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Feminism

Feminism, Capitalism, and Nature

- Features - Sexual politics -

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This interview first appeared in Italian on [Asinus Novus](#). It was translated from [French](#) by Patrick King.

Q: Could you explain how you approach your research on feminism? What are the main reasons that compelled you to write on the conditions of women?

Cinzia Arruzza: At the risk of sounding boring, I would say that my interest in feminism comes from my lived experience: not only from being a woman who was born and grew up in the Sicily of the 1970s-1990s, in a situation in which gender oppression was particularly strong, but also my experiences as a political activist forced to confront sexism and homophobia on a daily basis. This was in political contexts where one would expect more sensitivity and understanding around these issues. So, I was already a feminist activist well before my interests in theoretical questions emerged.

However, over the years, my way of approaching feminism has profoundly changed, particularly from a theoretical point of view. The key moments of this change were, on the one hand, my encounter with queer theory, where I found “along with a lot of problematic elements” the possibility of deepening a critique of social construction and sexual identity which is more inclusive and in many ways more liberating, joyful, and fun. On the other hand, it was my exposure to Anglo-American Marxist and materialist feminism which opened the door to a new world of possibilities in relation to an Italian debate on gender theory which I had always found stifling and enclosed within itself, in a self-referential discourse. Starting from there, my main interest and research was the structural link between capitalism and gender oppression, as well as the relation between class, gender, and “race” in processes of social and political subjectivization.

Q: There is a long tradition that considers gender oppression as being older and more ingrained than class oppression, and thus represents a more radical struggle. What do you think of this tradition?

CA: I believe that one must consider this assertion in the context of the long and difficult history of the relations between feminism and social movements based on class struggle, in all their forms. To assert the primacy of gender oppression and the radicality of feminist struggle was a way of claiming a centrality and autonomy that was often lost within mixed movements.

I understand why this happened, historically speaking, and to what it was responding. However, I do not share the historical or political conclusions of this tradition. This would become a long debate, but I will hold myself to a few remarks. The first is that even if gender oppression would have been the first form of power and domination created by humanity, it would not follow as a logical consequence that gender oppression would be at the root of other forms of domination. To me, this is not a problem that can be solved through syllogisms. Secondly, this position presupposes that male domination over women has a universal character, and its origin is obscured by the sands of time. Both assertions are questionable from a historical and anthropological point of view. Finally, I see the role of critique must be to interpret the present in order to open up new areas of potential transformation.

In my opinion, the present is global capitalist society. From this point of view, I do not find it interesting to play the game of prioritizing among critiques and struggles. What interests me is understanding how capitalism actively produces and reproduces new forms of gender oppression and how these are utilized. This is the importance of a gendered perspective for the understanding of what contemporary capitalism is and what the class struggle should do in order to successfully overcome it.

In other words, the debate over “which is the most radical struggle” has played a contingent political role in relation to the tensions which existed between the requirements of women’s liberation and anti-capitalist struggle. But this debate must be overcome. The most radical struggle is the one that will be capable of challenging at the same time different forms of oppression, exploitation, and alienation which intersect in capitalist society and the one that will be capable of uniting what capitalism has fragmented.

Q: One of the ways in which the symbolic negation of women operates in patriarchal culture is through the classic identification of masculinity with an element of rationality/spirituality and the reduction of femininity to the sphere of nature/irrationality. Do you think that this identification is merely ideological, or that it contains a kernel of truth that can be turned against itself? that is to say, femininity reveals the falsity of male rationality by opening up the perspective of what this instrumentalization of rationality tries to hide, that is, precisely nature, sensibility, the unconscious?

A: This is a large and complex question. To use a Foucaultian parlance, I think that this opposition is not merely ideological in the sense of false consciousness, but that, to the contrary, it contributed to the social and discursive construction of the subjects concerned. The question is then knowing if this discursive construction contains a possibility for emancipation and critique. For example if the female can play, insofar as it is an element closest to nature, sensibility, affection, and the semiotic order, a positive critical role in relation to the phallogocentric order.

Personally, I do not think so. It seems to me undeniable that the Western tradition of thought has been progressively construed as a fetishized and mythologized reason, one opposed to the realm of passion and sensibility. However, this process has been much less linear than we think it is. In the Western philosophical tradition, which was practically dominated by men, different conceptions of rationality were encountered, some of which escaped the definition of rationality as being opposed to sensibility/nature. I am thinking of Spinoza or Hume, for example, but the list is much longer. Even Plato considered certain passions, like anger and shame, not to mention Eros, as being fundamental for Logos and its orientation towards philosophy and knowledge. The concept of “male rationality” then must be problematized. Having said this, an appeal to the unconscious, nature, or sensibility is not in itself necessarily a part of an emancipatory process. A large part of the far Right are comfortable with notions of nature and irrationality...

Q: The feminist critique of patriarchal power has often led to a vision of the feminist revolution as non-violent transformation of society. Do you think this presupposition is justified?

A: No. First of all, I consider that the violent or nonviolent character of a struggle, in terms of the level of violence, is often determined by the opponents and by the specific circumstances in which we act. Obviously, this can generate monstrous acts (and generated them elsewhere), so it is necessary to reflect on violence and to critique its use. But to imagine that revolution or any radical transformation of society can conform to a preconceived ideal of benevolence means to want a revolution without a revolution, to paraphrase Robespierre. Moreover, to think that feminist revolution will be de facto non-violent is to accept the prejudice that women are naturally less violent.

Clearly, women are less violent than men statistically, but this is the result of a long historical process of the expropriation of women from the instruments of violence and the possibility of using them. The impossibility of exercising violence towards the outside world is often transformed into a form of violence inwards and toward ourselves: in the form of masochism, self-denigration, denial, and a lack of self-confidence.

I do not want to be misunderstood on this point: it is not about aestheticizing or celebrating violence. But it is about not mistaking weakness for strength. I claim for myself and all women the right to defend ourselves, even by violent means, against male violence. And in the same way, I support the right for struggles, movements, and revolutions to defend themselves, even by violent means.

The myth of a nonviolent feminist revolution risks also being a slap in the face to women who find themselves in situations of prolonged abuse, in times of war, or in situations of rising social conflict. Do we really want to discuss nonviolent revolution with Marissa Alexander, sentenced to 20 years in prison for firing warning shots into the air against her husband, who had beat her for years? Or do we believe that migrant women who are the targets of neo-Nazi violence in Greece, do not have the right to defend themselves even if they are able to?

Q: Do you think that it is possible for there to be a “feminist” capitalism? That is, a society in which women would be finally liberated from patriarchy but would continue to exploit all workers indifferently and without gender into account?

A: This question is at the center of my theoretical research. I think it is impossible for several reasons. First of all, the oppression of women under capitalism plays a fundamental role at different levels: it allows for the support and reproduction of hierarchies in the division of labor which are crucial for capitalist competition. It is equally necessary for the organization of social reproduction, or the manner in which human beings socialize and reproduce themselves. In other words, the oppression of women is integral to the conditions which allow for the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist accumulation over time.

Patriarchal ideology plays a fundamental role in terms of politics, as well. One should keep in mind the incredible flexibility of capitalism, meaning that the forms gender oppression takes within capitalism are variable and are not always the same. Capitalism is able to adapt to claims for formal rights (the right to vote, gay marriage) and knows how to co-opt LGBT and feminist discourses to its advantage. For example, recently we have started to talk about “femonationalism,” and “homonationalism,” even “pinkwashing,” or the appropriation of particular LGBT or feminist discourses to racist, conservative, or Islamophobic ends.

We must not confuse, however, this capacity to co-opt and utilize discourses with a real emancipatory politics. The fact is, the same governments who are outraged by the homophobia and sexism of Putin’s Russia undertake a austerity, immigration and repressive policies that primarily target women and LGBT persons belonging to the most exploited sections of society. From this point of view, we should not choose between Putin and Obama: we should rather distance ourselves from both of them.

Q: Do you think that a feminist transformation of society would change our relations with non-human nature, such as our relations to ecosystems and other animal species?

A: This is an idea supported by the ecofeminist movement, but that has also found a lot of success within the broader feminist movement. The problem with this view is the theoretical presuppositions that underlie it and that were previously mentioned: the acceptance of the affinity of women and nature, the identification of human rationality with masculinity, the valorizing of sensibility, intuition, and empathy as feminine attributes...these are assumptions that I do not share. Having said this, some ecofeminist reflections and research on the question of non-human nature that are coming from a feminist perspective have revealed interesting aspects and proposals that I do share. In this sense, feminism can contribute significantly to the transformation of our relationship with non-human nature. In the same way, it could contribute to a critique of political economy, which has identified a foothold in the ecological critique of capital (and a grid for reading reality) which is quite fundamental.

However, there is a mechanistic aspect to the thought that a feminist and socialist society would necessarily produce a different relation with nonhuman nature—just think of the non-critical productivism of the Soviet Union, not only during the phase of Stalinist degeneration, but even before that, during the first few years of the revolution. So much so that today we speak of ecosocialism and ecofeminism—if the transformation of our relations to animals and the environment were an automatic consequence of the transformation of our relations of production and gender relations, then it would not be necessary to add “eco” to these terms.

Q: A question about radical politics: To what extent can we call emancipatory feminist struggles transversal? And to what extent can they be so?

A: At the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the latter half of the 1970s, the concept of universal sisterhood was taken for granted. From then, it has entered into crisis, under the weight of critiques from black and lesbian feminists. This makes us pose the question of the transversality of struggles in a more complex way. First, in terms of what it means to “be a woman,” as the concrete experience of oppression is not the same for all women. There is an interconnection between gender oppression, racial discrimination, and class exploitation which determines the living conditions of different women. There is also the fact that the forms of politicization and subjectivization of women are variable and dynamic, in terms of processes of gender, race, and class identification and the priority that one of these aspects can have over the other.

But, besides this, if it is true that some forms of gender oppression—“for example, gender violence”—are experienced by women in a transversal manner, it is also true that there can be antagonistic interests and demands connected to class, and in this case, the possibilities of a transversal struggle disappear. I find it hard to see myself in solidarity with Angela Merkel, whose violent austerity policies cause the living and working conditions of millions of women across Europe to deteriorate. We are talking here about very concrete questions. I may be in agreement with some female entrepreneurs or managers on the right to abortion. But if the same women also support cuts to public health budgets, they make this right impossible in practice by preventing free access to abortion for millions of women. In this case, I do not think we are on the same side of the barricade, and that the men who fight on my side to save public health and the right to abortion are better allies than Angela Merkel.

Q: The history of the traditional left saw feminism as being forced to fight against the subordination of the everyday struggle against gender oppression to other struggles: the critique of the alienation of traditional politics that we find in the slogan “the personal is political” seems to have won today. But does this not too often reduce political struggle to being a moral witness of one’s own social marginality? Between the idea of fighting to create the conditions for a different society and the idea that utopia exists today in the current conditions, is there a third way?

A: The tension between a prefigurative politics and strategic struggle in overcoming capitalism has always existed throughout the history of class and social movements. The prioritizing of one dimension over the other is often due to the internal weaknesses of the struggle: from the moment when revolution ceases to become an option, (either because of the failure of the struggle or the devolution/degeneration of the revolutionary attempt), a prefigurative politics, or the creation and maintenance of common practices and alternative forms of life, appears to be the only option possible.

Personally, I believe we need both. I do not believe in fantasy islands, or that capitalism will be overcome through the gradual accumulation of alternative political and social communities. At the same time, I feel that our organizational forms and modes of political action, as well as the interpersonal relations between those who are fighting together, cannot be in complete contradiction with the slogan that “another world is possible.” There is much to learn from the notion of prefiguration and the fact that the personal is political; provided, however, that we do not believe that this prefiguration is the solution to all of our problems.