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Introduction

Women's subjectivity in contemporary society

Abstract

This new issue, which follows up the online publication of La camera blu, makes its way through the contemporary scenario by investigating experiences, perceptions and political representations developing nowadays around female subjectivity. While in the 7th issue of La camera blu (The policies of the present) we focused our attention on the asymmetries between sexes across politics, work and family, despite being in the presence of legislation increasingly attentive to the pursuit of fundamental rights for women and men alike, here we intend to open up a debate over the new forms of alienation and self-hetero-oppression which have silently developed behind the creases of emancipation. In doing so, we set out to offer multidisciplinary instruments for deepening our knowledge about the man-woman relational tangles still present in the current social organization of Western and developing countries, which are still grappling with ethical-normative and often legally outdated, albeit socially shared, statutes, which still legitimate this kind of asymmetry. Therefore, we seek to understand the individual collusions and relational strategies that continue to sustain female subordination, bring about conflicts between sexes and drive social and welfare policies.

Keywords: *woman's body, veiling, sexualization, objectivation, subordination*

Looking back at the previous century, we note that suffragettes and 'flapper' girls were the first women to claim, in the early 20th century, the right to a life that was self-achieving and had a playful dimension.
Indeed, the 1920s called forth the figure of the garçonne, whom Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald described as a woman "who would live of experimentations, be self-conscious, and does what she does while being aware of the effects of her actions (Milford, 1971, p.116).
Zelda was, despite herself, an icon of the 'flapper style', which she considered a medicine capable of resolving many societal evils and making young women more intelligent "by teaching them how to treasure their natural resources and fulfil themselves" (1922). This vision had accompanied the struggle for votes of the early 20th century, prefiguring the underlying nub of a new female who imagined herself free of the maternity role and seduction-based rules. Yet, during the first part of the 20th century, the

clash with the prescriptive and pervasive femaleness, thought of as a compelling maternity, occurred mainly through a silent avoidance of roles and feminine tasks: Emily Dickinson wrote poems and then put them away in a drawer; Sibilla Aleramo gave up her son in order to be loyal to herself.

Then, in the 1950s, the condemnation of society for denying equality of rights and opportunities to women was made explicit thanks to Simone de Beauvoir. The underlying roots of her reasoning are, indeed, still current. The social dimension of differences leads to adaptation or even rebellion and both of them in turn have an effect on the social regulation of human rapports. The context in which an individual makes choices is, in fact, important for evaluating the development, the perceived and given support, and the outcomes of the choices themselves. There is a difference between making a decision that satisfies a social consensus and making a choice that elicits not acknowledgment but rather denigration and interdiction. Moreover, the social mandate is interiorized and strengthened by internal collusions, which are built up by living within such a given universe.

In this context, the story of Zelda Fitzgerald, the wife of the well-know American novelist Scott Fitzgerald, seems to me quite emblematic and paradigmatic. For the writer, his wife Zelda is not meant to write or dance; she must be "a complementary intelligence" (Milford, 1971). She seeks refuge in illness in order to reject the place where Scott places her. She is unable to find her place, but she does not want to stay in the one to which she has been assigned. Zelda loves to dance and she practises it with a passion but when she receives an invitation to join the San Carlo Theatre of Naples she turns it down; she does not complete her novels; she is unable to live with her husband, but she cannot detach herself from him either (p. 313). She is reassured only by her voices; she hears the voice of Scott who speaks to her, saying "I lost the woman I put down into my book" (p. 324). This is, for her, a hard and bitter state of affairs, which, unfortunately, she can neither escape nor overcome. He wants to possess her and she fights him by taking refuge in her illness, yet she cannot find a way to possess herself, i.e. to be a woman in herself. What Zelda wants to avoid, at any cost, is the prospect of joining those unhappy legions of women brought down by domestic life, tired and yet resigned.

Objectivation, hyper-sexualization, absence of relation

Today, in Western society, "the era of norm when the boundary between normal and abnormal was clearly drawn and closely guarded" (Bauman 2013, p. 61) has been overcome. Individual rights are defended and affirmed. Women, through the fights of the1970s, have acquired the much sought-after full self-freedom and yet we are witnessing something that is a far cry from the liberty of the individual's own body, i.e. the commodification of the latter. We have passed from the 1970s feminist movements, which advanced the slogan "my body is mine and I manage it", to a time in which there is a media-driven ostentation of the body that places woman in a condition in which they can be exploited. The increase in "equal opportunity" has not shattered the barrier of asymmetry.

Barducci, as a psychoanalyst, investigates this issue in more depth, exploring how the lack of recognition of female subjectivity acts at an individual level. Compared to past

generations, opportunities for women are increasing and yet we are witnessing a reaffirmation of an old sexism, which is taking on new shapes. In particular, Natasha Walter points out how, in contemporary society, "far from achieving liberty and potentiality for women, the new 'hypersexual' culture redefines female success through a 'narrow framework of sexual allure'" (2010, p.10). Sexualization and women's objectification are the perverse outcomes of the battle fought to liberate the body from the constraints of social rules. In fact, the failure of the dialectic between the sexes led women's liberation from stereotypes and rules to the reduction of femininity of the body; the latter, in gaining liberty and visibility, has nonetheless retained its lack of subjective status.

The aim of this issue is, thus, to understand the polysemy of the body by taking into account the 'epigones' of the 1970s revolution and the way in which the policies of the body proceed on their way despite the permanence of old discriminations and creeping sexism.

For Walter (2010, p. 95), the cage that protects from the impossible liberation and the acceptance of its impossibility is the repression of emotion. As the author claims (p. 101), the repression of emotion sets people free from their emotional needs and acts as a substitute for the repression of physical need. Thus, it opens up a universe of bondless women and men upon whom the hyper-sexualised culture is founded. In 2001, Bauman advocated that "The postmodern deconstruction of immortality - the tendency to cut off the present from both past and future - is paralleled by tearing eroticism apart from both sexual reproduction and love" (2013, p. 54). In my view, emotions have been willingly set apart from sexuality because they cause too much pain to both mothers and grandmothers who have been faithful to the roles assigned to them, thereby enduring unhappy marriages, betrayals and abandonments while silently expressing their pain. The search for fullness of emotions and feelings has brought suffering to the generation who in the 1970s tried to follow the way of self-expression by breaking down given family and social schemes. The price of this insubordination has been high: patronymic banishment, incomprehension of sons or daughters, the breaking of bonds, and never-healed incomprehension between the couple.

In this scenario are inscribed the alienation of the female body, described by Testoni, and the widespread and acknowledged use of prostitution by men and women alike, noted by Nunziante Cesàro and Stanziano. The overcoming of family constraints as a limit to the wish fulfilment has opened an unthinkable scenario, which is the bearer of new solutions and new problems. On one side stands the idyllic fantasy of utter wish fulfilment: the materialization of sheer pleasure is pursued away from moral belonging-related constraints and family codes and, therefore, the limits imposed by time and the fear of confrontation are unwillingly tolerated and the mal d'emprise increasingly imposes itself on human relationships. Nunziante Cesaro and Stanziano show, by means of this construct, which has been proposed by Dorey (1981), the aspects of possession/domination present in the sexual encounter. This proposal is extremely interesting as it accounts for the need to nullify the Other's desire in order not to be invaded and, at the same time, to assimilate the lover to oneself.

This could explain the increasing spread of emotionless sexuality, which, in the long run, turns out to be itself an impediment to building up relationships of reciprocal acknowledgment. A reference to Recalcati is now in order. This author roots desire in the

presence of the otherness and, at the same time, denounces the absence of the very one as a contemporary evil. For Recalcati, the paradox lies in perceiving the Other's desire as a source of bewilderment and menace to its own desire. "On one hand the desire is linked to the Other's desire in that it is the symbolic nutriment of the desire itself; yet, on the other hand, the desire turns out to be an individual push to its own fulfilment which does not depend on the Other" says Recalcati. Apparently, there is no definitive solution to this contradiction. Human desire swings structurally between the desire of the Other and the desire of having a desire of its own, thereby being incapable of resolutely deciding between either the one or the Other (2012, p. 64). "What does unleash anguish? Is it the feeling of being at the mercy of the Other, to be reduced to an object placed in the whimsical other's hands, to be the unarmed object of the limitless and insatiable other's delight" (2012, p. 71).

This interpretation explains how the inability to manage its own desire while being in the presence of the Other's brings the self to wholesome, albeit bondless, pleasure-oriented rapports in which the objectification of the Other acts as a defensive shield against an ancient helplessness. Gonzalez and Napolitano make explicit the contradictions of this psychic dynamic acting within the relationships between sexes, and Tamzali, in her contribution, analyses the risk of returning to traditional rules and the inability to construe new value-based dimensions for the relationships between sexes and for the construction of sociality.

Alienation and human rights

This issue is also concerned with critical ways of managing the body: Staziano and Nunziante Cesàro on the one hand affirm sex workers' rights and on the other hand provide a close analysis of prostitution and its use in contemporary society; these authors explain the deep motivations that make prostitution so attractive and, at the same time, open up a debate on the figure of the sex worker, going beyond the stigma of exclusion and marginalization. On this account, I wish to reference Flora Cornish who claims that "The internalized stigma of prostitutions [is] challenged (1) by asserting that sex workers have rights which should be respected, (2) by claiming equivalence to other oppressed but politically successful groups and (3) by providing evidence of sex workers' positive achievements." (Cornish, 2006)

However, explaining the profound dimension of prostitution in depth and, at the same time, laying claim to the social value of paid sex for unappealing individuals, as the authors did, opens up a debate around the value of social bonds and the possibility of turning relationships into commodities.

A 'room of one's own', recognition and objectification

The search for a "room of one's own", which Virginia Woolf pursued as early as 1929, and the quest "to be one in herself" by Esther Harding (1951) guided the World War I and II generations until the appearance of 1970s feminism. While, before the First World War, the aim of being a better person involved paying less attention to oneself and more to others as well as engaging in instructive studies, modern feminism created

the rhetoric of self-expression by encouraging women to identify their desires and being independent. However, due to a strange perversion of intent, according to Walter this attention to independence and self-expression has been sold back to women under the guise of consumerism and self-objectification (Walter, 2010, p. 65). The attention paid to reaching a self-expression consistent with one's own desire has been merchandised in a self-satisfaction stemming from the perfection of the body.

Self-expression has become the optimization of the expression of the body within socially shared rules. Thus, for new generations, being a sexual object is today the only form to be acknowledged in one's own existence; there appears to be no alternative culture.

Chiara Volpato (2011) highlights how the processes of objectification and sexualization contribute to a reduction in self-esteem as well as a weakening of certain competences attributed to women, in particular the ones required for occupying a position of responsibility. This topic is discussed in this issue by presenting original and innovative research on the theme of objectification building. The importance of the social construction of gender prejudice has led us to investigate how this works within the family understood as a socializing institution but, thus far, our data show no evidence of family bonds influencing the young offspring.

While the data on the effect that visual exposure to the male and female body has upon the construction of dimensions of objectification are quite emblematic (Rollero, De Piccoli), the research carried out by Rollero and De Piccoli, in fact, sheds light on how the objectification of the body does not increase benevolence towards women but increases male hostility towards the other sex; these data lead us to think about female objectification in that, while it may seem a way of reducing the conflict between sexes by negating female subjectivity, it is in reality another bearer of hostility. These data are of vital importance for understanding the dynamics between the sexes. Objectification, which might seem a distorted method of pacification, in fact turns out to be a way of strengthening male aggressiveness. Indeed, as the female body is exhibited like a desirable otherness, this leads to a need to control the danger it presents. Conversely, there is a need to control the female body through the media since these produce a powerful shower of devaluing and dehumanizing images (Camussi, Annovazzi).

Within social psychology, Moscovici (1989) understands objectification as a visible and figurative expression of a thematic hub, which is initially merely theoretical but is subsequently an objective reality. In our case, the very choice of the body as a figurative expression causes woman to be selectively reduced to an exhibited body. Therefore, according to Moscovici this is a process that allows the construction of shared meanings by means of social representation; however in the matter of the woman's objectification of her body, the meaning boils down to that of an exhibited part, i.e. precisely her body. In that sense, objectification is to be understood as sexualization, that is to say the reduction to sexual function and object constructed by the dominant social imagery.

Intercultural dialogue and challenges between cultures

The topics of rights, citizenship and democracy bring the theme of gender face to face with an intercultural dimension. Any other perspective is a merely culturalist spe-

culation which is of no use to women and men who face asymmetries and inequalities in both private and public life in different contexts throughout the world. The theme of intercultural dialogue concerns how the attribution of different symbolic meanings is evolving over time and, signs apart, the necessity of understanding the meaning of different experiences and movements. In that sense, Celen's contribution gives voice to the groundbreaking value that many young Turkish women ascribe to the use of the turban. The intercultural challenge raises the need to reject, and indeed fight against, any signs and forms than sustain male-female inequality as well as the power asymmetry between women and men in contemporary society.

Women, understood as political objects, are reduced to a Unum and are seen in their specificity as Unicum. There is a need, instead, to draw a clear distinction in this discussion between standpoints and points of view. In Italy, for example, the relativist approach to intercultural dialogue by valuing differences is losing sight of the principles underlying the intercultural dialogue itself. This is exactly the kind of thought that encourages the silent revolution towards self-determination, which many women are fighting for while not opposing the canon that maintains the principle of female subordination. Others, instead, fight in the name of citizenship rights and principles of equality for the access to resources and power, mainly those systems of thought that advocate protection and tutelage rather than affirmation of basic rights. Among the countries of the Mediterranean area this clash is so strong that it is bringing to life different movements aimed at affirming female liberty. For those adopting the perspective of the respect for differences, affirming the right to wear the veil is seen as an expression of free belief and social custom; for others, the fight must instead be against any kind of veiling whatsoever.

Renata Pepicelli (2010) depicts, from an Islamic perspective, an exhaustive frame of the variegated and complex "gender activism". The clash between universalistic standpoints and post-colonialist critics is well documented by the author, as is the evolution of processes of social transformation. Her description of the demonstrations staged on 12th March 2000, the first in Rabat by female and feminist movements in favour of sustaining the reform of family law and the second in Casablanca by Islamic organizations in opposition to the former, clearly shows the emergence of new social conflicts between groups adhering to religious tradition and forces attempting to oppose them. In this polysemy of meanings attributed to the veil as a signifier of the female condition, the latter has become an expression of oppression and, at the same time, is claimed as an expression of self-determination when an individual woman decides to wear it out of respect for her principles and customs. The standpoint of this issue of Camera Blu is to attempt to understand, through Celen's contribution, the subjective dimension of the scarf battle while thinking about the political value of the control of women's bodies as well as the way in which the focus on the veil causes one to lose sight of self-determination aims and basic respect for women's desires and power. Therefore, the contribution by Wassyla Tamzali, writer and feminist card-carrier of the collective Maghreb Egalité, examines this issue by analysing the pitfalls and, at the same time, showing that the veil can assume an undreamt-of role, especially for youngsters, and can be a bulwark of achievement through the reinvention of a powerful symbol of past subordination.

INTRO

In facing these current topics, the theme of citizenship takes shape as a key element in thinking about the on-going changes in contemporary society. The issue of citizenship includes and is a substitute for those of "welcome" and tutelage, which are more limited and smaller as settings in that they express the paternalism of those who want to help those deemed in need of help. Citizenship in that sense goes beyond and overcomes the multicultural dimension.

Today, we have to reckon with not one but many "cultures", spread throughout the world. The plurality of dividing cultures and differences are considered in different ways with regard to how we conceive of the idea of "culture".

Gender, inter-culture, and human rights

The most currently discussed vision is the "multicultural" one, which looks at "cultures" as internally homogeneous aggregations separated from the outside by impenetrable barriers. From the multicultural perspective, cultural plurality brings about a relationless juxtaposition in that the different "cultures" remain the same in themselves and are separated by impenetrable barriers. This vision has been proved wrong by historical research, which shows that different cultural worlds profoundly influence each other. The multicultural vision draws the frame in which cross-cultural research explores the differences between different "cultures" as though they were distinct and unchangeable realities. A case in point is those studies which compare the conception of the self of "American" and "Japanese" people as though these were representative of separated and homogeneous societies, or as though they were thoroughgoing cultural "clones" (Mantovani, 2008).

The inter-cultural perspective, which represents an alternative to the multicultural vision, does not regard "cultures" as homogeneous and separated groups, nor does it consider that exchanges between "cultures" are absent; above all, it does not think that "cultures" in themselves exist at all. What do exist, in reality, are social actors, who use instruments (artefacts, narrations etc.) offered by the environment in order to organize their lives. Whilst the multicultural perspective deems "culture" to be standalone realities (this idea is called "essentialist"), the inter-cultural perspective places the concept of "agency", which works with initiative and personal responsibility, at the centre of its discourse (Mantovani, 2004). Under certain conditions, singular people and social groups might resort to an "essentialist" and "fundamentalist" vision of "culture", in particular of their own "culture", but this self-representation constitutes only a cultural, instrumental and contingent aspect, as has been shown by Bauman (1996, 1999), in that it does not complete the dynamics of cultural exchange and transformation (Mantovani, 2008).

Whilst the multicultural perspective presupposes the existence of impenetrable barriers standing between "cultures", which is why it sets out to apprehend the differences existing between "Western" and "Arab" people, the inter-cultural perspective assumes the existence of social actors who meet up and influence each other every day. Whilst the multicultural perspective is interested in exploring differences between stereotyped social groups, according to Mantovani (2010), the inter-cultural perspective works on porous boundaries, and exchanges of languages, food, music and stories.

When, instead, we remain anchored to a discourse centred exclusively on culture, the right of every individual to respect his/her own value and culture is immediately evoked. This is the model that a multicultural approach brings forward for the policies of integration. The corollary stemming from this idea is that every subject is to be welcomed along with its values, customs, and principles. This assumption fits into a policy of tolerance and respect for the other, but it inevitably causes us to ask ourselves what becomes of the Ego. What about "me"? And what about my Weltanschauung?

The important point, for me, is to highlight what happens when the respect for the other's culture drives me to negate my own principles, or, even more so, when asserting respect and tolerance for the other leads me to promote principles completely opposed to my own. This is the case for those who, having been educated in the values taught by the Enlightenment and the respect for democracy, stand up for the right of every individual to decide on how to live their own lives and thereby end up accepting the customs of those who, for example, negate the principle of female individuality by subjugating women to family rules and the household's authority.

This is, in my view, the thematic hub around which those concerned with equality between women and men are called to express themselves. It is, nonetheless, a heated debate about the limits of ideology and political correctness, the role of religions in the third millennium, and the lack of laic politics; so, the principles of mutual respect must pass the test of history and contemporary policies. As Wassyla Tamzali claims:

"Respect for the Other and tolerance should never allow the intolerable to be tolerated. Women beaten up in the name of family law, excluded by private and public decision-making processes, and violated in the private and public spheres because they do not accept being subordinated to an abusive authority cannot be invisible to our conscience and political actions even though we recognize their right to belong to another culture. In that sense, the examination of the female condition is a key element in the relationship between the Islamic and Western worlds, between laity and modernity. We cannot even overlook the study and representation of the Otherand of the Self seen through the eyes of the other and in relation to this. The research into the sharable makes its way through the awareness of the way in which differences are perceived. I am concerned that Western society, unable to meet its needs and build its future, could re-establish itself upon bygone securities and, in doing so, collude in the worldview shared by Islamic societies.

In other words, I am concerned that the contemporary multicultural vision could cause us to lose our unifying values and lead, in fact, to the mutual synergizing of the most conservative elements of different societies which use ipod/ipad, computers, TV, and keep on exploiting our world without attempting to find an individual, environmental and planetary respective humanism".

This causes us to reconsider the role that religion has been playing as an identification and aggregative process for contemporary society throughout those countries where the religions of the Father, i.e. Judaism, Islam and Catholicism, are seeking instruments of reciprocal dialogue. My concern is that we may lose the space so assiduously carved out by the laity and that, in the name of God, women may be taken back home to take care of the world. Female unemployment rates, the difficulty of reconciling the interests

of women and men, and youngsters' distrust of the future are all signs of the problems facing the Western world in advancing the current model of development.

With reference to Seyla Benhabib (2002), the encounter between differences can take place by sharing values and constructing a common universe made of shared values. So, the plea should be addressed not to static cultures but, rather, to those principles by belonging to different cultures and memories, which we can and want to share. This is the only road to travel for northern and southern women given the diversity of their laws, customs and social lifestyles. However, the presence of differences should not lead us to claim different objectives, i.e. to live in a speed-based, two-way world. In the straightforward expression of Marina Calloni, a feminist and sociologist at the London School of Economics, "we must hold fast to a new idea of citizenship, which a) has an ethical basis including a critique of violence (taken to mean the will to impose control over the body and hence affirmation of a subject which is integral and non-humiliated); b) affirms a conception of equality which is "complex" and distributive, and not merely in formal terms; and c) conceives of politics as a public domain, not limitable to 'ties of blood'. What I am proposing is to empower the presence of women in the various sectors of society, favouring their promotion in the decision-making instances of all institutions; to combine the traditions of culture and religion in the respect of the rights of women as citizens; this will probably mean revising, on the time-scale imposed by history, the roles and functions which religion and the law attribute to women in the private sphere, concerning ties, sentiments and children; to institutionalise women's studies in universities and promote work opportunities even at top level for women" (Calloni, 2000, p. 58).

Self-achievement and dialectic of desire

The female role bears the prescription of self-sacrifice and that of its subjectivity and self-determination in the name of the preservation of human ties, whereas men are asked to make do without them. A female model that is unified with the myth of technology currently reigns. Our proposal is, instead, to create a social system made up of individuals capable of fulfilling their aspirations and desires but, at the same time, to build up ties and overcome solitude. Introducing the trans-human vision, as proposed by Francesca Ferrando, allows us to pass from technology, understood as an instrument of adjustment of an imposed order of perfection, to the acquisitions of technique aimed at improving human liveability. In that sense, technique renounces its dimension of social prescription to become the supporter of human subjectivity and female subjectivity in particular.

Testoni makes reference to Anna Harendt to denounce the danger of what is deemed obvious. Adjustment and social education make invisible thousands of daily signs and forms that construct and keep female subjectivity still, not to mention the role played by the body which is reduced to "either a maternal means or a seductive ornament" as Gonzalez describes it, from a Lacanian perspective, later in this issue.

Only if we understand the implicit forms of the clash with what is deemed obvious and, hence, silent can we find effective strategies for overcoming it. In that sense, Kafka's Hunger Artist and the denouncement of pro-ana websites by Anna Gargiulo

account for a strategy of avoidance of the body to the rule of the socially shared word, which leads to a process of de-sexualization, which deprives every sexual connotation of sense, be it male or female. "The right food the hunger cannot find is the food which holds the desire of being eaten by the hunger itself" Catarzi says. Therefore, the lack of desire for food defends against undesired food. Yet, "the body dies out when it turns out to be unable to be wishful."

Avoiding the game of desiring and building ties constitutes, in this way, the invisible disease of human ties which no longer abide by the prescription and obligations of traditional society and, at the same time, show the impossibility of being subjects of one's self. Another lethal outcome of the clash between different visions of the relationships between sexes and the role attributed to motherhood is stalking and femicide. These are alarming crimes that are emblematic of a socially intolerable situation still on-going. The victims are often those who have rebelled, those who plucked up the courage to report their persecutors and take back their lives. All of this leaves us discouraged and speechless, although we do not resign ourselves to it (Arcidiacono, Di Napoli, 2010). Stefania Napolitano calls forth Lou Salomé's theory and, before this, she references the Freudian indication not to set the object-libido and libidinal ego apart (see next pages). In doing so, she substantiates the critique of the union to the other which creates a whole, as in the experience of love in which two people, in a way, lose themselves. She instead proposes a relationship that keeps the self apart through the passion for the other.

I would like to conclude this introduction by echoing Anna Santoro's exhortation (2012) for us to be hard-working cicadas. In Fedro's fairy tale the cicada sings, plays and enjoys itself. For Anna Santoro the hard-working cicada represents the possibility of enjoying life and human ties but, at the same time, giving value and recognition to one's own social agency by claiming one's own acknowledgment as well as one's own body and visibility. The challenge lies in overcoming the subjugation and the commodification of oneself through the search for new life dimensions capable of encompassing self-achievement and relationships.

Acknowledgment

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