

Beyond the Obvious: Whose Gender Studies?

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The situation of gender studies in Italy is still quite troubling for a number of reasons, but in this brief commentary I will touch on only one from the standpoint of a political philosopher who also teaches gender studies (*studi di genere*). To come directly to the point, the most urgent question to address, if we really want gender-sensitive research to develop across disciplines, concerns who is entitled to perform that kind of research and *for whom*. In fact, I find that if we try to “move beyond the obvious”, as the subheading of our international seminar suggested, we discover that Italian gender studies is still dominated by certain implicit presuppositions concerning the kind of people fully entitled to become researchers in gender issues. Such presuppositions may also become, if unwittingly, a powerful means to exclude all non-fitting people through a mild form of epistemicide by the part of the relating “scientific community”, one of whose tasks is to police the borders of admissible knowledge about “gender”. I will try to briefly argue for the previous statements, although I am very well aware that a much more detailed analysis would be needed, moving from my personal experience as a researcher and teacher in the field. As far as I see it, anyone should be entitled in principle to engage in Gender Studies and gender-sensitive research, not least because all of us *are assigned, are, have, and perform* a (particular kind of) gender. Moreover, both gender studies and gender-sensitive research should be performed in principle in the service of all concrete individuals, in that they also *are assigned, are, have, and perform* a (particular kind of) gender. However, this is not what happens, at least not in Italy, where gender research seems to have become, and still is a prerogative of “women”, both as researchers and as a target group. In a sense, it could probably be stated that in Italy (although not only) gender studies and women’s studies run often the risk of overlapping, with the result that the very term “gender” becomes an equivalent for “women”.

As a philosopher, I find that the most dangerous outcome of such an overlap is that this renders it no longer necessary just to “move beyond the obvious” in order to give a precise definition of the two notions, let alone of their privileged relationship, to the extent that when you say the word “genere” (gender) the image immediately is evoked of “donna” (woman), without any doubts that all the speakers and listeners immediately understand what properly a “woman” is and therefore also what “gender” means.

This implies that if you are usually identified by others as a woman, as happens to me, no one asks you anymore if you are satisfied with such an identification, and you become part of the group, without having the possibility to put in question that identification.

Of course this has the advantage of entitling you to “do” gender studies, because you have the right *physique du rôle*, so to speak. But the other side of the coin is that if you dare to question that original “obvious” identification you immediately find yourself marginalized. To give only one instance, it may happen because you feel a much greater affinity with research and teaching fields such as queer and transgender theories that refuse sexual and gender binaries and hence a stable and definite identification as one sex and one gender of the only two currently allowed. In short, it is my contention that far from being open to all possible *genders*, gender studies are generally the realm of researchers who are identified or (accept to) self-identify as women.

It would not be so difficult for anyone interested in the matter to find out that the overwhelming majority of those engaging in gender studies are identified or self-identify as women, as it is the case with the members of the various research centers, institutions, journals, etc., in which the words “gender” or “genere” appear. When conferences, workshops, and seminars are held on “gender issues,” it usually happens that the vast majority of speakers, as well as most of the audience, are “women”. This has the side-effect of reaffirming the by now stereotypical idea that “gender issues” are something pertaining primarily or especially to women, something that is “reserved” for them, because the addressed issues are “women’s issues” or issues on which women give their (womanly) point of view when relating to the only other accepted gender, that is to say “men”. It might seem strange that women themselves do not fight against such an automatic and uncritical association between gender and women, but here a political philosopher may have something appropriate to say. As a matter of fact, that association reinforces the sense of belonging to an identity group, that of “women”, which can be put in the service of an identity politics activated by, and targeted to, women in order to promote and campaign for women-oriented policies under the label of “gender-oriented policies”.

The same goes with the audience that gender studies, and generally gender issues, are able to attract in Italy. The students attending my classes are almost all women (at least at first sight), even if my radical and unconventional position is well known and the classes themselves include lectures and activities on queer theories, transgender theories, (critical) disability studies, Crip theories, as well as on non-mainstream case studies, such as sadomasochism, disability, sexuality, intersexuality and the like. The same happens when I give lectures or seminars in other universities, or in courses on, say, gender violence: the vast majority of the people looking at me can be inserted, according to the prevailing sexual and gender norms for stereotypical classification, in the category of women. Now, I must confess that this is a problem to me, urging me to ask *why* it is (still) so. I am aware that I could find a reassuring answer in putting the blame on the so-called patriarchal society, which keeps “men” far from gender issues because they are none of their business. I might also find some relief in believing that things will change in the future, as soon as “women” succeed in dismantling that society and in convincing “men” that being gender-sensitive is also in their interest.

Unfortunately, these and similar answers are not enough to me and asking “Why?” immediately brings me back to the questions of “who” and “for whom”, and hence to the responsibility of those who “do” gender studies in deconstructing the stereotypical association between gender and women. In fact, a great part of the difficulties that gender studies are currently undergoing in Italy lies in a widespread defensive and exclusive, if

not “isolationist”, attitude by the part of many women researchers. This does not mean that people not identified as women are banished, but that those perceived as “outsiders” are requested to follow the rules set up by the in-group of women regarding the correct way to perform research about gender issues and the results it should achieve. I tend to suppose that this holds true also for the few “men” researching gender issues, although I would prefer reading, and listening to, what they have to say about the issue, before taking a position. Be it as it may, such an attitude lets some unintended consequences emerge that make the theoretical and political potential of gender studies vanish. I will mention only two of them.

The first has to do with the reaction by those who are not engaged in, or are suspicious toward, gender studies, especially people identified or self-identified as “men”. The association between gender and women, as well as the above-mentioned defensive attitude, may and do have the undesired outcome to reinforce the idea that “gender affairs” are actually “women’s affairs” and that therefore men should rather keep at arm’s length, so to speak. This is something quite typical of an oppositional group-dynamics such as the one currently at play both within academic circles and the wider public discourse when it comes to gender issues. In other terms, when women researchers reiterate the idea that the primary focus of the discipline should be women, though adding that this does not mean to exclude men, they are giving men good reasons not only to consider gender as a womanly affair, but even not to feel themselves curious to better understand what “gender” is about, eventually becoming interested in gender by being explicitly involved on equal terms.

In a sense, then, I am suggesting that the lack of “men’s” involvement in developing gender studies might be ascribed, at least partially, to an inability to show how gender affects *all of us* in that it is a social construction of roles, practices, and so on to which *all of us* have been, are being, and will be subject to, independently of our anatomy.

But this cannot be done until women themselves give up the association between gender as a general category and only one particular gender. Until then, things will not change that much, for all the attempts to dismantle “patriarchal society” through gender/women-oriented policies, laws, and rules.

The second unintended consequence has to do with the exclusion of people who, like me, maintain that gender studies can show its usefulness and potential only if it is able to open to a pluralism of genders, by shifting to “genders” studies. And I must also confess that sometimes I wonder if it would not be rather the case to simply overcome this by now seemingly exploited discipline to replace it with something different. What leads me to this discomforting conclusion is something my personal experience of epistemic marginalization simply because I take other theoretical options, such as queer and transgender theories, so seriously as to state that not only genders, but also sexes and sexualities are nothing more than cultural co-constructs built up by people who have the power to do so at the expenses of all those who are still, and will probably remain, a minority. I understand that this form of exclusion originates from the adherence to a notion of (collective) identity functional to the performances required by identity politics, but still I find that this implies diminishing the role of “gender” for a “progressive” politics.

Therefore, I would suggest, by way of a provisional conclusion, that accepting to enter an unbiased dialog with non-mainstream and sometimes even “heretical” positions com-

ing from outside the somehow established front of gender-as-women's-studies could result in building a wider front, more capable to campaign and fight for a greater and greater acknowledgment of the role that gender-sensitive research might play for *all of us*, independently of our identification in a stable identity. This is not meant to imply that "women's issues" should be downplayed or considered irrelevant: just the opposite. It is rather meant to suggest the usefulness of building flexible networks of alliances among different and even divergent approaches to gender issues that will never converge or unify, but would nonetheless be able to fight together toward less and less exclusion. This is also the main goal that I still believe, although from a radically critical perspective, was the one dreamed about by the original pioneers of the notion of gender.