

Young Women's Subjectivities and New Feminisms in the Neo-Liberal Age

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The generations of young women raised between the last decade of last century and this century inherited from second wave feminism (the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s), the expression of subjectivity as a taken for granted right. Nonetheless, there are important differences between the ways in which women who considered themselves a part of the second wave of the feminist movement used this right and its dynamics today, in a time when the neo-liberal values of the market and of individualization, of the emphasis on freedom of choice and enjoyment, redefine the meaning of agency (and of the political) for everyone, but for young women in a special way. For women in the 1970s, expressing their own subjectivity was first of all a political issue as it was able to bring the dominant social roles back into question (Ferree and Hess 2000; Bertolotti and Scattigno 2005), but new scenarios take shape for women in younger generations. The following notes are intended to pause upon these transformations, to draw attention to the importance of placing the subjectivity and ambivalences its expression entails at the center of analysis.¹

Subjectivity and the women's movement

While identity is an issue viewed as part of social sciences' tradition, and gender identities were analyzed and widely debated in the late 20th century, subjectivity has usually remained excluded from this analysis. Analyses of modernity have focused on the triumph of rationality and disenchantment, marginalizing the subjective dimension. In this frame, subjectivity is generally considered as the equivalent of the subject's intimate dimension, a manifestation of its consciousness, and therefore stripped of any social meanings. According to Martuccelli (2002, 437), on the contrary, subjectivity and the social world are strictly connected as the first is "marked by the ideal of a domain of self subtracted to the social". In other words, subjectivity is fully expressed where public identities are brought into question. This dynamic, and the significant role it plays in creatively reworking existing

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social conditions, rose to the fore with the movements of the 1960s and 1970s—the students' movement and feminism in particular.

Second wave feminism broke the male monopoly on subjectivity and focused public attention on women's ability to reject any form of social fixity, including identitarian and institutional fixity. The political nature of this exercise of subjectivity is thus obvious. No connotation of introspection and intimacy can be related to it. Thanks to this collective and political exercise, subjectivity is about more than just forming a personal critique of the social world; it is connected to a genuine project of the self. This is in turn necessarily bound up with forming a relationship with otherness. Indeed, it is the exercise of subjectivity that enables people to relate to others.

Above all, for the women involved in second wave feminism, subjectivity comes about thanks to relationships with other women; through the communication, dialog, and "thinking and acting together" that these enable. And through these relationships the bond between the body, sexuality, and the construction of new forms of knowledge, capable of challenging established knowledge of the social world, can be explored.

This subjectivity finds its strategic arena for expression in the public sphere. As it has been so often underlined, the personal dimension is far removed from the intimate sphere of life ("the personal is political"). The personal is inseparable from the political, being a strategic arena for political action, as the patriarchal oppression and power dynamics that underpin it are reproduced in the personal sphere. For the women's movement subjectivity is an explicit form of resistance to the normalization of behaviors. Involving the subjective viewpoint is a way to challenge dominant world visions and belief systems.

As Martuccelli (2002) points out, reflexivity and subjectivity appear to be inseparably linked. On a general level, in the women's movement reflexivity is an everyday social practice that changes the relationship with action. Women treat themselves and their status as an object of knowledge, thus making room for forms of experience capable of challenging power relations. In a nutshell, reflexivity enables subjectivity to distance itself from givens. Forms of knowledge that are produced in this way, shaped by a critical vision of the self and one's social setting, represent an opportunity to gain control over one's life and rethink one's political role. Reflexivity thus reinforces the arena of subjectivity through an ongoing process of critical formulation.

The method of self-awareness practiced by the women's movement in the 1970s, and centered around starting from one's experiences, effectively exemplifies both the bond between the personal and the political, and the strict link between subjectivity and reflexivity. This shapes the critique of the capitalist society through which women define themselves as subjects.

These remarks set out to highlight the strands that link the second and third waves of feminism. These strands, given the known differences between the two waves (Gillies, Howie and Munford 2007), are distinguished by a common reference to the assertion of subjectivity even though in a very different social scenario. This is characterized, especially in southern Europe (Murgia and Poggio 2014), by widespread job insecurity even for highly-educated young people. In recent years, for example, the numerous organized groups of young feminists in precarious jobs (e.g., Sexyshock, Fiorelle, Sconvegno, Precas: see Fantone 2011b, 32) in Italy, probably the backbone of feminism in the new century (Fantone 2007; Galetto et al. 2007; Reale, 2008), describe themselves as a "plurality of

subjectivities in relation”, and “unclassifiable subjects”. Through this description they wish to indicate their separation from institutional politics and other institutional expressions. They lay claim to multiple belongings, fragmented identities, and forms of organization that are experimental and open. Individuals can belong to one group or another, but are free to experiment when it comes to politics.

These young feminists describe their subjectivities as “nomadic” (Braidotti 2011) and exploit their employment insecurity as leverage for the exercise of subjectivity. In the groups, which do not have (do not want to have and do not intend to create) a collective identity, diverse identities come together. What connects the young women in each group is a common culture based on the recognition of diversity and their self-determination as subjects. Where identities exist they are not set in stone but positively asserted as mutable. They arise from practices of creative experimentation, like those developed by the queer movement for example. The imagination comes to the fore, challenging stereotypes and conventional mind sets. What these practices have in common is taking a critical distance from the existing world through irony, avoiding self-pity for the problems occasioned by existential precariousness, the so-called “victim mentality” often attributed to second wave feminism. This precariousness thus reveals ambivalent traits: while it is bound up with a negative lexicon (Morini, Karls, and Armani 2014) such as instability, impermanence, fragility, on the other hand it is linked with an idea of flux, possibility, and redefinition. By definition these practices are immersed in the present and do not look to the future; they have to enable, above all, forms of self-narrative able to guarantee self-recognition. In the foreground there is a resilient subjectivity that tries to resist the attempts to assimilate it.

The link between these different subjectivities, for which the web is the chosen political tool, is their common reference to a life shaped by intermittent work (a condition that is both personal and generational), by financial freedom that is extremely difficult to obtain, but also the idea that “the pleasurable is political” (Jamie Pond). And also, the ability to recognize one another, and to attribute value one another.

Most of these women do not call themselves feminists (with many actively rejecting the label: see Aronson 2003); and when the term is used it is in the plural (they talk about feminisms), in order to avoid pigeonholing, labels and limitations. Yet they do assert their generation as a political generation, in search of new practices and new modes of expression for the political. Unlike the women of the second wave, these young women no longer define themselves in relation to the world of men; it is their own subjectivity that defines them.

New gender identities, new gendered subjectivities

The analysis by the Norwegian scholars Bjerrum Nielsen and Monica Rudberg (1994), of the various historical stages in the construction of gender identity, gives us a useful analytical framework to complete the reflections on young women’s subjectivities. According to these scholars, in the second half of the last century, at least up to the 1970s, the phase of gender polarization was followed by a stage of open gender battle that we can link to so-called second wave feminism. The following phase, the one we are currently in, is instead centered on the process of female individualization, which can in a way be linked to third wave feminism.

As highlighted by Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2003) among others, the prevailing desire among generations of young women in recent decades is that of building “a life of one’s own”: no longer exclusively bound up with the family, but centered around the individual, a life that can also be constructed without a stable male presence. In the temporal architecture that is thus defined, a strategic role is played by “time for oneself”—time devoted to the subjective exploration of one’s own needs and desires outside a logic of self-sacrifice (Bryson 2007, 134–136; Odih 1999; Piazza 2006). It follows that women are plagued not only by continuing worries over achieving the right work-life balance, so elusive especially in southern European countries; for younger women, the main concern seems to be achieving recognition of their right to be present in various different worlds simultaneously, without necessarily having to choose one or another: in other words, without being denied the right to exercise active ambivalence (Libreria delle Donne 2008).

Nielsen and Rudberg’s reflections (1994) offer another valid element when it comes to concluding our analysis. Although their considerations relate to the 1990s, they include many of the characteristics highlighted in contemporary studies and empirical researches concerning young women. To comprehend processes of social change as intertwined with gender relations, the Norwegian academics suggest taking three different aspects into account: *gender identity* (the gender I have), *gender subjectivity* (the gender I am) and the social and cultural resources that the environment offers to express these. The generation of women growing up in the 1940s and 1950s experienced the contradiction between a modernized gender identity and a lack of adequate social and cultural resources to implement it. The generation of young women growing up in the 1960s and 1970s had to come to terms with a different contradiction, namely between a modernized gender identity and a subjectivity still linked to the relationship with the male sphere. Second wave feminism broke this bond, enabling young women to practice self-determination in full. Starting from this time, the “assumption that women do not need a career because they derive their livelihood from a man, as well as a complete identity from the heterosexual nuclear family has been challenged” (Harris 2004: 6).

The contemporary generations of young women therefore feel able to act in complete freedom. Characterized by a strong need for independence, these young women set out to leave the mark of their subjectivity on the world (Thomson 2009). However, the life plans to which the new levels of education lend legitimacy are beginning to come up against limitations, clashing with the lack of social resources available to enable this form of self-expression. While they cultivate the belief that they can fulfill their objectives with no impediments whatsoever, the generations we are talking about are starting to experience increasingly adverse conditions in reality. The employment precariousness we talked about earlier effectively exemplifies these limitations.

With reference to the ideal type of young woman of these last generations, Nielsen and Rudberg write: “She wants everything and believes she can do anything. But is that possible?” (1994: 111). These are the women of “making it”: intended as the art of inventing oneself and solving one’s own problems. Self-fulfillment is considered exclusively an issue of individual responsibility, the product of a do-it-yourself attitude. While inequalities of class and race continue to exert a concrete influence on people’s lives, the “can-do girl” ideology is taking hold.

Concluding remarks

For some time now the young women of Europe have been getting to grips with these cultural representations, now increasingly explicitly bound up with the neo-liberal ideal of a flexible, self-governing, and self-realizing individual. In this scenario, as emphasized by Wyn and Dwyer (1999), it is therefore fundamental that researchers do not remain anchored to issues that only marginally affect the lives of young men and women today (for example the question of citizenship in abstract terms). Young women's subjectivities call for the creation of a different agenda of issues; taking account, for example, of their deferral of long-term relationships and their later-life motherhood; of their wish, and need, of social recognition here and now (starting from the social networks: see e.g., Mainardi 2015).

After reflecting on the many aspects and nuances of young women's existential conditions and experiences, Anita Harris (2004: 186) writes: "it is important to honor young women's own capacities to make positive meaning in their lives, to enjoy the agency they have, and to respect their strategies for doing the best they can". Those who recognize themselves in this exhortation feel themselves part of the job of defending young women's choices of self-determination. These choices are realized despite the heavy threat, which young women experience daily, of an uncertain and ever more presentified existence, the result of the new capitalist economy and of neo-liberal values of efficiency, competition, and speed that accompany them.

This process, as is known, can create the conditions for an annulment of critical thought, and can preclude the elaboration of collective responses. If this does not happen and, instead, types of social critique and openly gendered mobilizations grow, it is certainly thanks to the specific ability of new generations of young women to express forms of political subjectivity (Magaraggia e Vingelli 2015), in particular through forms of presence on the public space connected to the fight against precariousness and the oppression of institutional identities.

As has been underlined (Harris and Dubson, 2015; McRobbie, 2007), this representation can easily be confused with the neo-liberal ideal of a flexible individual, who is always able to self-govern, despite external circumstances. An ungendered individual, who looks with detachment upon group movements, and considers his/herself self-sufficient; who does not recognize the power that social structures have in conditioning life paths; who considers political mobilization superfluous. In this respect, it is important to be aware of that which Angela McRobbie (2007) defines as the "new sexual contract" according to which the new degrees of freedom young girls have, together with access to consumer culture, are today exchanged with the marginal role assigned to a critical vision of the relationships of power. Being aware of this risk, and of the ambivalence that marks the expression of subjectivity by young women of recent generations, can help us to better understand the "indirect" character of some forms of resistance that they express, and the redefinition of politics they practice.

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