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WOMEN'S IDENTITY. SEX AND GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN FEMINISM

by

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The views expressed in this study commit no one but the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Unesco.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Ne puttane ne madonne", chanted Roman feminists gathered to protest against restrictive abortion and contraception laws a decade ago, "finalmente solo donne" (In English: "Neither prostitutes nor madonnas, finally just women".) The slogans they coined emphasized a radical will to break with conventional definitions of femininity. Heeding to this desire, they embarked upon processes tending to deconstruct existing definitions of female identity. Such processes took as their specific object the triadic relationship linking sex, sexuality and gender. In the course of their endeavours, feminists both repoliticized sexual identities and established the contours of new modes of female definition. The identities they thus devised often purported to permanence, but each was dismantled as the precariousness of its ontological foundations emerged.

Before describing the asymptotic search for identity which engaged the better part of Italian feminism for over a decade and a half, allow me to briefly define key terms my exposition will adopt. "Sex" indicates the category to which an individual is assigned on the basis of specific physiological traits. "Gender" refers to the social and cultural role-set conventionally assigned to sex but not physically prescribed by it. "Sexuality" designates a set of practices related to the experience of oneself and others as sexual beings.

This paper will contend that the securing of a new feminine identity and the regeneration of the community of women constitute the specific utopianism implicit in the feminisms of contemporary Italy. The attempt to revivify the feminine occurs, moreover, in the midst of contradictory but largely countervailing forces tending principally to devalue the characteristics of "femininity". These forces undermine "female identity". Against them, feminists evolved multiple practices, at once theoretical and organizational, which, though not uniformly adopted, nonetheless shared many important features. These features combined to form what I have termed feminism's praxis of separation and distinction: a praxis, it should be noted, which is not exclusively Italian.

Although the praxis of separation and distinction tends to relegitimize difference, it is accompanied by continuous uncertainty concerning the nature of sexual difference itself. As feminists have debated the reasons for, and qualities of, women's specificities three positions have gained particular salience. The first views gender as an historical construct devoid of natural necessity. In this view there are no essentially female or male sociocultural or psychological traits. Consequently, if the sexual differentiation of sexual roles weakens, so will the sexual differentiation of individual identities. And, it is often felt, the resulting sexual polyvalence will liberate untold human potential. Women and men are endowed with specific physiological, psychological and hence cultural characteristics, the supporters of a second, contrasting, position argue. The particularities to be found in sexual subcultures are not merely historical products. Rather, they embody different modes of human nature. The specificities of the feminine must be recognized and revalorized, they maintain, so that women may be liberated and contribute fully to the renovation of human society. But finally, counters a third voice in this discussion, female and male, feminine and masculine, are logically necessary

but historically constructed characters: the one specularly constitutes the other. Unravelling the specific features of each can only lead to the cultural cleavage between the two, not to their intrinsic properties. For all the divergencies in the views they express, the three positions briefly summarized intertwine inextricably within the same discursive arena. Taken together, the inciters to sex/gender homogeneity and the seekers of differentiating certainty meld into one Moebius strip, that three dimensional helix which twists and turns but has one surface only.

## 2. THE FEMINIST REDISCOVERY OF DIFFERENCE

The attempt to revivify the feminine has occupied feminists in a variety of national contexts. Analysing women's fiction, a group of Italian feminists wrote: "The greatest denial which weighs on women is the denial of their silence, the denial of the fact that when they speak they do not speak, when they desire they do not desire... the silence is broken when there is the possibility of signifying women's non-existence" (Libreria delle donne, 1982: 58). In a different tone the American psychologist Carol Gilligan stressed the specificity of female morality. "... (I)n the different voice of women lies", she contended, "the truth of an ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility" (Gilligan, 1982: 173). Her tone contrasted sharply with that Hélène Cixous adopted as she hailed the resurfacing of an essentially female subject. I quote from "The Laugh of Meduse": "Now women return from afar, from always: from 'without', from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture'" (Cixous, 1976: 877). Their divergent accents notwithstanding, these three accounts all want to point to a specificity of the female: a female who, caring or menacing, resurgent or ever-present, voiceless or simply unheard, is always fundamentally different from her masculine counterpart.

Affirming that difference, Italian feminists evolved multiple discursive strategies, each entailing particular readings of the relationships linking sex, sexuality and gender. In the following paragraphs I shall recapitulate those readings, concentrating on the key elements which informed most feminist analyses of women's specificities.

One such element concerned the importance of feminine roles as determinants of commonalities cutting across differential class positions. Addressing an assembly of the New Left in 1974, the "Collettivo femminista comunista romano" asked: "What is it that defines a woman?" And answered: "Her roles in society as well as her class position" (Frabotta, 1976: 26). While a position conditioned life-chances and colored antagonisms and solidarities, a role (or set thereof) affected the existential experience of personhood. In contrast to positions, roles entailed obligations and expectations that limited one's sense of self. In 1967 the Milanese Demau (Gruppo Demistificazione Autoritarismo) had already detailed the particularities of women's roles, focussing on their reproductive orientation. "In our society... the woman must be exclusively a reproducer of the species and a worker in the domestic sphere... (Spagnoletti, 1978: 52), they argued.

In industrialized nations, values had crystallized - or, rather, fossilized. Even though society no longer required of females that they reproduce throughout their biological cycle, women were still cast first and foremost as procreators. Their reproductive duties extended beyond the particular matter of bearing children. The "Collettivo femminista comunista romano", for instance, described such duties as follows: Women generated, regenerated and reconstituted the labor force. They did so by performing the myriad of daily tasks which household functioning necessitated. But they also - and very importantly - assured the transmission of conservative ideologies designed to ensure the survival of economic and sexual hierarchies. Women (in their roles) were critical to the maintenance of consent (Frabotta, 1976: 27).

Attention to women's reproductive roles accompanied analyses of the family as a central institution of contemporary societies. Some emphasized the family's ideological and cultural functions. Demau viewed the family as an "essential element in the transmission and formation of the character structure which is typical in our culture" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 58). Nuclear families structured, in their opinion, four basic roles: father-husband, wife-mother, son-brother, daughter-sister. Generational and sexual distinctions intersected, forming precise power hierarchies. The child therefore apprehended sexual difference as power inequality; distinctions and inequalities molded role models that became constitutive of the Ego. The ensuing authoritarian personality characterized the contemporary industrial world. "Our culture bases...all its social roles on the relationship of power perpetuated in the family and makes (the fact of) belonging to one sex rather than to the other the primary, exemplary symbol of that relationship" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 59). To this Milanese collective, then, sexual/power relations grounded in the family provided society's building blocks.

Writing her famed text, Sputiamo su Hegel (We Spit on Hegel), published in 1970, Carla Lonzi - probably the major theorist of "Rivolta femminile" - defined the family as "that institution which has rendered her (woman) more of a slave and a slave for longer than the slaves" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 125). Women were subjected to life-long dependance: in their fathers' families first, in their husbands' after. The family's oppressive role was such, however, that mere economic independence would not suffice to insure their liberation. Women must demolish the center of their captivity. The bastion of patriarchal power rested - Rivolta femminile's manifesto contended - on matrimony. "In marriage the woman, deprived of her name loses her identity thus signifying the passage of property which has occurred between her father and her husband" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 102). And traditional images of femininity, instrumental male creations, denoted the tie linking matrimony, family and female oppression: "Virginity, chastity, fidelity are not virtues, but bonds to construct and maintain the family. Honor represents their logical (conseguente) repressive codification" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 102).

Discussing the family, Rivolta femminile - like Demau and many other collectives - centered on the cultural repression it engendered. They pointed out women's economic subordination without dwelling upon it. Yet already in 1967 Demau had coined the phrase "double labor" calling attention to the dual burden women's work involved when employment accompanied home-

making. Other feminists - generally more firmly ensconced within the political organizations of the New Left - concentrated on the intersection of family economics and female oppression. Published in 1972, the much cited book La coscienza di sfruttata detailed domestic tasks: "producing, bringing up and taking care of children; taking care of a husband; transforming 'semi-finished' goods into consumable goods; preparing food; maintaining objects; washing dishes, washing and ironing clothes, over-all caring for the home as a physical environment; transporting; daily buying and transporting goods from social centers (shops) to the home" (Abba et al., 1972: 102). Performed by 11 million full-time housewives and by all women employed outside the home, too, domestic duties possessed the normal characteristics of "work". It required labor power; necessitated an elevated - albeit variable - number of working-hours; entailed effort, energy and occupational diseases; and, if performed by someone other than a wife, appeared to possess precise monetary value (Abba et al., 1972: 104). Domestic labor was not simply critical to family functioning; it was crucial to capitalism in general. "A capitalistic system is unthinkable without the family", La coscienza di sfruttata declared. According to its authors, women's unpaid work in the home "enormously" lowered the market cost of labor (Abba et al., 1972: 115). More importantly, however, it buttressed society's class divisions and market operations. In order to do so, the family engaged in a contradictory movement. On one hand, it created a type of masculine egalitarianism, for within the sphere of the home all men exercised proprietary rights over women. On the other hand, the family reproduced inequality, for families could be distinguished into two basic kinds; those which conferred private capital and those within which the proletariat "inherited" itself as un-propertied labor power. Simultaneously guaranteeing equality and its converse, the family assured capital's conservation.

La coscienza di sfruttata participated in an on-going debate. In the terms then dear to the New Left, two major questions called for answers. Was women's oppression the product of "structural" (i.e. economic) or of "super-structural" (i.e. cultural) factors? Was class or gender more important in determining women's social status? In the majority non-feminist, when not decidedly anti-feminist, New Left theorists propended towards readings relegating women's problems to secondary status. Such problems were - they usually contended - subordinate to the dynamics of class conflict. Feminism erred in affirming their importance and establishing an independent movement. Numerous feminists argued against this position. La coscienza di sfruttata provided particularly cogent rejoinders; it did so, moreover, within the boundaries of the discourse on capitalist societies that the Italian New Left had developed. Its location within this discursive framework granted it particular credibility. And its "structural"-economic interpretation of women's condition appeared to substantiate the primacy of gender over class.<sup>1</sup> Arguments advanced in La coscienza di sfruttata echoed throughout the debates of Italian feminists. The description of housework as work, and of its functionality to capitalist economies, was marshalled in support of demands for wages. That housework was both crucial to capitalism and patriarchally exploited labor was also contended by Mariarosa della Costa and Selma James in their widely circulated Potere femminile e sovversione sociale (Della Costa and James, 1974). They demanded wages for housework. Politically, they intended this claim to reveal the antagonism that pitted women against the existing social order.

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1. Abba et al. argued against analyses couched in terms of roles, favoring instead, the notion of 'caste'.

Strategically, they thought wages would provide women with the material bases on which to found their autonomy. A collective opus, Le operaie della casa (1975) further advanced themes already put forth in pamphlets and documents prepared by the collectives of "Lotta femminista" and formalized in the writing of Mariarosa della Costa. In every gesture of women's domestic existence the authors of Le operaie della casa perceived uncompensated labor: smiling, making love or cooking came under the same rubric of sexual exploitation.

Many feminists argued against wages for housework. Indeed, dalla Costa's theses may have found a greater following abroad than in Italy. Critics of her positions (and, more generally, of those advanced by Lotta femminista) stressed the risks salarizing homemakers entailed. Paying women to perform their daily tasks would crystallize their dispersion and isolation in individual homes, the sexual division of labor, the state's neglect of social needs. But many opponents of wages for housework nonetheless adopted key elements of the "structural analyses" of women's domestic functions developed in Potere femminile e sovversione sociale and Le operaie della casa as well as in La coscienza di sfruttata.

The discursive distances and diffractions separating Demau, Rivolta femminile, Lotta femminista and the feminist communists are great. Yet their common interest in reclaiming the difference between women and men led them to share many concerns. Thus they all focussed on women's roles and tasks, on the sexual division of labor and on the family. And thus they began separating sex from gender, ideologically explicating the developments whereby the two had come to be conflated, to appear interchangeable. The distinction between gender and sex was further highlighted as feminists reflected on maternity and sexuality as nodal features of female experience.

Maternity paradigmatically expressed the contradictions inherent in women's condition. In its manifesto Rivolta femminile expounded: "The transmission of life, the respect for life, the sense of life are (part of) woman's intense experiences and (are) values that she claims./ The first element of woman's resentment towards society is that she is obliged to face maternity as an aut-aut./ We denounce the de-naturing of a maternity which is paid for by exclusion" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 103). Women were simultaneously soldered to mothering as destiny and deprived of its fruits. "The one who generates does not have the faculty of attributing her own name to her children: woman's right has been coveted by others who have made it their privilege" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 102).<sup>1</sup> Demau also stressed maternity's double bind, for women were both enjoined to fulfil their reproductive duties and deprived of rights over their children. And for feminists of all stripes, from the hierarchies that regulated relations between the sexes to the images of femininity encoded in normative stereotypes, many of the evils from which women suffered descended directly from patriarchal governance of maternity and mothering. A multiplicity of political issues radiated out of feminism's concern with maternity, from abortion and contraception to the organization of social services and the transformation of family relations. In the early nineteen seventies the equation established between oppression and maternity loomed large in feminist discourse. Some groups, such as Rivolta femminile, emphasized

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1. Until the 1974 reform Italian law granted fathers full rights over children as per the principle of pratia potesta.

maternity's positive valences. The mother-child relationship, they claimed, endowed women's experience with special, and sexually specific, wealth. "Maternity", Carla Lonzi wrote, "has been (one of our) resources of thoughts and sensations, the circumstance of a particular initiation. We are not responsible for having generated humanity out of our slavery; it is not the son who enslaved us, but the father" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 121-122). The idea that maternity represented a crucible of richness fully surfaced in the second part of the decade. In earlier years, maternity signified oppression, feminists tended to argue, because male dominance had relegated females to reproduction while usurping their rights over their progeny, herein lay the essence of patriarchal power: in the codification of men's rights over their descent.

Men's command over women's reproductive functions was directly related to masculine sexual dominance. Demau called on women in 1967 to "free themselves from the sexual slavery in which man has kept them" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 46). Shortly thereafter Carla Lonzi described women as "the archetype of property, the first object conceived by man: the sexual object" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 109). The essential traits of a feminist interpretation emerged. Anchoring female sexuality to women's reproductive functions patriarchal mores had deprived women of the possibility of "knowing their real pleasure". Feminists of all political persuasions protested the reduction of women's sexuality within the alienating conditions imposed by men's possession. Cerchio Spezzato formulated the common opinion: women's sexuality had been so "mortified" that passivity permeated even so-called "liberated" relations. For such repression women paid dearly. Not only did they frequently suffer sexual dissatisfaction, they often experienced frigidity as a "normal" state of affairs (Spagnoletti, 1978: 174). Rivolta femminile exhorted: "We welcome free sexuality in all its forms. We have ceased to consider frigidity an honorable alternative" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 174).

The Movimento di Liberazione della Donna - a national organization federated to the Radical Party - considered sexual repression a cornerstone of patriarchal society, "the fundamental mechanism which generates the character structures required to render political, ideological and economic slavery tolerable" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 91). For feminists the rediscovery (or reinvention) of female sexuality was crucial. And it could not proceed by merely replicating and reversing masculine experience. Assuming an extremist stance, Rivolta femminile roundly denounced the campaign for free abortion which, in the mid-nineteen seventies, engaged a large part of Italian feminism. Legalised abortion, they argued, could only sanction modes of heterosexual intercourse founded on the suppression of female pleasure (Frabotta, 1974: 85-86). In far more modulated tones, many feminists called for the development of a new eros and of a new ethic of sexual engagement.<sup>1</sup> The mapping of Freud's "dark continent" constituted, it was generally agreed, a political task of essential import to the liberation of women.

As feminists traced the distinctions separating women and men through a

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1 It is in this context that ideologies claiming the superior legitimacy of lesbian relations must be read.

variety of realms, they proposed to de-naturalize female experience. Subjecting seemingly inherent and intrinsic destinies and vocations to collective critiques, they reintroduced gender into social analysis. Gender thus acquired historical depth - and, with it, historical possibility. As gender became a set of properties susceptible to human, historical, modelling it was increasingly distinguished from sex. The space between gender and sex defined the arena within which women's identity could be subjected to conscious (re)founding.

The elaboration of women's identity required coming to terms with its existing limitations. Psychological oppression appeared of tantamount importance. Demau saw such oppression in women's "masochism" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 45). And the Cerchio Spezzato discerned its effects in women's dependance: "Just as in sexual relations the woman is not the subject but the 'other', so too in social life she lives a reflected existence: she is only that which the man decides she is" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 174). But the problem of women's identity was not limited to the difficulties of self-validation. For women were also traversing a profound crisis, a crisis catalysed by their entry into the world of paid employment. Demau summarized their dilemma. A woman, they wrote, faced two alternatives. She could opt for "masculinization". Or, she could fall back into a role which had clearly become "exhausted and anachronistic". Women's hereditary role (and mission) seemed increasingly bereft of social value and significance (Spagnoletti, 1978: 56). Femininity, in other words, had lost its legitimacy; but masculinity did not illuminate a path for women to travel.

Feminists denounced societal imposition of masculine models on females in search of self.

They coined metaphors to evoke the "otherness" of women. Woman was, Carla Lonzi wrote, "the other face of the earth" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 130). Lina Mangiacapra, a member of the Neapolitan group "Le nemesiache", compared herself to a witch: "I continue to fly/riding my broom/I am not (the) man" (Frabotta et al., 1978: 201). That comparison had already been made in a popular feminist slogan which resounded in the demonstrations of the mid-nineteen seventies: "Tremble, tremble, the witches have come back". Some feminists, like those of Rivolta femminile, sought to recuperate traits that they believed to be somehow "essentially" feminine. "The species of man has expressed itself by killing", Carla Lonzi claimed, "the species of woman has expressed itself by working and protecting life" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 129). War was a masculine endeavour; life a female care. But many feminists hesitated to provide authoritative definitions of feminine and masculine features. They proceeded more empirically, by a kind of ad hoc bricolage.

"We want to live like signore proclaimed the banner a working class collective carried to the International Woman's Day demonstration held in Rome on March 8, 1983. They were quoting explicitly from the document "More women than men" published by the women's bookstore in Milan. That bookstore - it is worth mentioning - had been founded in part by feminists who, in the late sixties, had formed Demau. "More women than men" explicated feminist goals in the following terms: "There is within us a desire to be



in the world like signore ... to have with things a secure familiarity, to find each time gestures, words, behavior conforming to our internal sentiments and adequate to the situation, to follow our thoughts, our desires our projects to the end. We call this the desire to win. Win in the world over everything which renders us insecure, unstable, dependent, imitators. And yet not to betray anything of what we are, not even that which now speaks only failingly" (Liberia delle donne, 1983: 1). To live in the world with ease, the Milanese stressed, was the real objective to which feminists must turn. Echoing themes once voiced by Demau (and by Rivolta femminile), they wrote: "The search for ease is a political practice which continues to say: the work to masculinize our minds and emotions is oppressive and, furthermore, it is useless". (Liberia delle donne, 1983: 4).

Here then, was a precise indication of a way to be: a signora, a lady. But the desire to be a signora is not without its linguistic ironies. A signora, by convention is married. She derives her social standing and prestige from a particular concoction of good breeding, good grace and good wedlock. A signora, in other words, is of necessity born to one signore and married to another. But in the language of the Liberia delle donne, the signora had transcended her patrilinear dependancies and become, like her masculine counterpart, one who lives in the world with that self-assurance which comes from the mastery of oneself and of one's surroundings.

Italian feminists did not reach this ideal of femininity easily; and it is unlikely that they will forever maintain it. As the following slides illustrate, their images of womanhood have undergone multiple permutations, traversing:

the oppressed housewife, keeping crisis in abeyance;

the deceived, isolated, blinded or silenced: the woman who has not because she cannot, joined the fight;

the priordial screamer (or the desperate in revolt);

the survivor;

the warring minerva;

the chrysalis;

the subversive.

"Who/what is a woman?" Simone de Beauvoir asked at the outset of her classic inquiry into the second sex (de Beauvoir, 1949: 14). Italian feminists implicitly took her question as their central theme. Far from forming a coherent and unified image, the feminist representations of the female subject that they devised left the solution undiscovered. One thing, however, they did emphatically say: being a woman is not being a man. From the mid-nineteen seventies on, they also said that there are many ways of being a woman. But it was only once they had established, and revalidated, the

basic distinction between women and men that they could explore the internal heterogeneity of women's ways of being. Affirming the cleavage of the sexes, uncovering the multiple modes of experiencing it, being a feminist in Italy was and is a way of seeking identity, a way of forging anew the categories of gender.

### 3. A PRAXIS OF SEPARATION AND DISTINCTION

The search for identity, the move towards the redefinition of gender, inspired feminism's praxis, a praxis of separation and distinction developed almost in unison by Italian collectives in the first half of the nineteen seventies. Notwithstanding the great heterogeneity that characterized the feminisms which developed in the crucible of Italy's highly charged political climate, most collectives seem to have shared a basic set of practices. Allow me, then, to review the constitutive elements of this common praxis whose rituals and routines wove together the project of a Utopian society. Separatism, consciousness-raising, the elaboration of language and symbols, like social solidarity, self-help and involvement in "feminist" research called forth a world of women governed by rules at odds with those of the environment but deemed capable of ensuring feminine fulfilment.

Separatism. Not everyone endorsed separatism. At its first national congress the Movimento di Liberazione della Donna, for instance, polemicized with those feminists who excluded men from their activities. They preferred, they then felt, to daily encounter, and argue with, their companions. And they did not wish to counter the "unisexuality of so many exclusively masculine environments ... with a mistake that would be opposite but substantially identical" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 88). But most feminist collectives made separatism one of their basic organizing principles. In their reasoning, separatism ensured autonomy, and that was vital to women's self-definition. The decision to exclude men, Cerchio Spezzato explained, was politically motivated: "Every oppressed (category) must first affirm itself in its rebellion and (then), from this position of strength accept confrontations. Including men would have obliged us to measure ourselves again with the methods and on the ground of our oppressor" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 172). Because of their separatism, feminists were often said to have followed in the lead of Third World and Black American nationalists. They invited the analogy themselves. Donna è Bello (Woman is beautiful) an early publication proclaimed, paraphrasing the famous slogan of black militancy. And Cerchio Spezzato titled one of its more famous pamphlets "Women and blacks. Sex and color" (cf. Spagnoletti, 1978: 173-176). Beyond the affinities they themselves claimed, feminists, like their predecessors, attributed great significance to polarizing methods capable of sharply demarcating the boundaries of the collective self from the rest of the world. And boundaries, as Mary Douglas has insisted, are essential to the establishment and preservation of identity (Douglas, 1966. Also cf. Green, 1977).

Consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising is frequently considered the fundamental technique around which contemporary feminism has been constructed. In Italy, in fact, consciousness-raising as practiced in ad hoc groups was only the first of a series of techniques designed to delve into

individual self-perceptions as well as to monitor daily behavior (cf. L'erba Voglio, 1974). Like its more sophisticated successor, 'the practice of the unconscious', which drew more explicitly on psychoanalytic theory, consciousness-raising was predicated on the assumption that women have been expropriated of themselves, subjected to psychological and cultural "colonization". Consequently deprived of a positive self-image, the ability to discern their real worth, and the capacity to pursue their own interests, they sought to remedy their situation through collective efforts at self-understanding and reconstruction. Implicitly, their efforts were predicated on the belief that by withdrawing into homogeneous groups women could approximate, if not attain, purification from masculine influence.

Political symbolism and language. Feminists used (and use) particular symbols. Amongst those of left-wing provenance, recourse to distinctive gestures and signs frequently provoked tense debates and sharp condemnations. The legitimacy of an alternative code was hard won, demonstrating the difficulties involved in transliterating and transforming the armamentarium of political expression garnered by one movement as it passes on to the next. The common codes forged by feminists none the less gathered a wide measure of general (and international) recognition. As in many other countries of Western Europe and North America, for example, the symbol for female was removed from the exclusive purview of biological scientists and used to indicate women's solidarity and strength.

(Slides)

Furthermore, over the years, a phraseology laden with political significance emerged, concomitant with feminist analyses of women's conditions. In the parlance of the movement and its sympathisers key terms, such as "patriarchy" or "sexism", transcended their original denotations and connoted, instead, entire world-views.

The creation of a language, or of fragments thereof, solidified the movement's bonds. Yet the language of feminism served as more than the cement reinforcing internal cohesion and external differentiation, for it conveyed particular meanings which almost universally underscored the commonalities setting women apart from men.

(Slide)

This image - recurrent in the iconography of both Italian and American feminists - effaces the distinctions amongst women. As cut-outs from the same cloth, the female figures are bonded: their clasped hands unsevered in the continuous chain that unites one to the next. As cut-out figures they invoke, moreover, the memory of childhood and they appeal to its sense of possibility. We were all girls before we were women, they seem to say, and together we can recreate our future. In this context, it is also interesting to note how little attention feminism's "street" language directed to enlisting men's sympathies. Turning to the other sex, feminist posters and songs became satirical or menacing, rarely solicitous.

(Slide)

In syntony with the graffiti reproduced above, a slogan chanted as separatist demonstrations drew crowds of male onlookers admonished: "Men don't stand there watching, at home the dishes need washing".

Feminist scholarship. If one includes under this general rubric feminist studies in the sciences and the humanities, three aspects of the work conducted appear especially striking: the attention devoted to uncovering and explicating the co-ordinates unifying women's status and conditions in varying situations; the interest in reconstructing women's history; and the intensity of the debate over the origins and implications of gender and sex differentiation. In the terms of what has been called the battle for the ownership of the past, these slides bespeak the feminist creation of a feminist tradition. That creation had been urged by Rivolta femminile in its manifesto: "Let us unite the situations and episodes of feminism's historical experience: through them woman has expressed herself interrupting, for the first time, the monologue of patriarchal civilization" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 104).

(Slides)

Each of the characteristics of feminist research can be seen as relating to the nature and legitimation of women's collective identity since to be effectively constituted and guarded the latter requires the definition of commonalities on the basis of which intra-group identification can occur, the construction of a shared memory, and the development of founding myths serviceable as guides to the past, the present and to the future.

Social solidarity and self-help. "Will women always be divided one from the other? Will they never form one body?" So had asked Olympe de Gouges. And so asked Rivolta femminile at the outset of its programmatic statement (Spagnoletti, 1978: 102). At the root of early feminist ideology was a strong emphasis on solidarity amongst women. Sisterhood was hoped to entail a life-time assurance of togetherness and sharing. But as collectives and consciousness-raising groups confronted the problems of aggressivity, competitiveness and conflict, solidarity emerged as a goal and guiding principle towards which feminists tended. Self-help figured prominently in their solidaristic strategies for it bolstered autonomy, reducing women's dependence on men, while enhancing female support networks. Feminist solidarity and the search for autonomy inspired a great many activities engaged in during the campaign for the liberalization of abortion. They were also pivotal in the establishment of women's centers and in the provision of legal services to the victims of rape and sexual abuse. But solidarity (and autonomy) also assumed less formalized and less public expressions than those embodied in health clinics and the like. Friendships, lasting sexual attachments, working relationships and systems of mutual aid were frequently so structured that the life-styles of individual feminists rotated around subcultural, largely informal institutions. The community which emerged revolved around a "purified identity" woven together by solidaristic bonds exercising protective functions.

What emerged, one must then ask, from this praxis of separation and distinction? What emerged, I would argue, was a "common world" of "common women" speaking a "common language". "Common world", "common woman" and "common language" are terms adopted by Italian feminism only in the last few years but adumbrated in their previous practices. They resonate, moreover, in the feminist movements of different countries. They appear, for instance, in the writings of Adrienne Rich, explicitly quoted by the Milanese document, "More women than men". "This we call the common world of women", its authors wrote, "a web of relationships and references to one's simili capable of registering, of giving consistency and efficacy to our experience in its integrity ... a being in the world in relationship to our simili and, in this relationship giving substance to that which the prevalence of the masculine denies, which is the original datum of our being women rather than men" (Liberia delle donne, 1983: 3).

It is this "common world of women" that feminist praxis forged as it invoked it; the Utopia that served not as a future ideal but as an informing power orienting the practices of the present. For what ultimately motivated the practices we have examined was the belief that the constraints of the hic et nunc could and should be superceded in the here and now. To attain women's liberation "concretely, and starting now", the Movimento di Liberazione della Donna outlined its program (Spagnoletti, 1978: 81). And for Carlo Lonzi the future was not pertinent, senseless with respect to the problematics of women's liberation. The question of women "is a new word, uttered by a new subject, who entrusts its diffusion to that instant (the instance of utterance)" (Spagnoletti, 1978: 136). Yet that new subject must be an authentic woman. And it is that woman whom feminist practices sought to forge. For this reason, Italy's contemporary feminisms stressed the distinction between the sexes, resolutely combatting sexual assimilation. For this reason they demanded difference, not just equality. And for this reason they sought to change women themselves. While affirming the importance of sex as the criterion guiding women's identification, the feminisms of recent years tended to redefine their existential coordinates. And so feminist activities frequently resembled rites of initiation: separating women from their conventional surroundings, overhauling the assumptions on which their self-perceptions rested, and finally incorporating them into the renewed community of women (cf. Turner, 1967: 93-111). Was being a woman a matter of sex or of gender? Feminists raised the problem, prying apart terms heretofore used as synonyms. The answers they gave were less important than the discursive space this act of separation created. That space became the crucible for the elaboration of new identities: identities which were to be resolutely female. And those identities required profound societal re-ordering. Ultimately Italian feminism attempted to construct an environment tailored to fit a new woman, one who had emerged from the ontological transformations the movement itself had endeavoured to engender.

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