

# Feminist theory: For another difference - On Luce Irigaray's "difference theory"

Tuesday 26 November 2013, by [CIRILLO Lidia](#) (Date first published: 1992).

**This article was written in 1992 in the context of a wide-ranging debate within the Italian Fourth Internationalists and in *Ridfondazione* around the "difference theory" put forward by Luce Irigaray.**

## Contents

- [A SURROGATE THEORY OF WOMEN AS](#)
- [GENDER DIFFERENCE DENIED](#)
- [THE TASK OF LIBERATION](#)
- [Femininity - between biology](#)
- [We do not need a feminine \(...\)](#)
- [The gender difference theory](#)
- [ELITES AND ORGANIC INTELLECTUA](#)
- [The philosophical foundations](#)
- [Symbolic Mother and total \(...\)](#)

---

It seems to me that within the debate about gender difference a lot of confusion has arisen through the meanings given to the terms used in the discussion and the views behind the various definitions. Some years ago I was rather clear on where I agreed and disagreed with the comrades who identified with Irigaray's ideas. [1]

I really don't know why the debate in "*Rifondazione*" [2] has ended up putting my mind in a bit of a muddle. But the muddle has not gone so far as to prevent me realising that the most interesting area of the debate is based on a misunderstanding. There is a fundamental reason for this. This misunderstanding revolves around a switching, a continual toing and froing between two types of differences that are not only of a distinct nature but in a certain way are mirror opposites.

It is a sort of unconscious conjuring trick: somebody talks about one of these differences and useful points are made with which we can agree. Then in another contribution from the same comrade, or in articles from comrades who are supposed to be talking about the same type of difference, in the next sentence or somewhere else in the text, the other type of difference rears its head and the whole of line of argument becomes muddled and confused.

I am not talking about the definition of "difference" used to signify the women's question or the work of the party towards women. It is obvious here that the term is being used in a functional way. Understandably in an environment in which a new orthodoxy has taken root and the possibility of discussion is linked to the acceptance of an abstract term with multiple meanings, there are women who prefer to go around rather than tackle the obstacle. This is understandable but not positive,

particularly in a theoretical discussion where it is not possible to separate words and what they refer to.

The switching of terms I am talking about involves contributions from women whose concerns I share, or at least those concerns which today, in the most recent papers and discussion, appear to be key and which produce the misunderstanding. These comrades look at the difference of the political protagonist ["soggetto"] through the lens of the ideology of the "theory of gender difference", identifying one with the other for various reasons, since there is a precise relationship between these two differences.

The main part of this article will deal with these two differences.

But some clarification will be useful to reduce, at least a little, the margin of non-communication?

You cannot say of the same thing that it is at one and the same time obvious and wrong. When you look at the theoretical work which in Italy has been called the "the theory of gender difference" both things can be said only with reference to different aspects of it. In the theoretical work of Irigaray and of the women who have taken up her explanatory framework there are numerous non-specific statements which we can agree with but on the other hand there is a specific feminist weltanschauung (world view) that we cannot agree with. You can get to the former non-specific statements without going via the latter analysis.

Those comrades supporting the gender difference theory wanted to get closer to radical feminism - something I believe has been necessary for some time. This strand of feminism has always been particularly attentive to the theme of gender difference but in a different sense than the meaning it has assumed today. In what way? Above all through an analysis of women's existence, investigating those aspects of women's life which make them different from individuals of the other sex. Also through a critique of ideology, through a demystification of the presumed neutrality of culture, which in fact reflects sex oppression.

However a new reading of gender difference emerges when this difference is seen as an expression of a different original structure, as a different way of thought that today can still be spoken and used, as a buried civilization that has to be excavated, as a totality of values residing in the sexual role and present condition of women. Even though there is a "newness" about this theory its roots lie particularly in the not-so-recent ideas of 1960s American feminism. Also, like any ideological or cultural reality there are precursors of these ideas. Irigaray is certainly the best known of them on this side of the Alps.

The theory of difference °note of tr.-the author sometimes applies the same term theory of difference not just to gender difference but to wider theories of difference to do with black movement etc] should not be confused either with radical feminism nor with the gay, lesbian or black movements pride in their difference. The enthusiasm for ideas of "differentness" among educated and integrated sectors of the ethnic minority in the USA and by supporters of the theory of gender difference are in a certain sense part of this tradition but their ideas from the outset are embedded in a striking way within the defeat of the oppressed classes and of oppositional culture.

Their theoretical frameworks are similar in many respects - new mythologies, a specific and distorted view of structuralism, rejection of any sort of objectivity in the results of intellectual activity etc. But the key to understanding their approach lies in analysing the events and conflicts of the last twenty years and not in looking at the pure realm of theory.

Marxism is accused of being a partial point of view since it is a male one. We can agree with that

although with some important qualifications. But we can turn the accusation back on the accusers by also showing the partial point of view of the neo-difference theorists. This partiality is not based on class but on a social group. We are dealing here with a bias that is not neutral towards women and ethnic minorities for the simple reason that white male domination has been historically constructed and is expressed in specific historical forms of class or caste domination.

To take a position, to argue against the neo-difference theorists is not easy. On the one hand in fact, they expose inadequacies of even the best Marxism and its sluggish thinking when oppression and difference are not immediately reducible to class oppression and class differences. The contradictory attitude of the left, divided between obtuse refusal and unconditional surrender, has laid bare a guilty conscience as long as its history.

On the other hand at the heart of the neo-difference theories there is a regressive ideological knot that obliges us to make a judgement. This ideology can strangle both attempts to redeveloping women's intervention as political subject/protagonist and the hope of a "rifondazione" (refounding of a radical communist party) since today it is impossible to do so without integrating the needs and consciousness of women and ethnic minorities.

## **A SURROGATE THEORY OF WOMEN AS POLITICAL SUBJECT/PROTAGONIST**

A first question can get us closer to the nub of the distinction between an analysis of the difference of political subjects and neo-difference ideology : why has Irigaray's thesis found such a large audience among women on the Italian Left?

Unilateral answers , in my opinion do not hold water.

For instance the theory of "delay" that is sometimes given by women from other European countries does not stand up. Indeed they are surprised and even wax ironic about these Italian women who still play with the broken toy of the difference theories. Catherine MacKinnon - the feminist who worked out the law against sexual harassment and supported Anita Hill - was asked the question:

"What's your opinion of the theory of the difference according to which women are asking for separate schools, separatist and diverse teaching and even a pedagogy of the sexual difference"

Her answer was:

"uh, the theory of the difference is stupid and outdated. It gets me very angry....."

She also made other comments that denied in part her initial expression of intolerance (*La Repubblica*, 29 October '91).

Although the theory of difference is not so old in Italy, the fundamental thesis is outdated. However what is new are the protagonists, the reasons, the cultural instruments used and the deep currents which are bringing the old and the new-old of recent years to the surface.

Neither does the thesis that the theory of difference is a post factum theorization of the 1970s movement, just as Marxism is a theory of a class struggle which had already revealed its internal dynamics, hold up either.

Both "explanatory" theses are invalidated by simple historical chronology because the non-systematic but specific body of ideas at the the basis of the theories of difference appeared in Europe at the end of 1960s with the French tendency called "Politique et Psychoanalyse" and a bit

later in Italy with texts and accounts brought together in the book "Non credere di avere dei diritti (we don't believe we have any rights). These texts and tendencies are the precursors of difference theory, in the sense that they contain ideas which were developed later, when objective conditions became favourable.

However during the period of the big women's mobilisations these ideas remained rather marginalised, despite a certain ideological influence in the vacuum of ideas that for various reasons characterised the PCI (Italian Communist Party), the trade unions, UDI (Union of Italian Women - satellite movement of PCI women) and the left that came out of the student movement. Only later when the wave of feminist struggle petered out what was left of its organisation took on the complexion and ideas of the "theory of gender difference". So is it all down to an ideology linked to the downturn? To a certain extent yes, if this means to say that in mobilisations which involved women of different social backgrounds, in a period of strong convergence of the movements of the oppressed other tendencies must necessarily have a much greater influence.

One type of difference is in reality the mirror opposite of the other. One ideology of difference looks at itself without the mediation of struggle and/or a radical culture of opposition. In the 1970s the weakness of the theoretical mediation was counter-balanced by the movement, by its radicalism and by the political context. The reversing/transformation of one type of difference into the other took place in practice. Once the objective situation changed the first type of difference returns to its initial situation and without a theoretical transformation nothing else can happen but self-contemplation. The theory of gender difference becomes its ideological projection.

But this does not explain why such a significant number of women on the left today identify with the theory of gender difference.

The ideology of gender difference has not in fact had a narcotic function. On the contrary it has helped prevent feminism going into coma. It has been the key idea that has kept the movement alive and in ferment, preventing it catching the all-pervasive depression. Feminism saved itself from that by separating its own destiny from the defeats (of the workers and proletariat). This ideology provided that slightly sectarian baggage of certainty, that pride in its own diversity that surviving Marxism seems to have lost.

The fact that this separation is largely an illusion for the moment does not matter. But it does matter that the theory of difference has been confirmed despite change in the political situation. The state of the social situation in Italy has certainly worsened the daily life of many women but you still have, as a most significant element for the moment, a partial change of culture that has been forced on a catholic and macho society like the Italian one.

The ideology of gender difference is therefore a surrogate for a theory of the difference of political subjects [beings/protagonists] that we as women on the left have not succeeded in developing.

The symbolic experience during the rise of the movement, so obvious in the demonstrations when women emphasised their femininity and paraded the symbol of their own sex, needs to be interpreted - women activists had then taken something that was available on the market of ideas.

This bold symbolism was also partly tied up with the weakness of Italian Marxism that had been gutted of its innards like a chicken and stuffed full of every type of stereotype and terminology. I emphasise stereotypes and not contributions here, since some ideas could have come through but they were taken up (I refer particularly to the PCI) with the same style and logic as the formal Marxism of the stalinist framework, binding together the interests of the apparatus and the ideology of power politics. The "theory of gender difference" was only one of the discourses that the PCI

opened up to , the antithesis without the thesis of a Marxism capable of created a dialectical tension,a real meeting with diverse theoretical traditions, problems and practices . While at the same time the new left were stuck in a hyper-activism and failed to educate itself. The latter, like today, was elastic and spongelike, open to every intellectual fashion because it was hardly aware of the real theoretical possibilities of Marxism.

The strengthening of theories of gender difference seems to me therefore to reflect a defeat (of the mass movements of the oppressed) and at the same time a partial success (of women and their self-consciousness). It is also a sign of strength (there remains a consistent layer of organised feminism in Italy ) and of a weakness (of Marxist men and women).

## **GENDER DIFFERENCE DENIED**

When the women comrades from Rifondazione who support the theory of gender difference say that gender difference has been denied they open two doors that are very close together but which open up the discussion to quite diverse problems and meanings.

Gender difference denied could mean that ideology, culture, representations of the world, convictions, stereotypes, symbols and so on have characterised the history of men and are precisely male and chauvinist.

Hegel saw in philosophy, religion, morality and law the incarnation of the history of the spirit. Marx responded that the ideal forms with which social relations and individual existence are expressed are products of the concrete needs of the ruling classes. He pointed out the existence of a close relationship between a flesh and blood individual subject with his/her projects and desires and the world of ideas and intellectual activity. Other considerations are superfluous for the moment. Within which limits, in which fields, for which aspects would the ideal forms of the world have been different if women had been an integral part is quite another question.

Gender difference denied can also mean a difference displaced, unsaid, hidden, forgotten and not represented.

When people state that in "Western thought" the female element is denied it is obvious that the angle of approach is different and it is no longer being said that there is a sexual domination which culture justifies and ideologically projects but that another symbolic world exists (for example that of Indian philosophy) an expression of another real world in which sexual oppression is greater than in the West while nevertheless gender difference is represented. A further point is being made - a dominant strand in Nietzsche's philosophy is taken up. He criticised Western philosophy for being abstract, understood as a pretext to impose schemas on reality, to interpret it , to create a rational communication and not just spiritual harmony between people..

In both cases we are getting away from the areas we really need to analyse. Allusions to oriental philosophy take us way off field. Above all because it is only to a small extent that religions embedded in agriculture express a different condition for women. Also the permanent nature of ideological projections of other real material relations would demonstrate, if need be, the difficulty of interpreting a totality of symbols and a structure originating so far off in the past. Half of all human history lies between the two.

The Nietzschean reference to abstraction, which is recurrent in Irigaray's work, leads to adopting a point of view (obviously as male chauvinist as the Marxist one) that is really not very useful in the task of constructing a female political subject [protagonist/being] whose necessary condition is the

capacity of women to “position themselves in the world” to establish not just an affective but a rational communication between them. The two meanings given to gender difference denied are the ideological projection of the diversity of the social group and therefore of a diversity of needs that has to be analysed by theoretical work.

Greatly simplifying the nature of the problem, we can however say that there is a door that leads into women’s lives connected to an experience of class struggle, to a radical culture of opposition leading to the project of relaunching a political initiative. The other door opens into the lives of women concerned with cutting out their own specific space in the academic and publishing world, a space that others cannot invade and devastate. Where they can mutually sustain one another in a difficult job of living where the other sex has built up more significant monuments to the creativity of the species and to their own sexual organ.

Let’s be clear, both social worlds have the right to exist and are both decent women’s lives. The question for me is that it is not possible to live in both social worlds simultaneously.

Women concerned with developing a female political subject/protagonist (and I put myself within this group of women) can visit the other world, have pleasant conversations, receive and give advice, but their social world, their intervention is something else, particularly from a theoretical point of view.

## **THE TASK OF LIBERATION**

If when we talk about gender difference denied we mean to say that history can be read not just as a class oppression, as class conflict or class consciousness but also as the oppression of a sex, as sexual conflict, sexual consciousness, then we need to draw a series of consequences at the general theoretical, philosophical, political and practical levels. The first is that the fundamental task is liberation, that women are committed to a long and complex struggle for liberation. On this point women comrades who adopt the gender difference theory as a “simplistic paradigm” are too reticent: they say liberation has already happened, liberation has already practically happened, liberation has already happened in developed capitalist countries. But, they say, this is not the problem. In fact this is the real problem. This problem determines and makes sense of all the rest.

The way in which the question of liberation is taken up is the product of some fundamental errors, above all the misunderstanding of the fact that defining sex oppression means referring to a complex sexual, social, and ideological oppression. The most significant expression of this has been the exclusion of women from prestigious roles, from work and from culture. The oppression of women is expressed in specific ways linked to the characteristics of male society. There is a precise relationship between exclusion, social oppression and the absence of women in the world of ideas.

Feminists did not raise the demand of shaking up false “neutrality” in obscure ways. They acted strongly. They investigated literature and psycho-analysis and political theory (see for example the work of Kate Millet, *The Politics of Sex*, written in the 1960s) and they considered these investigations as a contribution to the struggle for liberation.

The true theoretical gains made by feminism were that understanding that key mechanisms of women’s oppression existed among them in a reciprocal relationship and could be understood and fought only within this relationship. The whole history of women and their battles, of their war of position explains this reciprocity and its dynamic.

Until some of us had access to culture all women have been deprived even of the elementary instruments to begin to express their oppression. Only when many women found in work outside the

home places where they could group together could they have the minimum relationship of forces necessary to experiment with more effective forms of struggle.

For feminism to begin to read male thought as an ideology of a sex, the projection of the experience of one sex, it was necessary for women to have achieved social gains - access to education and the weakening of the traditional forms of exclusion.

Criticism of ideology is in any case a necessary condition for other advances in the social and political fields. Laws are not enough because oppression is hammered into the brain and hearts and determines desires, ambition, the image of one's own destiny and choices. The idea that liberation has already been achieved is a product of its crude legalistic and economic image.

Even from this point of view liberation is a very long way from being achieved in Western capitalist countries or in the (ex-) so-called "socialist countries".

The relationship between material conditions and ideas is not immediate, mechanical or direct. The history of women and feminism shows this clearly.

The reference to Marx more clearly reveals the real nature of the problem. Another culture, another way of thinking, another system of symbols in the last analysis can only be the product of other material social relations. What holds for women is even more the case for the lower classes as a whole. There is a lot of reciprocity and another culture and another way of thinking in turn form conditions for other material social relations.

Finally there is one thing that Marxist women know or ought to know and women from other cultures understandably know less well or can only partially grasp. Every material and ideological gain is reversible. A step backwards in the living conditions of women will inevitably in the long term have consequences on consciousness, not just for the poorest women but for all women.

Unless you think that our heads, rigidly determined by our sex, are immune from the relations established with the rest of the world, with other women in particular.

Here it seems to me other semantic mistakes are introduced- due to the superimposing of the two types of gender differences.

What does this term [used by the gender difference theorists] homologation mean? I have heard and read significantly distinct versions of this term. Homologation can be defined as betrayal of one's own femininity, the assuming of male attitudes and values. Irigaray maintains that competitive, aggressive women who desire power are not feminine using much the same logic as my grandmother who told me I was a "maschiaccio" (tomboy), when I reacted to the thousand little power games of children of the opposite sex and gave the occasional hiding to some of the less robust boys.

But in the original version of the "theory of gender difference" the term is used in a more serious way - meaning supporting the values and points of view of other people, those values and points of view through which men sustain their needs and that are an expression of their prejudice.

This second meaning is not specific to the "theory of gender difference". However the first meaning is specific to it with its concern with creating a sort of official code of femininity. Nevertheless the idea can contribute to the development of a feminine political subject [protagonist/being] because it introduces the idea of a radical criticism of what exists, a systematic challenge to the apparently obvious.

But the term itself continually pushes the consciousness of women comrades towards the first sense which is both banal and wrong. Also because if this was not the case the fundamental reason for the homologation of the minority of women who manage to get access the roles and fields traditionally reserved for men would be easily explained.

When in a given society marginalisation, inferior roles and social insignificance coincide with certain categories of people (women and ethnic minorities in developed capitalist societies) then their image immediately becomes devalued.

A conceptual sleight of hand - overcoming the contradiction between superiority and inferiority - resolves the problem on paper but not in real life. If gender difference corresponds in reality to a condition of inferiority, then not only in the eyes of the rest of society but in those of the oppressed themselves the values of the other finish up by becoming the only values.

The homologation of those women who achieve prestige roles or make it to intellectual activity is therefore, above all, the shadow of the condition of other women. In the second place it is the product of the isolation, the loneliness, the last arrived, the few, in a universe solidly structured and built by the other. This leads us back to oppression and to liberation.

The logic that lies behind the objective of constructing a parallel symbolic order is in a certain sense counterposed to the latter. It seems that sometimes the demand of imposing the symbols of a strong femininity is to be achieved by keeping an impossible distance from socially weak women:

*"Those women who believe in using laws cannot take account of the complexity of the feminine choice° ...] because laws necessarily express a general abstract provision. They end up by putting limits on the problems of a category of women, obviously the most disadvantaged, and present them as typical of the feminine condition as a whole. This operation brings women down to the most miserable conditions, blacks out their different sort of choices as well as the real possibility they have of changing reality to their advantage, and in this way it denies the existence of a feminine sex. Only a "feminine condition" is presented which nobody can really identify with."*

### **Femininity - between biology and myth**

I would like now to try and briefly explain what new ideas the "theory of gender difference" has raised. For some time the following have been part of the feminist tradition:

- looking at history as the history of sexual oppression and sexual conflict;
- gender difference as a way of analysing a different existence;
- studies on the language of women (already in 1978 Marina Yaguello referred to secret languages in her work *Les Mots et les Femmes*);
- the criticism of male chauvinist ideology in literature, science and philosophy etc.

This was particularly the case during those active political periods when a strong feminist sensibility met up not so much with "pure" Marxism (although this occasionally happened) but at least with its effects through cultural influence.

You also have, although for some time now to a much lesser extent, the pride in gender difference which is a sure sign of an autonomous political protagonism. The mass movements of the 1970s gave substance to this pride, showing how the origins of homologation lay in solitude and beginning to



undermine the conformism of weakness. The new idea was that there was a difference that was both biological and historical that can be individualised and described, taken up as a value and (therefore) as a norm.

The new idea then is really the elaboration of a series of elements that already existed in a dispersed way within feminist thought and are now brought together and unified in a more or less organic theory. You could say it is new in the sense that this work of collection and synthesis does incorporate an element which was not there before (the defeat of the lower classes) and the mixture of the latter with the rest of the "dish" seriously changes the composition and taste as a whole.

The Italian philosophy of gender difference is very much indebted to the ideas of Irigaray as is openly recognised because Irigaray provides the indispensable element of theory - the idea that there is an innate gender difference in thought which is a biological fact linked to the morphology of sex and the women's specific sexuality. Without this key idea it is impossible to claim gender difference as a value, to adopt it as the "simple paradigm".

Traditional feminism - both the radical and Marxist varieties - have usually reacted to male chauvinist difference theory (theoretical male chauvinism is basically a theory of gender difference) by explaining the historical nature of gender difference. Against men who theorised the distinctness of women on the basis of biological existence itself, its savage naturalness, of women's inability to sublimate or transcend it, feminists responded by partly throwing back the accusations, exposing its deprecating and ideological character; explaining what was true in women's distinctness as a fruit of history, a history of women's oppression.

More culturally aware feminists have never theorized equality in terms of uniformity. This identification is typical of reactionary and conservative thought and is nothing to do with Marxist criticism of the abstract equality embedded in bourgeois laws. The theory of gender difference mixes up the two separate approaches because its ideas have come out of contradictory and diverse political and cultural realities. The better tradition of feminism could not theorise gender difference as a value for a very good reason: gender difference which coincides with history in the case of women, is oppression and consequently one cannot idealise it or identify with it.

On the other hand referring to thought as a symbolic projection of an original structure leads the difference theorists to remove the contradiction. They say a gender difference exists which is not oppression; women have a different thought which is silent and unexpressed because it has been silenced but its existence reveals the partiality and invalidity of male thought, of ideology as well as philosophy and science.

But what does Irigaray say? If *Bandera Rossa* [3] wants to give me more space in a future issue I will try and explain it then. It is not easy:

- some of her works are written in a very obstrusive language (for example the *Ethics of Sexual difference*) that is suspended in an Heideggerian style between poetry and philosophical argument;
- because you would need to say something first about the rewriting of Freud by Lacan, passing via Saussure who is partially turned on his head by Irigaray through Lacan's reading of him;
- finally because it is difficult to work out a precise line of argument, even a partial or open coherence.

Irigaray also defends what we would call contradictoriness. She was suspended from teaching after the publication of *Speculum* (1974) for ethical reasons - that is incoherence with theoretical rigour -

she then defended herself in *This sex that is not sex* (1978) with the argument of femininity. She attributed to all women (apparently it is assumed that this excludes those who are homologated) this very characteristic that is a virtue and not a vice.

*"Therefore it is useless to trap women into giving an exact definition of what they want to say, of making them repeat themselves so they may be clear, they are already more than clear with respect to the discursive machine in which you try to trap them."*

Nevertheless I think we can fairly summarise the results of Irigaray's theoretical work in the following way:

a) A sort of feminine mythology is developed whose origins seem to lie in some sort of original sin, the refusal to recognise her value as a mother, a refusal whose punishment/ consequence is the creation of a universe of language and symbols that is not rooted in the archaic world and despises and ignores nature.

Leaving women out means in fact not to respect nature and the earth and to create (for example) an "economic superstructure" that does not respect the "infrastructure of natural fecundity". The consequence of all this are the aberrations of uncultivated land, goods destroyed and hunger in the world.

The age of women was on the other hand an age of peace, following the cosmic rhythms where mother and children presided over the fertility of the earth without this involving the marginalisation of the other.

The refusal to recognise her own maternal power has altered women's perception of the world and the forgotten secret is the mystery of the female sexual organs, the loss of knowing the importance of the vagina in deciphering the universe.

The scientific use of myth made by anthropology and psycho-analysis in Irigaray becomes (especially in *Sexes and Genealogy*, where these themes are developed) the myth of the myth, in which all the deepest truths concerning our identity, the human species and the world appears to be deposited as enigmas.

b) The original gender difference is analysed via the mediation of Lacan's psychoanalysis. The difference in thinking between men and women are described as differences that project into culture the pure and simple morphology of sex:

*"Mathematical sciences are interested in the theory of wholes, of closed and open spaces, of the infinitely small and the infinitely great. It hardly looks at the question of the semi-open, the wholes with changing borders, of anybody analysing the problem of the border of the passage between, through fluctuations, what takes place from one threshold to the other of defined wholes (topology, while taking up these problems emphasises more on what closes than on what remains without any possible circularity?)".*

Or her notion of gender difference, which explains and rationalises by linking this specific feminine sexuality, a crystallised stereotype of male chauvinist culture, to the illogicality of women:

*"She is indefinitely an other in her own self. This is certainly why it is said of her that she is bizarre, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious...Not to mention her own language in which she goes off in all senses without tracing out the coherence of any sense." (From *This sex that is not one*)*

Or a gender difference that looks at science from the visual point of view of maternity:

*“Economic science (like social sciences?) have emphasised the phenomenon of rarefication and the problem of survival more than that of life and abundance.”*

But in other books being feminine seems to be rather an attitude, a capacity of women’s thinking not to be trapped in the logic of systems and abstraction. Thinking becomes feminine through a transexual operation of the Nietzschean critique of Western philosophy.

The limits of the attempt to imagine specific, constant and ahistorical characteristics of women’s thought are seen when Irigaray or comrades who place themselves in the same logic, try to explain what it consists of. I have never heard or read a single word that does not reproduce or apply schema coming out of male culture. This seems to me absolutely obvious if two things that the theory of gender difference state are held to be true: that women do not speak their own language and that language and things cannot be separated

c) A feminine identity is described that is made up substantially of places/spaces that are shared. You can get to this position by much less tortuous arguments. Although Irigaray insists on the demand that women should not see themselves only as mothers and that there is no place for men without a place for herself, femininity is still seen as getting close to nature, to fertility, peace, given by oneself.

d) A series of criticisms are developed or repeated from earlier analyses about how psychoanalysis is organised around male parameters, particularly around the alternative made between clitoral or vaginal pleasure, the prevalence of the maternal function over the erotic, the sexual evolution of women, the passive/active sexual roles, the dependence on the paternal superego etc. This part of Irigaray’s work had a similar logic to traditional feminism.

We should add here that the idea of femininity as a ‘black continent’ has much more validity. In fact that is where to find its origins and foundations. Given the absolutely specific relationship that exists in this field between the subject and the material of the investigation (remember the importance of the work Freud did on himself) then female sexuality must necessarily remain an unknown, until women themselves begin to speak about it. Obviously belonging to a sex does not guarantee a solution because the schemas, the models, the language that are overlaid on reality can often only be removed by complex, difficult processes which work themselves out in a parallel way in society and thought.

Male domination in psychoanalysis is not only a survival of ideological prejudices but also as a tendency of the male psychoanalyst to interpret female sexuality from his own self, from his own sexuality, thereby unconsciously taking on the male sexual model. So we can say that with psychoanalysis more than in other fields there is a problem of gender difference that is not expressed or only partially expressed.

What are the limits, the risks, the mistakes of the theoretical work of Irigaray, to whom Italian ideology is much indebted for the essential points it uses to raise the question of the parallel symbolic order?

In the first place this theory does not have any credibility: although some particular threads of it are acceptable (not every thread) the whole mosaic is certainly not.

Let us take for example the most significant element - thought as a symbolic projection of sex and sexuality, not only as an experience linked to both (which is non-contentious) and therefore to a certain extent historical, but as the projection of an original structure of the same type as that through which the species orders its experience. This idea is contradicted forcefully by other

psychoanalytic tendencies and our analysis cannot be based on ideological criteria, on the greater or lesser "fit" of a thesis with our political convictions.

Even if you accept the idea of an original structure I think the interpretation of signs is particularly unsound. For the following reasons:

- the ideological position of who does the interpretation, since inevitably cultural elements are brought into the imaginary world that is being interpreted (these are the objections Kate Millet makes against somebody called Erikson who supports a theory similar in many aspects to Irigaray's which is defined by the American feminist as being a thesis of anti-feminist reaction;
- thought is not just a projection of a structure founded on sex but also is linked to the species;
- thought is not only the projection of an original structure but of the entire experience of men and women in the broadest and most complete sense of the term.

For example what does it mean to reduce Hegel to one thing - his sexual being, leaving out his position as a German intellectual in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Furthermore when the signs of language in which the unconscious is structured are then partially modified (which is what Irigaray does with respect to Lacan) you cannot say that the theoretical paradigm holds as before as if taking a single card out of a finely balanced tower of cards makes no difference! Above all in this case what is really lacking is empirical/experimental data, which must have a role in any discussion of symbolic projection.

In fact how can a discourse be credible if concentric defensive barriers have been built up? :

- It is contradictory to theorise being contradictory as feminine, in this way reserving the right to liquidate any objection by the argument of which sex you belong to or whether you are homologated ;
- it is written in a mystical and hermetic way and rejects any criticism as vulgar banalities;
- it finishes up in places different from where one expected it to or with a question mark when a conclusion would stretch the theory beyond certain limits.

Irigaray's theoretical work not only is hardly reliable but it is also damaging or could become so if the objective conditions arise to make it catch on in reality, in people's consciousness.

Parading the myth of femininity, mainly using a male language which ignores the need to place oneself in the world and to establish rational relations with others (necessarily more abstract since to communicate means in a certain sense abstracting from your immediate self) serves women a very bad hand. It leaves women where they are which is a pre- not a post- rational situation. The same problems, the same categories, the same symbols change their meaning and value profoundly when they are transferred from one subject to another. The anarchic and wayward genius of Nietzsche becomes pure rubbish (and it is not his fault) when it is translated into a lexicon of different needs and conditions. This applies to women who have a great demand for finding a way forward, for explaining the world, for finding their own rationality and "developed thought".

### **We do not need a feminine mystique**

Irigaray's theoretical work creates an "official" code of femininity (among other things it identifies

this with things very close to what has always been common women's places/spaces ) which ends up in laying the bases for a new norm that is very similar to the old one.

The more and more common use of Irigaray's "official" code has been apparent for some time in left feminist circles and is shown in the exhibition of affection and the rhetoric of starting from oneself (the imaginary as feminine). In this way they overturn the concerns of traditional feminism, both the radical and Marxist versions, which were to break feminine schemas, giving space for women to think and live independently. The very idea of homologation in its most banal sense (and this is the most current one) can become another way of repeating to women what is appropriate for their sex to do or be.

I am convinced however that the poison is in the nicest part of the apple. The natural, fertile and peaceful feminine being that stands behind the "veils of the strange verses" of Sex and genealogy is the same doll men give to the opposite sex so that they try and model themselves on it as much as possible.

Placing women close to nature is at one and the same time a stereotype and something true. The true part is challenged and pushed back by that which is historically determined, as oppression. The ability and possibility of transcending it is taken away because, it is claimed, women have a biologically determined destiny since they have an uterus and a vagina. Women began to breathe when their bodies did not have to continue to obey nature, when the by-products of the needs of the reproduction of and production of men, but also their struggles and the struggle of all the oppressed, left their bodies less exposed to the violence and ravages of nature. Also from this point of view what can be a value for men may not certainly be the case for women who still need science and technology as rationality and "developed thought" for themselves.

I find the image of women as peaceful and non-aggressive particularly insidious. Naturally it is just that women are sometimes in the leadership of the struggle for peace because this can correspond to their needs as mothers or because common sense means it is plausible that women reject war. But I do not find it correct when this leadership is championed in the name of a gender difference that is really linked to history and sexual roles.

Are women naturally more peaceful? You can answer both yes and no. In the animal world where sexual difference emerges apart from history and culture it is said that the male sexual role makes him in general more aggressive but it is also a fact that the female can be just as aggressive on occasions (for example when defending her young).

Especially since aggression is very much tied up with other needs, to the type of relations that these needs have with the world in any particular species. If I happened to come face to face with a tiger I would not waste time worrying what sex he or she was! Now since men and women both belong to a species that is able to change its own relations with the world and therefore the way in which its needs are met, their aggression is not a static fact and is characterised by a feature internal to the species that has become gradually decisive as the possibility or obstacles to the satisfaction of needs does not lie in nature or other species but in the domination over other men and women.

Are women historically more peaceful? Again one can say yes and no. Women are less susceptible to warlike rhetoric, to the myths of force and destiny and are mothers who don't want their sons to go off and get slaughtered. But women have mobilised on many occasions to support wars: bestial wars like the Nazi one, class wars, or wars of national liberation where women took their role in the rebellion of the oppressed. Hostility to war has also characterised the history of other oppressed groups - the lower classes for instance who were nearly always "persuaded" to go to the slaughter through the threat of execution and military tribunals rather than out of ideology and ritual.

One thing is very clear, something that my experience first as a woman then as a Marxist has definitely convinced me. Disarming the oppressed is the first elementary precaution any ruler tries to carry out. The mildness, the wish for peace and the non-aggression of women are also and more certainly the consequence of oppression. If the objective of a political protagonist/subject is liberation then our own values have to be developed within this framework.

Women have a great need for their own aggression for their own wars because sexual peace, like social/industrial peace in the last analysis leaves existing conditions unchanged.

In any case, the reason why today you often find women in the leadership of struggles for peace is the same for which they are often at the head of other struggles - because of their radicalism and militancy. Becoming political protagonists tends to overturn in practice their values which become the opposite of what oppression had imposed.

The "symbolic mother" of the feminine political protagonist/subject must be in my opinion the god Kali. A mother that generates but also destroys, who kills the old so that the new can be born. You cannot build a new world without destroying the old.

### **The gender difference theory that we do need**

It seems to me at this point that the nature of the problem raised by the neo-gender difference theorists can be clarified. Existing gender difference cannot be taken up as a value nor can one deduce from it a specific femininity, an official code of femininity, a prefiguration of its expression in thought and the world. It is precisely because nature is intertwined with history and the history of women is a history of deep and total oppression, that there is a permanent risk confirmed by the "gender difference theory" of idealising it, of repositing the values created by oppression, of bringing back through the window everything which feminism has managed to throw out by the front door.

Existing gender difference can be taken up as a basic reality to be interpreted and understood. Indeed there is an unsaid, unknown gender difference that is translated into male language or completely ignored. To understand themselves women must do research in history, in anthropology, psychoanalysis, biology, mythology etc. But this is a long and complex work that cannot be taken on by the vanguard of political women. The latter can integrate certain data into its work with the understanding of the reciprocal autonomy of the fields of scientific research and political theory and practice.

Another of the least positive and least useful characteristics of the "theory of gender difference" is the jumping from one field to other problems and discourses, shifting from psychoanalysis to philosophy and then from philosophy to politics without the necessary mediations. A revolutionary discovery like the evolution of the species through natural selection, becomes a socially conservative ideology when it is used to read and interpret quite a different question - oppression and class conflict.

Existing gender differences can be taken up as a working hypothesis, as an explanation of the historical mission of women: through their own liberation women will liberate ideas and society from their one-sidedness, from their expression of the needs and the projections of only one of the two sexes.

But only when women are able to be no longer ideologically inferior in all the fields of activity of the species will it be possible to say what gender difference consists of. This will only be when women

have succeeded in freeing themselves from gender difference as an oppression, then difference will be seen and expressed as an antidote to male prejudice. We are not talking here of a pure bio-psychic fact (in the forms and limits in which this exists), it will be a new reality inextricably linked to history and read in the light of another history which women will have to be part of. This gender difference cannot be revealed, unearthed or theorised today for the simple reason that it does not exist or has only begun to exist. It is at the beginning of its formation.

On the other hand the gender difference that can be taken up today as a value (because it can already be expressed but not as an oppression -oppression itself is reversed into its opposite) is the gender difference in the road to liberation, the gender difference of the political subject [°protagonist/being].

One of the expressions of projecting oneself as an autonomous political subject is the pride of being what one is, the consciousness of the subversive force acquired from existing gender difference.

But if this is the case then the ideological construction of the "theory of gender difference" falls apart. I have already explained why I think the development of women as political subjects/protagonists must involve an immediate overturning of values whereas the ideology of gender difference takes on those values in their initial position, they are statically projected into theory and political practice.

The framework for the development of women as political subjects does not only involve an overturning of values. The fields of inquiry change as does the relationship with the male world, the criteria for the choice of language, the conceptual categories, the tasks etc.

Categories like parallel symbolic order, trust in sisterhood, homologation; an anti-equalitarian polemic that is not just a criticism of the abstract equality of bourgeois legality; a feminine liberty that does not arise from the liberation of other women could perhaps be functional for other ideologies of gender difference but not for ours.

The attempt to give other meanings to the theory of gender difference as we have seen in the discussion and some documents from the PRC (Party of Communist Refoundation) are limited because they create a contradiction between words and things which ends up leaving in a mistaken limbo our tasks and their political/organisational form, pushing them continually towards the framework of the other theory of gender difference where words and what they refer to have quite another coherence.

## **ELITES AND ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS**

When I state that the neo-theory of gender difference expresses the needs of a social group different from the one that can take on the task of developing again the role of women as political subjects [°protagonists/beings] I am not repositing the distinction between petit-bourgeois feminism and proletarian feminism, which is a mistaken sociological rather than a political way of approaching the question. I am really referring to a difference between elites and organic intellectuals which in this historical period is being posed in different forms for all the oppressed.

It seems to me that the neo-theory of gender difference expresses above all the present conditions of intellectuals. Any type of social mandate has been taken away from them from both the employers and the oppressed. The white male boss now needs specialists in communication. The oppressed have been weakened by the events of recent years.

Intellectuals are thinking for themselves, they are developing ideologies and theories for themselves and this isolation, this forced egocentrism (that is not individual but historically determined) is reflected in their theoretical/ideological work.

We also see reflected in the theory of gender difference the specific conditions of intellectuals who come from oppressed minorities and sexes. Their presence in universities and culture is the product of struggle and ideological changes. The pride of their difference is brought into their ideas. It is a strong symbol which gives prestige to all those who are members of a minority or the oppressed sex (the other sexes are naturally lesbians and gays).

Complexity is very much part of the theoretical/ideological work done by the difference theorists. On the one hand I do not think it really reflects a specific identity and culture but rather a combination of elements from male, European culture (particularly structuralism). On the other hand it is not very functional to the needs of the ethnic minorities, women and gays/lesbians. In fact it can create confusion and difficulties.

I know little of this phenomenon but there are striking analogies with the theory of gender difference with its complexity and criticisms. However it would be incorrect to give a single judgment on all the neo-difference theories especially because of the diverse nature and forms of oppression. However it seems to me that in an absolutely new way we are seeing the contradiction between the needs of particular individuals coopted into the white-male-bosses system and those of the marginalised and excluded masses.

Traditional feminists and the black movement in the United States were perfectly aware and concerned that strong symbols are double-edged swords because they are also symbols for the other side, they are used both to signify a coming liberation and to express the ongoing oppression.

The uncertainty of women comrades who identify with the theory of gender difference about the priority of the task of liberation shows that these concerns were well founded.

## **The philosophical foundations of gender difference**

Placing oneself in the framework of developing an autonomous political subject °protagonist/being] also means prioritising some specific fields of inquiry.

First of all it means that while it is useful and legitimate that women who work or have interests in philosophy gather together their research in that field it does not mean that this is the priority theoretical field for women's political intervention. Not because philosophy is a world of abstraction and politics is "effective reality" but because philosophy, while it is not ideology, can mean only one thing now - there is a difference in how women and men think. This is said in such a way as to fail to unravel even one of the key questions in the discussion.

Or at least this applies to the idea I have of philosophy and which I cannot renounce.

Speaking philosophically difference can only start from one phenomenon - the consciousness of difference that has always been and remains deeply and keenly felt. The strength of the theory of gender difference is also tied up with this, every woman feels and knows she is different, a different being. The mistake of "equality" is a thin skin that soon breaks when the conviction ends that to say one is equal is the best way to make one's life better.

Paraphrasing a philosopher dear to the theory of gender difference I would say that to understand



difference, you have to shift the attention on to the person who is asking questions about gender difference. I have to ask myself why do women feel different where does this belief come from and to what extent does it correspond with reality? The answer comes from daily life, from lived experience, from women's experience. Under this heading of experience I would put everything: her private life, her life as a worker, the historical forms in which the male world is organised and the image of herself that this world provides, her body and the symbolisation she derives from it etc. An analysis of existence, that feminism has already done to a large extent and under the same heading we can put the consciousness and statistics of the conditions of women in factories. I think women feel different above all because their lives and experiences are different.

This idea can also be seen in the documents that the Italian neo-gender difference theorists identify with as their founding texts but in the present theoretical work (at least that which has produced schools of thought and ideologies) some of the worst things from existentialism are brought up, for example the idea of a total trust in sisterhood, tying one's fate totally to the community of women (*affidamento*), one of the few in Heidegger's philosophical discourse that can in some sense justify his political choices. "I do not believe I have rights" is a statement by Carla Lonzi in her book, "Sputiamo su Hegel" (spit on Hegel) which seems particularly lucid to me, also because she does not counterpose equality and difference as other women who support the theory of gender difference systematically do.

*"Equality is a judicial principle: the common denominator present in every human being to whom justice should be rendered. Difference is an existential principle which is about the ways of being human, the peculiarity of human experience, its finality, its openings, the sense of existence in a given situation and in a situation we would want to produce. The difference between men and women is the basic difference of humanity."*

But here we are in quite a different period of Italian history, difference theory had not become neo-difference theory and the wind from France was blowing us the ideas of De Beauvoir and not those of Irigaray.

The relationship between being and consciousness is found in existence itself, in all the experiences of daily life; women's thought is different for the simple fact that her existence is different.

This is evidently not just the case for the sexes but is also for classes. When Marx abandoned the philosophy from which he took the idea of dialectic, his research focused implicitly (his desire to develop a political subject impelled him to no longer concern himself with philosophy) on the field of human relations, of experiences, the transformations of human acts and needs in culture, ideology and symbols. He therefore focussed on the terrain where it is possible to link up with anthropology, psychoanalysis and some of the best elements of existentialism.

It has already been said that there is an "anthropological continuity" going from Feuerbach to Marx and we might add this has been by an large unexplored as with many of the theoretical problems which Marxism should have dealt with. But this link up has partially taken place in feminism, especially with De Beauvoir. We are paraphrasing De Beauvoir when we say women are born and become different and not Irigaray who says precisely the contrary.

The consciousness of the new lower classes which Marx investigated, the proletariat born in the industrial revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, derived in the first place from a change in its conditions of existence. The concentration of workers in big industrial complexes and the work organisation, dependence on machines, the fact that the other pole of conflict was the real boss of society, trade union organisation and struggles, the relationship with revolutionary intellectuals etc... are the specific experiences that made class consciousness possible.

The foundation of the relationship between being and consciousness deprived the dialectic (which remained valid in many respects) of any possible aspect of necessity. The necessity feature of the dialectic has a sense if you presuppose a oneness of thought. Hegel looked for a law internal to the transformations of culture and found it in a sort of continuous transcending of ideas when they reached their own limits. The overturning of this framework by Marx (through Feuerbach) and particularly the understanding that ideas have to be interpreted in their relationship with people in flesh and blood and with their needs, denied the oneness of thought and instead ties it to the different conditions of life of different classes. It presupposes therefore that history is the product of different ideas/thought and the conflict between them, behind which there is naturally class differences.

So the outcome of the conflict is not a necessity or inevitable.

The limits of working class consciousness can be found in experience, especially in the limits the other pole of the productive process, the class enemy with its consciousness, imposes on workers' experience. As a limit imposed on the consciousness of the other we must also recognise the phenomenon of bureaucracy. More simply: history has up to now demonstrated that the experiences made by the bourgeoisie produces a stronger and more stable class consciousness than that of the working class. These points do have something to do with women's thought. If we draw the conclusion that a different existence gives us a different way of thinking, then in reality we have not said anything that is useful for women to go beyond, we can only repeat ad infinitum that there is a gender difference.

Philosophy does not in fact sustain the existence of bio-psychoanalytical factors linked to sex or sexuality. Philosophy does not save me from understanding the the different thought of women, which is the recurrent reason of all male humour against us. Even less do I think this gender difference can be the basis of an autonomous political subject, of a self-consciousness. In history only some differences have produced (and then only in a partial and intermittent way) a consciousness adequate to changing people's conditions and the relations with the rest of the world.

To find out about the things philosophy cannot tell me I have to look elsewhere.

To know what I am particularly interested in, if my objective is the autonomous political protagonist/subject, I need to look necessarily and as a priority into history. Only an adequately understood and assimilated history will tell me when, in what conditions, in what relationship with the male world and with what cultural, political and organisational expressions women have been political subjects/protagonists. We need to see the periods and forms in which the demand for liberation has been expressed, the need to decide for ourselves and to have a role in history and culture.

You cannot analyse the foundations of sexual conflict philosophically ,in other words you cannot make a philosophy of history if this history remains mainly unknown and misunderstood. To know it and to understand it also means being able to come to another phase in the field of philosophy with a proberb or expell women from the labour force according to the needs of production.

The second limit is to do with men from the working class who continued to oppress women and men from the more radical left who did not take into account the strength of patriarchal ideology and often reproduced the worse forms of it within its own ranks.

For women equality remained an asbtraction that had to be concretised in reality : there are not equal opportunities for work, there are not equal possibilities to take on certain roles or enter important professions, there is not the same freedom to use their own time or to dedicate

themselves to philosophy, politics or science.

What does it mean to say women are equal to men? No obviously we are talking of two different things. Women are different but can demand that their difference is recognised as of equal value, equal rights to life/existence and equal possibility of achievement.

Maybe it worth asking ourselves if it has always been correct to pose women's demands in terms of equality, using a term that creates a conceptually incorrect and even offensive superimposition. The answer is that the value of words, their sense and their utility are produced by history. The idea of equality has had a great subversive and innovatory force in history.

Can the idea of gender difference take on today the same polemical, subversive and innovative value? In narrow progressive circles the answer is obviously yes. The intervention of women as political subject/protagonist has already had a clarifying function.

But what about in the rest of society?

Equality was a new idea that broke with centuries, millenia of hierarchical ideology. Gender difference however has an alter ego, that has lived too long in the popular imagination and that more recent political events have awakened.

Women's needs are always more constrained and undefined within a generic and ambivalent idea like equality but they will not be better represented in the other framework. It is possible that simple paradigms no longer exist or that women must find another one but simple paradigms with a positive force do not emerge in periods like the present one. Finally there is a value within the idea of equality that is not just polemical or limited to specific needs or to particular historical periods. For a difference to become a value it needs to be recognised as fully part of the the field of equality. Intolerance of diversity and not being able to respect it is above all an inability to think in terms of equality, a deficit of equalitarian culture. This can be seen by the fact that the worst intolerance towards differences comes from the rightist difference ideologists, not from the equalitarian left (if there still is one). The same culture produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the idea of equality and the *Lettres Persannes* °note needed -tr], the first text in which the reciprocal character of gender difference was explored. Whenever there is oppression fundamentally there is a refusal to think of the oppressor and the oppressed as equal. Whenever equalitarianism is devalued the values of differences are put forward more strongly. The more that equalitarianism recedes the more that differences are presented in terms of the alter ego of the popular fantasies given flesh and blood by Bossi (leader of the populist Lega Nord) or Le Pen.

### **Symbolic Mother and total identity in sisterhood (affidamento)**

The objective of the parallel symbolic universe does not have in itself any political specificity. In reality it indicates, if the expression has any meaning, a long historical process, that involves dozens of generations of women, unfolding in the most diverse cultural fields. It will be the project of another women's existence and experience. The history of men will condition it very strongly (and perhaps constrain it to retreat for decades) and its future success is uncertain.

Setting a political objective means drawing up the coordinates of this process and outlining another way - hopefully - forward. We must take up again a feminist approach which combines criticism of ideology, cultural and symbolic battles, material gains, bringing broader layers of women into action, building up small or big autonomous structures, internal or external to the party according to concrete possibilities. There is no magic key, figure or code that allows us to avoid the risk and

bother of intervening within history and with the male world. Femininity will not be revealed through any sort of ritual in which we make ourselves into priestesses.

It is absolutely indispensable to recuperate a sense of the specificity of the political. In this work of building a "parallel symbolic order" women who work in political structures, in a mixed organisation but also in a female only political organisation, have their tasks and specific languages. To intervene politically as women still means you have to be politically active - to establish relations with social sectors, to relate to needs, to change the relationship of forces, to raise political problems, perhaps in a new language but which still has a political sense.. We are especially talking here of redefining the character, scope and use of terms.

The terms *affidamento* [total identity and trust in sisterhood] and symbolic mother usually refer to different questions and demands that cannot be resolved with the same formulae because the real meanings are different.

Here reference is being made to a demand for women to have authority, prestige, influence and power that is lacking or absent in society. It defers problems of liberation, of women's presence, of changing the quality of their existence, of criticising ideology, of feminine symbolic projection within culture realisable in a long and complex historical process.

In this sense the Mother can symbolise another authority, *Enfantin*, a utopian socialist put on trial for feminism in 1830 put it this way: "The reign of women is approaching, the Mother of all Men and all Women will appear...For Life is about women and men." (Benoite Groult *Le Feminisme au masculine*).

But with the same term a solution is offered to a concrete political problem - the development of a feminine vanguard. This approach is a significant optical reversal - the consequence of political organisation, the emergence of leaders, is exchanged for a functional instrument. The Mother therefore becomes only an authoritarian symbol and takes on an ideological meaning similar to the way Stalin used the term Father of the Russian people.

The optical reversal is not a coincidence since for the theorists of "gender difference" the objective of a parallel symbolic order has a different meaning to the historical process I have discussed and from the type of consciousness partially expressed by the vanguard and the organic intellectuals.

It means building a separate microcosm of women in which hierarchies, values and culture turned on its head are artificially reproduced. A world where the very separateness guarantees a blockade against any male symbols. Within this logic *affidamento* [total identity/trust with sisterhood] has a less generic meaning from that which is generally used by women activists and it reveals the philosophical if not political thinking of the women who have coined the term.

*Affidamento* [total identity/trust with sisterhood] is a Heideggerian expression meaning to share the fate of the community to which one belongs. It can have a profoundly reactionary meaning (in Heidegger's case it was even worse). When women use it is only conservative - it is the existing difference without any overturning or dialectic.

The parable of Madame du Deffand and of Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse, which has circulated in photocopied versions, deserves a lot more analysis than I can give now. It is the story of the split between two women because of the decision by the youngest to go and get involved with the party of philosophers, against the will of her friend and protector. And the younger woman is criticised for not having negotiated her freedom from the other woman, at the time when politics was moving from the salons (places of women's power and pleasure) to the outside, to circles no longer

accessible to them.

Mademoiselle de L'Espinasse's choice I think expresses rather the contradictory path taken by female liberation - an uncomfortable but inevitable phase. The break with those places reserved for women, the entry into the male world, the inevitable risk however of homologation.

In any case this has been the road taken by feminism if the logic of its history is read and understood. But up to what point can we refer to feminism when we talk about the "theory of gender difference"?

We have to also ask ourselves - what use has all this been other than providing sharp discussions in recent years.

It has not responded to the real needs of women. Not just to the demands for work or for social services but even in symbolic battles like around the Anita Hill case in the USA.

In Italy we have seen the tortuous passage of the law against sexual violence, now dispersed in much conflict; a trial has opened that has put the question of abortion rights back on the agenda and revealed the contradictions of the 194 law; everyday there are episodes showing contempt and discrimination against women. I am not saying there is a particular interest on these questions. Nor are there new gains in the analysis of feminine existence or criticism of the male world. We can only continue to set out the need for this.

Finally, this complex ideological structure seems to have especially the function of bringing together and providing reciprocal support for women. If the period does not offer much more (but is this true?), then this is already something, because it is correct that women help and support each other, particularly through getting other women in positions in all mixed organisations and institutions.

But on certain conditions: anybody can be recalled from any position -this is the opposite of leadership roles that have paternal or maternal attributes; the respect for other women, that the winning of positions must not mean trampling on everyone else, which is done if the task of liberation is undervalued or if old stereotypes are reproduced; the understanding that problem of the female political subject/protagonist requires that redefinition of objectives, values, fields of inquiry and language which I have talked about from my own inseparable experience, as a woman and as a Marxist.

**Lidia Cirillo**

---

**P.S.**

\* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

---

**Footnotes**

[1] Luce Irigaray, author, best known for *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977). For a further discussion of Irigaray's ideas see Josette Trat ["On the theory of sexual difference."](#)

[2] The Party of Communist Refoundation, which emerged from the break up of the former Italian Communist Party and in which the members of the Italian section of the Fourth International were active between 1997 and 2007.

[3] Journal of the Italian Fourth Internationalists.