Naked in the gymnasium: women as agents of social change

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> … [T]he most ridiculous thing of all will be the sight of women naked in the palaestra, exercising with the men, especially when they are no longer young […]
> Yes, indeed, he said: *according to present notions*, the proposal would be thought ridiculous.
> (Plato in Agonito 1977, p. 26, italics added)

Women have throughout history participated in and sometimes initiated rebellions to defend the welfare of their family, community, class and race or ethnic group. These rebellions – with all their political, social and cultural complexity – are sometimes (rather patronisingly) called 'popular feminism' or 'unconscious feminism.'[1] We realise how problematic this appellation could be, since women – in Britain in particular, but elsewhere as well – have in the not-so-distant past organised precisely against radical feminism, to defend family values and other more conservative standards of social conduct. The perceived paradox reveals how differences and their related 'interests' are shaped in a contest over the symbols of public culture, often intersecting the divide based on gender, class, political and denominational persuasion, ethnicity or race.

It appears that generations of women in a wide range of political and social movements, individual women resisting social injustice and at least three waves of conscious feminism(s) have not yet succeeded in defeating the popular stigma surrounding female activism. Women moving in the public arena still evoke the same negative images they have conjured for centuries, reflected in such derogatory appellations as 'viragos,' 'witches,' 'femmes-hommes,' or 'hyenas in petty-coats'.

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[1] Both terms are indeed quite unacceptable, but they clearly demonstrate the inertia of language in staying abreast of social change.

It could be said that the best way to undermine women's 'revolutionary' potential is to ask 'what do you mean by women?' or, 'what do you mean by revolution?' That is not my intention. However, qualifying my principal terms of reference seems imperative from the outset, since both notions have been at the centre of particularly animated polemics at least since the early years of 'Women's Revolution' in the early 1960s and the collapse of the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s respectively.

'As if Women Existed': Different Approaches to Subjectivity

> […] the case against saying 'we' seems overwhelming: politically as a piece of imperialist presumption, and epistemologically as a fiction that equates autonomy with universality.
> (Scheman 1993, p. 190)

Invoking 'women' in the title of this paper is a hazardous enterprise, which may attract accusations of essentialism, normativity and exclusivity. Ever since the publication of De Bouvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), gender has been regarded as a social, rather than biological category. Subsequent debates problematised its 'universal' and 'essential' nature. Positing gender as a 'multiple interpretation of sex' inevitably challenged the existence of unified categories of 'women' and 'men'.

On the one hand, essentialist discourse has been widely criticised by non-white and non-western feminists on the account of its blindness to the multiplicity of racial, ethnic, cultural, social and political intersections in which concrete groups of women are constructed (see for example Spelman 1988; Elshtain 1995). On the other, it has been challenged by poststructuralist, deconstructionist and postmodernist theorists, who generally reject the existence of pregiven, stable and unified subjects. Most notably, anti-essentialist approach has been advocated consistently by the American cultural theorist Judith Butler (1990, 1992).

Assumptions of the existence of a coherent identity of 'women' based on either biology or 'universal' social conditioning have been characteristic of feminist discourse since the 1960s. Motivated by a desire to constitute 'woman' as a subject on an equal footing with the Aristotelian rational 'man', feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were engaging in a kind

of 'transpraxis', using the models and strategies at their disposal, which had been at the core of the 'oppressive' relationship they were rebelling against. Even nowadays, many theorists adhere to a view that a certain degree of essentialism is a necessary precondition for feminist political action.

The question is, do we need an unproblematic unity of 'women' in order to be politically engaged, that is, is political action really dependent on solidarity of identity? A characteristic lament from the advocates of conventional pragmatics is: 'Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorized' (Hartsock 1990, p. 164). Others believe that this kind of 'strategic essentialism' simply won't do, since 'strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended' (Butler 1990, p. 5). Despite her opposition – in principle – to 'strategic essentialism', Butler concedes that temporary unities 'might emerge in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity,' permitting of 'multiple convergences and divergences, without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure' (1990, p. 16). According to this view, 'certain forms of acknowledged fragmentation might [actually] facilitate coalitional action, precisely because the 'unity' of the category of women is neither presupposed nor desired' (1990).

Anti-essentialist argument has spilled over from theory to feminist practice. It has been recognised that the rejection of universality entails an acknowledgment of the contingent and specific nature of political claims for women and men alike. Anti-essentialist political strategies are seen as resting on 'analyses of the utility of certain arguments in certain discursive contexts, without, however, invoking absolute qualities for women or men' (Scott 1988). On a practical level, new strategies for women's activism have been developed. By far the most popular is 'transversalist politics', which draws on strategies employed by Italian feminists from Women's Resource Centre in Bologna. 'Transversalist politics' (Yuval-Davis 1997) involves a process of 'rooting' and

'shifting,' in which activists remain rooted in their own identities and values, while at the same time being ready to shift views in dialogue with those of other identities and values. Political dialogue fashioned in this manner is expected to avoid uncritical solidarity and the homogenisation of the 'Other'. The knowledge acquired through this practice is always 'unfinished', but its fluidity is seen as beneficial, because of its capability to take into account differences and ruptures, which would otherwise remain hidden under the surface.

Recent feminist studies tend to resist the temptation of producing a 'grand narrative' of the 'universal woman'. Individual 'fragments' speak for themselves. This refusal to treat women as a 'universal subject' is not considered a defection from politics, but on the contrary, a political act in itself (Butler 1992, p. 4), aimed at opening up spaces for political interests that have hitherto been marginalised.

'As if Revolution was Possible': Women and the End of History

> Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect.
> (Hartsock 1990, p. 164)

If the previous section reads as an apology to feminist essentialists, we also owe one to the advocates of *posthistoire*, whose influence in the last fifty years cannot be overlooked. Posthistorians leave little room for revolt and we are more or less expected to resign to a *status quo*. This version of the 'end of history' looks both more plausible and more desirable from a position of power. From women's vantage point, it is hard to accept that history might be coming to an end. History had been man's domain for centuries and women began gaining access to it only in the last three or four decades. Not surprisingly, modern-day 'eschatologists' are mostly men. The few women who have tackled speculations on the end of history, have done so only to dismiss them as either irrelevant or missing the point. Jean Bethke Elshtain, for example, has seen them as short-lived delusions proving that 'history does not bend to our wishes or to our theories, at least not in the ways we fondly hope or optimistically project' (1995, p. 196). Julia Kristeva has reasserted the necessity of nurturing a 'culture of revolt', by invoking the

correlation – central to psychoanalysis – between pleasure and revolt: '… happiness exists only at the price of a revolt. None of us has pleasure without confronting an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law that allows us to realize ourselves as autonomous and free. The revolt revealed to accompany the private experience of happiness is an integral part of the pleasure principle' (2000, p. 7).

One's acceptance or rejection of the possibility of history coming to an end depends mainly on the interpretation of 'progress' one subscribes to. The Enlightenment promise of an orderly advance from poverty and ignorance to prosperity and modernity has been exposed as part and parcel of colonialist discourse. Contrary to the common perception, postmodernist interpretations at the other end of the spectrum do not categorically deny the possibility of progress as such, but they refuse to see it in the context of a prophetic, supposedly universal 'grand narrative'.

If it is true that the time of great rebellious projects, bold prophecies and dichotomies charged with value judgment is behind us, what implications does that have on women and their social agency? Three 'grand narratives' of the twentieth century – socialism, fascism and communism – have all failed and the perceived *anomie* makes contemporary posthistorians feel uneasy. The fourth competing narrative, that of liberalism, is rather uncritically glorified by posthistorians. Macro-narratives in the epic tradition as well as in history have notoriously been at the core of the patriarchal rhetoric: the symbolic 'slaying of the virago' in classical literature has been brought to our attention by a number of scholars (see, for example, Tomalin 1982); religious fundamentalisms have endeavoured to make woman practically invisible; fascism has cast her as procreator and 'guardian of the hearth'; while communism has bequeathed her with the legacy of the 'double burden'.

Narrative tends to order reality. Narrative form has been described as consisting of repeated binary oppositions, through which meaning is universally produced. Consequently, disintegration of a narrative always entails a collapse of the underlying grid of dichotomies. Francis Fukuyama published his much-debated essay 'The End of

History?' in the *National Interest* in 1989, the year of the collapse of the Berlin Wall.[2] Although it is impossible to refer the end of the Cold War to any single event, 1989 symbolically marks the 'implosion', or 'self-deconstruction' of the greatest twentieth-century political dichotomy of communist totalitarianism vs. western liberal democracy.

Deconstruction of binary oppositions has been one of the vital strategies of feminist theory. In particular, feminists have consciously engaged in undermining what was seen as the two staple elements of patriarchal discourse, namely the male/female and the public/private dichotomies. It has been argued that the male/female opposition reflects an essentially masculine conception of the 'autonomous self', while the female element of the opposition merely functions as a 'prop' for its construction (di Stefano 1996, p. 96). Arguments in favour of autonomy have mainly been motivated by pragmatic reasons, in campaigns for women's legal and political rights. Others have maintained that autonomous self-determination is not gender-biased and as such does not necessarily require that women fit into male-defined norms (see Grosz 1987, p. 193).

The dichotomy of 'public' versus 'private' domains has arguably been the most instrumental in the exclusion of women from political rights and other rights commonly associated with citizenship. In liberalism, a clear division of these two realms – interpreted respectively as 'the state' vs. 'civil society'; 'the social' vs. 'the personal'; and the 'public' vs. the 'domestic' – has been considered a much needed guarantor of individual freedom.[3] According to Carole Pateman, the strong separation between public and private spheres in liberalism meant that domestic power relations were seen as a matter of personal 'choice', not to be incorporated in the scope of democracy. The issue for women then was to apply democratic ideals 'in the kitchen, the nursery and the bedroom' (1988, p. 216). Pateman's arguments focus on the origins of liberal democracy in a social contract, which, according to Pateman, went hand in hand with a sexual contract of women's subjugation through marital rights.

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[2] The thesis offered in the essay was later dealt with in book format in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).
[3] For a discussion of the dichotomy within liberalism, see Will Kymlicka (1990).

Pateman's influential book on *The Sexual Contract* has been challenged by later feminists, who questioned the relevance of the origins in social (and by extension, sexual) contract for present-day liberalism (see Brown 1995, p. 137). More generally, feminists have emphasised the ways in which women's chances of becoming political equals are in fact influenced and often determined by power relations within the household and work force. It has been recognised that the 'boundary between the public and the private is a political act in itself' and that 'political power relations with their own dynamics exist in each social sphere' (Yuval-Davis 1997, p. 80). The nature and makeup of what is considered 'public' and 'private' varies from one study to another, from one set of power relations under scrutiny to another.

Feminist theorists such as Butler and Scott (Butler 1990; Butler 1992; Scott 1992, p. 22-40) have preferred to disassociate themselves from the grand narratives of social progress and refused to substitute them with alternative, supposedly more 'women-friendly' narratives. Rejecting the today widely discredited rhetoric, they have asserted that our world is really full of micro-narrative possibilities opening up in countless directions. History continues, because numerous potential as well as actual conflicts around the globe warn us against both complacency and defeatism. But history itself has to shake off its prophetic aspirations and loaded rhetoric. In the case of Marxism, Richard Rorty has suggested to abandon the idea of progress through 'the anticapitalist struggle' in favour of 'the struggle against avoidable human misery;' to start talking about 'greed and selfishness' rather than about 'bourgeois ideology,' about 'starvation wages' and 'layoffs' rather than about the 'commodification of labor,' and about 'differential per-pupil expenditure on schools' and 'differential access to health care' rather than about the 'division of society into classes' (Rorty 1995, p. 212). In a similar vein, feminist studies of women as agents of social change can be interpreted as unique anecdotes, which may help us observe how different women in different contexts have struggled against what they viewed as avoidable human affliction.

Women and Revolution

… [T]he woman holds the promise of liberation. It is the woman who, in Delacroix' painting, holding the flag of the revolution, leads the people on the barricades. She wears no uniform; her breasts are bare, and her beautiful face shows no trace of violence. But she has a rifle in her hand – for the end of violence is still to be fought for.
(Marcuse 1972)

Women are often seen as the guardians of tradition, rather than as the symbols of social change. This is especially true in revolutions inspired by a drive for national liberation and independence (see Yuval-Davis 1997, pp. 60-61). However, it has also been noticed that women's political participation peaks in periods of turbulent social change (see Kaufman 1997, p. 165). This statement – which is, incidentally, also true for the majority of men – may sound like a truism within societies based on patriarchal power and dominated by masculine culture. In that context, revolution always seems to bring promise of inclusion for the excluded and the oppressed. Significantly, women have also been prominent in symbolic representations of the 'World-Turned-Upside-Down' during carnivals of sixteenth-century Europe (see Davis 1975, pp. 124-151), and young women appeared as 'living icons' in official representations of revolutionary France (see Hunt 1992, p. 82). And indeed, Delacroix' *Liberty Guiding the People* – a young woman holding the revolutionary flag – has become an almost universal image of revolution. Women's revolutionary potential has been asserted in most major world revolutions and subversive movements, from France to Russia, from China to Latin America, from Iran to India. This potential has been recognised by theorists like Marcuse (1972) and Habermas (1989).

Insights into women's revolutionary potential have been offered by disciplines such as anthropology and psychoanalysis. Anthropology's concept of liminality, devised and elaborated by Arnold van Gennep, in his *The Rites of Passage* (1960) and Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), seems to be particularly useful. Both studies deal with transitional stages and the accompanying rituals in primitive societies. According to Turner, 'limen'[4] is a 'no-man's land betwixt-and-between […] a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities […] a

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[4] Lat. *limen* signifies 'threshold' or 'margin'.

striving after new forms and structures. Political liminal groups 'frighten' a stable commune but are invaluable in crisis.[5] Liminality is open, fluid and diverse. Also, there is a certain correspondence between the 'weakness' of liminality in transitional periods and the structural inferiority of certain groups or categories in established social systems. Turner has outlined the difference between the attributes of liminality and those of the status system in terms of a series of binary oppositions, such as 'transition/state', 'communitas/structure', 'equality/inequality', 'absence of status/status', 'nakedness or uniform clothing/ distinctions of clothing', 'minimisation of sex distinctions/maximisation of sex distinctions, 'suspension of kinship rights and obligations/kinship rights and obligations' etc. Within this framework, woman becomes a liminal entity by definition. However, rites of passage – like world-turned-upside-down carnivals – upset the system only to define and confirm it. Indeed, women in revolutionary movements have often felt 'betrayed' once the revolutionary disorder has petrified into a new system (see Diamond 1998; Galili 1998).

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the creative impetus for change lies in the unconscious, the magma, the outside – and by implication, precisely in the female. Luce Irigaray has maintained that rationality in the Western tradition has always been conceptualised as male (see Irigaray1985). It is based on the principles of identity, non-contradiction and binarism. These principles arise from a belief in the possibility of individuating stable forms. For the female imaginary – according to Irigaray – there is no such possibility. Irigaray describes women as a 'sort of magma […] from which men, humanity, draw nourishment, shelter, the resources to live or survive for free' (1993, p. 102). Consequently, women are said to resemble the unconscious (Irigaray 1985, p. 73), a sphere in which the laws of identity and non-contradiction do not apply.

'Naked in the Gymnasium'

I would like to conclude this essay with a reflection on the opening quotation from Plato's *Republic*. In this controversial treatise, Socrates maintains that women should be educated equally with men and included among the Guardians, the ruling class of his

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[5] For a perceptive treatment of women as a liminal group see Trexler (1980, p. 16).

ideal city. Susan Moller Okin has convincingly argued that this revolutionary vision goes hand in hand with Plato's erasure of the private sphere and individual property from the lives of the Guardians (1991, p. 21). Elsewhere, the preservation of property necessitates monogamy and private households, and thus brings women back to their role of 'private wives' with all that this involves. In the light of this interpretation, women are drawn into a prophetic (and utopian) 'grand narrative', but they can also easily be betrayed by it.

The 'grand narrative' out of the way, we can play with its fragments. I propose that we consider the image of naked women and men in the gymnasium. We can then establish that gymnasium symbolically represents society and that nakedness (or 'absence of clothes') stands for difference freed of social constraints. Along with Plato's Glaucon, we can conclude: according to present notions, the proposal – in addition to being thought 'ridiculous' – is not necessarily a desirable objective for either women or men. Clothes may be a *conditio sine qua non*, but through numerous revolts, women and men may achieve more freedom in choosing their attire for different occasions.

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