be a relationship between Riesman’s other-directed man and Wolff’s Jungian model of medial woman: their relationship is not underpinned by autonomous intimate partner dynamics influenced by microsociological and psychological factors but on the contrary it is represented as an irreducible conflict and struggle for power.

In this line, Michel Foucault's reflection on sexuality and discipline of the body appear to us particularly relevant (Foucault, 1977). Foucault understood with foresight that political power in modernity moves society towards a technological model, where individual relations are submitted to the external technologies of bio-control. If we want to draw a parallel with Riesman and Wolff's language, the societal model theorized by Foucault is one of other-direction, a society inhabited by medial women.

Thus said, we suggest that gender discourse of violence might be understood, according to Foucault's perspective, as technologies subjugating the body and mind of individuals, technologies that are elaborated within a framework of microphysics of power to achieve social control (Martin et al., 1988). These technologies are at work in continuous messages that beset individuals with a sense of impossible relationship and irreducible gender conflict. At the same time, men and women are exposed to narratives of gender that reduce the sex differences from a biological endowment to a culturally shaped gender orientation. In these discourses, gender orientations can be apparently determined in autonomy by the individual with the help of surgical techniques of transformation of the body and with the help of linguistic techniques of transformation of archetypes. Denying the irreversibility of sex difference and acting on gender differences, the techniques of the body and language promise a definitive solution to that irreducible conflict which opposes the masculine archetypes to the feminine archetypes in the collective psyche.

The microphysics of power represents in Foucauldian theory the tragic end and maybe an irreversible failure of the polis: the failure of a communicative action oriented to collective agreement, and the failure of politics that would surrender to the mechanisms of an organizational and systemic social control. This scenario can also be read through Jürgen Habermas's theory of public sphere as a systemic colonization of lifeworlds: systematic interference of external imperatives dictated by bureaucracies within a sphere of individual communication. Otherwise a genuine communicative action, according to Habermas, means essentially to leave the lifeworlds free from systemic conditioning in an effort to preserve the public confrontation on main social issues. In our view, colonization of lifeworlds is exactly what happened in the definition of 'femminicidio' as a major social problem in Italy. Indeed, as we saw earlier the very concept of 'femminicidio' was semantically constructed within specific interest groups and the political system and was absolutely not the outcome of any public confrontation with other groups of civil society.

A sociologist who took to the extreme Foucault and Habermas's line of thought on systemic social control was Niklas Luhmann. The theory of social systems by Luhmann maintains that a complex society is more advanced in terms of functional differentiation as human beings are ousted by those systemic mechanisms tasked with the reduction of extra-systemic complexity (Luhmann, 1996). Luhmann pushes the consequences of his theory to the extremes in that he replaces the sociological category of the social actor with the category of psychic system. Hence men and women and their relationship are no longer considered to be the primary foundation of society; on the contrary, within a society that is declined as a social system, they constitute just one element of its intra-systemic environment.

Habermas, known for being the main critic of Luhmann's theory of social systems, vehemently denounced the attempt at systemic colonization of the lifeworlds: all those areas of life in which the problems should be resolved through a free debate in the public sphere based on a communicative action oriented to agreement (Habermas, 1985: 180–188).

In formally organized domains, the mechanism of mutual understanding in language, which is essential for social integration, is partially rescinded and relieved by steering media. (Habermas, 1987 edn: 310)

The danger is that of a world that is well described in science fiction novels. Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World* are the most prominent examples. Systems theory, according to Habermas's critics, falls into mortal sin when it claims to be the only exhaustive description of the present. Systems theory is only a possibility and its description is adequate to represent the features of a world governed by systemic mechanisms. The final decision of which path to undertake rests with humanity in the hope that it does not lose the sense and the direction of its journey.

Following these reflections, Pierpaolo Donati has developed the relational theory of society in which at the centre of the social experience the relationship rests as the cornerstone of society (Donati, 2011). But, as pointed out by Habermas, a relationship is only possible if it is built on a communicative action oriented to agreement. This dialogue is often conflicting when it is acted out by individuals who are not other-directed but self-directed. Although Donati insists on the inherently communicative dimension of the relationship, he is aware of the risk that non-human systemic communication pointed out in Luhmann's systems theory could colonize relationships.

He speaks of,

... an irruption of the inhuman into the social, one that progressively displaces what is still human ... The epochal change that we are witnessing represents an emerging society characterized by the fact that the 'social' is no longer seen, heard, or acted upon as something immediately human. (Donati, 2009: 21)¹⁵

Conclusions

Following Donati's reaffirmation of the centrality of the relationship in sociology with respect to the gender discourse of violence means the courageous reaffirmation of the human in an historical moment in which discourses marked by other-direction and the systemic logic of the non-human seem to be winning. It is in this vein that we hope that sociologists continue to critically question the tenability of the gender theory of violence and in doing so that they are aware of the specific political origins of the gender view of society. Similarly, we would recommend caution in using the term femicide insofar that in the public sphere this term is overloaded with meanings that go far beyond the mere identification of the biological sex of the victim. The reaffirmation of the human in sociological debate on femicide means bringing together other discourses, other interpretations of violence which would help to recover some of complexity of the phenomenon of

violence and the interactionism between nature and culture that is neglected by the gender cultural discourse, which on the contrary claims to explain all cases of VAW with the same formula of patriarchal power.

Going back to the previous discussion on Habermas and Foucault's view on discourse formation, sociology could certainly play a role in fostering a true communicative confrontation at the level of the public sphere and trigger the defeudalization of the public sphere from media discourses that are partial both in their content and in their social representativeness. One way to carry out this task would be to analyse different discourses that compete and intersect with that of gender violence and that remain excluded from the formation of hegemonic knowledge. At the moment, this hegemony seems to have been won by social constructivism, which has become the password when faced with whatever social issue. The main risk is then the unexpected reaction of a human marginalized or even expelled from the social systems. These reactions are mainly unconscious, haunted by the dark forces of the archetypes.

Acknowledgements

This article has been proofread by Jill Woodcock, the British School of Trieste.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. The speech is available at presidente.camera.it/5?evento=188.
2. Radio24, La Zanzara, 25 September 2013.
3. Some of most important advocacy initiatives on 'femminicidio' and VAW: in 2011 a coalition of NGOs elaborated the CEDAW shadow report; in 2012 'Se non ora quando' (SNOQ), a new network of women singled out for their rebellion against sexism in media and political culture reinforced by Silvio Berlusconi's sex scandals, launched the 'Mai più complici' campaign asking men to stop being complicit with femminicidio; finally, a different feminist coalition led by UDI launched the campaign 'No More' to urge the Italian government to ratify the Istanbul Convention on VAW; on 14 February 2013, countless women's groups across the country danced Eve Ensler's international Flash Mob on VAW.
4. See also: Luisa Betti, 'Violenza e media', *La 27 Ora*, 27 September 2013. At: 27esimaora.corriere.it/articolo/violenza-e-media-non-basta-essere-brave-persone-e-bravi-giornalisti/.
5. It follows a list of examples on the participation of media and opinion leaders in the 'femminicidio' discourse. Daily *La Repubblica* created a special online page titled 'Femminicidio' (Repubblica.it) and also carried out a long-form investigative report titled 'men who hate women'. The blog *La Ventisettesima ora*, hosted by the online daily edition of *Il Corriere della Sera*, published a series of personal stories detailing experiences of rape and battering collected in the book titled *Questo Non è Amore* (This is not Love). Femminicidio as a social cause was also endorsed by independent newspaper *Fatto Quotidiano*, especially through the newspaper's online blog *Donne Di Fatto*. The term is also adopted by the National Federation of the Italian Press (FNSI), which adhered to the mobilization campaign *Posto Occupato*, which on International Women's Day (8 March) occupies a seat in different theatres across the country as a symbolic reminder of the absence of murdered women. Journalist

Riccardo Iacona published a collection of stories titled *Uomini che Uccidono le Donne* (Men who Kill Women) (Iacona, 2012) and the television programme *Presa Diretta* hosted by Iacona himself dedicated an entire episode to these stories; prominent writer Dacia Maraini's published in 2012 a novel titled *L'Amore Rubato* (Stolen Love) and in 2013 feminist blogger Loredana Lipperini with philosopher Michela Murgia published '*L'ho Uccisa Perché l'Amavo. Falso!*' (I Killed her Because I Loved her. False!). Prominent editorialist Adriano Sofri on *Repubblica*'s front page defined femminicidio 'nothing else than an adaptation of language and law to a millenarian injustice' (27 March 2012). Likewise, journalist Roberto Saviano posted on his Facebook page: 'Since the start of the year 54 women have been killed by husbands, lovers, boyfriends and exes ... It is now the time to call this massacre with a precise name: femminicidio' (29 April 2012).

6. In this note we report some of the main actions taken by political actors to step up the 'femminicidio' narrative. Draft laws: one draft law was proposed by Senator Anna Serafini (Centre-Left) and provided the introduction of femminicidio as a new crime to be treated with more severity than a simple homicide; another draft was presented by previous Minister of Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna and lawyer Giulia Bongiorno (Centre-Right), who suggested that male murderers of female victims should be imprisoned for life. Centre-Left parties linked the fight against femicide with a commitment to encourage female participation in politics: the Democratic Party reserved 40% of total candidates to women and the Left and Freedom Party nominated an almost equal number of female and male candidates. The newly elected parliament indeed boasts the highest number of female members in Italian history.
7. We conducted a keyword search with the database Dow Jones Factiva (2005–2013) and found only 23 and 27 media items mentioning the earlier terms and 5975 items reporting the latter.
8. Let us consider the following quotes taken from newswires: 'a conclusive action of a spiral of daily domestic violence' (Agi, Elezioni: Sel manifesterà giovedì contro violenza a donne, 12 February 2013, Factiva); 'family massacre', 'silenced pain', 'hidden in Italian houses behind close curtains' (Adnkronos, Teatro: le donne della Dandini di nuovo in scena con 'Ferite a morte', 20 February 2013, Factiva). The identity of the agents of femminicidio is nominalized through their relationships with the victims as 'fiancées, lovers, husbands, relatives' (Ansa, Sfida Tv: Vendola, serve riscatto da Italia berlusconiana, 12 November 2012, Factiva) and 'men who should have loved and protected them' (Adnkronos, Teatro: le donne della Dandini di nuovo in scena con 'Ferite a morte', 20 February 2013, Factiva).
9. In a code of conduct for the media on VAW reporting drafted by a national network of women journalists it is stated that 'journalists must avoid exemplification of VAW with the theory of cycle of violence' (Femminismi, Donne di Fano-Pesaro-Urbino, Codice etico per la stampa in caso di Femminicidio, 1 May 2012; femminismi.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/codice-etico.pdf).
10. Cristina Zagaria, Donne (e uomini) con la sciarpa bianca, *La Repubblica di Napoli*, 13 February 2012, Factiva.
11. AGI, Primarie CS: Vendola, buona politica è cancellare leggi paura, 7 November 2012, Factiva; ADNkronos, Violenza su donne: Vendola, uscire da immaginario del berlusconismo, 11 February 2013, Factiva.
12. Elisa Gianni, La Presidente della Camera plaude all'interruzione di Miss Italia, 15 July 2013. Available at: www.squer.it/of/la-presidente-della-camera-plaude-allinterruzione-di-miss-italia-e-su-twitter-fioccano-le-polemiche/ (accessed 2 March 2014).
13. Fabio Sabatini, Dove c'è Barilla c'è una sguattera, *Micromega*, 30 September 2013. Available at: blog-micromega.blogautore.espresso.repubblica.it/2013/09/30/fabio-sabatini-dove-ce-barilla-ce-una-sguattera/ (accessed 9 December 2015).
14. In Jungian theory, collective psyche is part of the unconscious and is generated by a process of sedimentation of cultural models (archetypes), which are transmitted through the generations

with mechanisms similar to the genetic traits of the species. These archetypes can be activated by social circumstances of specific historical moments and haunt the consciousness of individuals. Individuals are not immediately aware of these archetypes; rather awareness of the forces that inhabit the collective psyche is achieved through a process of self-education that Jung called individuation. It is a subjective task that most of the time would be dodged, thus making humanity victim of itself.

15. For Donati the human dimension is the relational dimension, part and parcel of society as the social dimension is part and parcel of the human. In other words, there cannot be humanity without a relational dimension of being (Donati, 2009).

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Author biographies

Daniela Bandelli is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, School of Communication and Arts, and teaching assistant at the University of Trieste. She has a Master's in Communication for Social Change and as a researcher she is interested in the contribution of social movements' discourses in challenging dominant representations of social issues in the media and political debate. In her PhD project, which is a critical analysis of discourses constructing the issue of domestic violence in Italy, she contributes to the critique of the gender framework by interrogating voices from the men's rights, shared parenting and traditional family movements.

Giorgio Porcelli, MA, PhD, is lecturer and member of the Department of Social and Political Sciences (DiSPeS) and Adjunct Professor of Theory and Practice in New Media, Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes and Sociology of the Family at the Department of Humanities (DiSU) of the University of Trieste. He is also member of the European Sociology Association RN18: Sociology of Communications and Media Research.

Résumé

Ces dernières années, le discours féministe sur le genre s'est imposé dans le débat politique italien. Les représentations stéréotypées et sexistes des femmes sont désignées comme des questions essentielles dans la lutte contre la violence faite aux femmes (VAW). Le discours sur les rôles sexuels et le projet culturel et linguistique qui lui est associé schématisent les dynamiques relationnelles hétérosexuelles (violentes), masquent les différentes lectures situationnelles, relationnelles et sociopsychologiques de la violence et privilégient une appréhension culturelle de l'être humain selon une identité autodéterminée et construite artificiellement. Nous suggérons que le discours sur le fémicide peut être considéré comme un dispositif de manipulation de l'identité humaine dans l'optique de la théorie de la Biopolitique de Foucault. En outre, nous nous appuyons sur la théorie de la sphère publique de Habermas pour suggérer que l'interprétation hégémonique des genres reflète le point de vue particulier des groupes féministes et qu'il n'est pas le résultat d'une quelconque réflexion publique inclusive sur les causes de ce phénomène social. Notre argument principal suggère que le discours de genre sur le fémicide contribue à la construction d'un paradigme constructiviste social pour l'interprétation du soi dans la société postmoderne qui serait composée, selon le sociologue David Riesman et le psychologue jungien Tony Wolf, d'individus se conformant à certaines valeurs culturelles.

Mots-clés

Fémicide, discours, genre, Italie, constructivisme social, violence domestique, violence contre les femmes

Resumen

En los últimos años, un discurso de género feminista sobre feminicidio se ha establecido en el debate político italiano. Representaciones estereotipadas y sexistas de las mujeres son señalados como cuestiones clave que se abordarán en la lucha contra la violencia contra las mujeres (VCM). El discurso de género, y un empeño cultural / lingüístico asociado, simplifican las dinámicas relacionales heterosexuales (violentas), eclipsan diferentes lecturas situacionales, relacionales y socio-psicológicas de la violencia y ponen en primer plano una comprensión cultural del ser humano como una identidad construida artificialmente y autodeterminada. Sugerimos que este discurso sobre el feminicidio se puede leer, a través de la lente de la teoría de la biopolítica de Foucault, como un dispositivo de manipulación de la identidad humana. Además, tomamos prestada la teoría de la esfera pública de Habermas, y sostenemos que la interpretación de género hegemónico del femicidio refleja el punto de vista específico de los grupos feministas, si bien no es el resultado de cualquier reflexiones públicas inclusivas sobre las causas de este fenómeno social. Nuestro argumento central es que un discurso de género del femicidio contribuye al avance de un paradigma constructivista social en la interpretación del self en la sociedad posmoderna, una sociedad que, como advierte el sociólogo David Riesman y el psicólogo junguiano, Tony Wolff, está poblada por individuos que conforman los valores culturales.

Palabras clave

Femicidio, discurso, género, sociología, Italia, constructivismo social, violencia doméstica, violencia contra las mujeres, femicidio