

GC 39235

# Italian Feminist Thought

A Reader

Edited by

*Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp*



*Prof. Demagistris is gently carried to the infirmary after collapsing at the end of her talk on "women teachers as accomplices and sisters in the custody of the female divine symbolic, through the process of 'entrustment, and the refusal of the process of homologation in mixed groups."*

Basil Blackwell

*K 90-9215*

*Karger Libri*

---

## Rivolta Femminile

Rivolta Femminile (Female Revolt) was officially born in July 1970 with the publication of its first manifesto, which the group posted up on the walls of Rome. The text expressed the identity of the group, and, by comparison, that of the women's liberation movement. Shortly after that, the group's members founded their own publishing house, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, in order to circulate their ideas without risking misrepresentation. A few months later *Sputiamo su Hegel* was published, followed in 1971 and 1972 by other texts, which taken together fully signify the positions of the group.

In the meantime the various small groups which together constituted the whole of Rivolta Femminile came into being in different parts of Italy. Each group conducted its research autonomously, following the rhythms and needs of the women who formed it, but the groups also maintained an ongoing dialogue amongst themselves. Their research was for self-awareness: the journey into the self sought a deep internal modification. Discarding all given ideas about women, it questioned the whole cultural tradition, and analysed personal experience.

Thus, Rivolta Femminile has never been interested in political propaganda, in the sense of trying to convince other women to join in an organized movement active on the public scene for social and political change, and the groups have not directly participated in the specific struggles carried on by Italian feminists. Their writings, however, have been greatly influential, in particular those by Carla Lonzi, the founder of the group, who died in 1982; for example, 'Female sexuality and abortion' (included in chapter 11, p. 214), went straight to the crux of the matter, identifying sexuality and its imposed forms as the locus of formation/deformation of women's identity.

As the work carried out by the group was felt to be ready for publication, a new title appeared in the *Libretti Verdi* series ('green books', from the colour of the cover). Since 1980, they have published a new series, called *Prototipi* ('prototypes'), to indicate that each text presents a total reconsideration of the self, and of the issue in question, versus the established ideas in that respect; and also that such reconsideration cannot become a 'model' for subsequent works.

The activities of the publishing house have become more and more central for Rivolta, as a means of giving expression to the range of women's thought, circulating it and making it act in the world, in order to found another culture.

We have chosen to include in this section substantial extracts from *Let's spit on Hegel* and the group's two manifestos.

### MANIFESTO RIVOLTA FEMMINILE, 1970

Will women always be divided one from another? Will they never form a single body?

Olympe de Gouges, 1791

Woman must not be defined in relation to man. This awareness is the foundation of both our struggle and our liberty.

Man is not the model to hold up for the process of woman's self-discovery.

Woman is the other in relation to man. Man is the other in relation to woman. Equality is an ideological attempt to subject woman even further.

The identification of woman with man means annulling the ultimate means of liberation.

Liberation for woman does not mean accepting the life man leads, because it is unlivable; on the contrary, it means expressing her own sense of existence.

Woman as subject does not reject man as subject but she rejects him as an absolute role. In society she rejects him as an authoritarian role.

Up until now the myth that the one complements the other has been used by man to justify his own power.

Women are persuaded from infancy not to take decisions and to depend on a 'capable' and 'responsible' person: father, husband, brother.

The female image with which man has interpreted woman has been his own invention.

Virginity, chastity, fidelity are not virtues; but bonds on which to build and to maintain the institution of the family. Honour is its consequent repressive codification.

In marriage, the woman, deprived of her name, loses her identity, signifying the transfer of property which has taken place between her father and the husband.

She who gives birth is unable to give her name to her children: the woman's right has been coveted by others whose privilege it had become.

We are forced to reclaim as our own the issue of a natural fact.

We identify marriage as the institution that has subordinated woman to male destiny. We are against marriage.

Divorce is a welding of marriages which actually reinforces the institution.

The transmission of life, respect for life, awareness of life are intense experiences for woman and values that she claims as her own.

Woman's first reason for resentment against society lies in being forced to face maternity as a dilemma.

We denounce the unnatural nature of a maternity paid for at the cost of exclusion.

The refusal of the freedom of abortion is part of the global denial of woman's autonomy.

We do not wish to think about motherhood all our lives or to continue to be unwitting instruments of patriarchal power.

Woman is fed up with bringing up a son who will turn into a bad lover.

In freedom she is able and willing to face the son and the son is humanity.

In all forms of cohabitation, feeding, cleaning, caring and every aspect of daily routine must be reciprocal gestures.

By education and by mimesis men and women step into their roles in very early infancy.

We understand the mystifying character of all ideologies, because through the reasoned forms of power (theological, moral, philosophical, political) they have constrained humanity into an inauthentic condition, suppressed and consenting.

Behind every ideology we can see the hierarchy of the sexes.

From now on we do not wish to have any screen between ourselves and the world.

Feminism has been the first political moment of historical criticism of the family and society.

Let's unite the situations and episodes of historical feminist experi-

ence: through it woman has manifested herself, interrupting for the first time the monologue of patriarchal civilization.

We identify in unpaid domestic work the help that allows both private and state capitalism to survive.

Shall we allow that which happens again and again at the end of every popular revolution, when woman, who has fought with the others, finds herself and her problems pushed to one side?

We detest the mechanisms of competitiveness and the blackmail exercised in the world by the hegemony of efficiency. We want to put our working capacity at the disposal of a society that is immune to this.

War has always been the specific activity of the male and his model for virile behaviour.

Equality of remuneration is one of our rights but our suppression is another matter. Shall we be content with equal pay when we already carry the burden of hours of domestic work?

We must re-examine the creative contributions made by woman to society and defeat the myth of her secondary industry.

Attributing high value to 'unproductive' moments is an extension of life proposed by woman.

Whoever is in power states 'loving an inferior being is part of eroticism.' Maintaining the status quo is therefore an act of love.

We welcome free sexuality in all its forms because we have stopped considering frigidity an honourable alternative.

Continuing to regulate life between the sexes is a necessity for power, the only satisfactory choice is a free relationship.

Curiosity and sexual games are a right of children and adolescents.

We have looked for 4,000 years; now we have seen!

Behind us is the apotheosis of the age-old masculine supremacy. Institutionalized religions have been its firmest pedestal. And the concept of 'genius' has constituted its unattainable step. Woman has undergone the experience of seeing what she was doing destroyed every day.

We consider incomplete any history which is based on non-perishable traces.

Nothing, or else misconception, has been handed down about the presence of woman. It is up to us to rediscover her in order to know the truth.

Civilization had despised us as inferior, the church has called us sex, psychoanalysis has betrayed us, Marxism has sold us to hypothetical revolution.

We ask for testimonials for centuries of philosophical thought that

has theorized about the inferiority of woman.

We hold systematic thinkers responsible for the great humiliation imposed on us by the patriarchal world. They have maintained the principle of woman as an adjunct for the reproduction of humanity, as bonded with divinity, or as the threshold of the animal world, a sphere of privacy and pietas. They have justified by metaphysics what was unjust and atrocious in the life of woman.

We spit on Hegel.

The servant-master dialectic is a settling of account between groups of men: it does not foresee the liberation of woman, the great oppressed by the patriarchal civilization.

Class struggle, as a revolutionary theory that developed from the servant-master dialectic, also excludes woman. We question socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

By not recognizing herself in male culture woman deprives it of the illusion of universality.

Man has always spoken in the name of humanity but half the world population now accuses him of having sublimated a mutilation.

Man's strength lies in identifying with culture, ours in refuting it.

After this act of conscience man will be distinct from woman and will have to listen to her telling what concerns her.

The world will not explode just because man will no longer hold the psychological balance based on our submission.

From the bitter reality of a universe that has never revealed its secrets we take much of the credit given to the obstinacies of culture. We wish to rise to be equal to an answerless universe.

We look for the authenticity of the gesture of revolt and will sacrifice it neither to organization nor to proselytism.

We communicate only with women.

#### LET'S SPIT ON HEGEL CARLA LONZI, 1970

The feminine problem is the relationship of any woman – deprived as she is of power, of history, of culture, of a role of her own – to any man: his power, his history, his culture, his absolute role.

This problem calls into question the whole of man's work and thought; man who has had no awareness of woman as a human being on the same level as himself.

In the eighteenth century we demanded equality, and Olympe de Gouges went to the scaffold for her 'Declaration of the Rights of Women'. The demand for equality of women with men in the matter

of rights coincides historically with the assertion of the equality of men among themselves. Our presence was timely then. Today we are conscious that we ourselves are posing a question.

The oppression of woman did not begin in historical times, but is buried in the obscurity of human origins. The oppression of woman will not be overcome by annihilating man. Nor will equality cancel it; oppression will continue with equality. Revolution will not cancel it; it will continue with revolution. The concept of alternatives is a stronghold of male power, where there is no place for women.

The equality available today is not philosophical but political. But do we, after thousands of years, really wish for inclusion, on these terms, in a world planned by others? Would we indeed be gratified by participating in the great defeat of man?

What is meant by woman's equality is usually her right to share in the exercise of power within society, once it is accepted that she is possessed of the same abilities as man. But in these years women's real experience has brought about a new awareness, setting into motion a process of global devaluation of the male world. We have come to see that at the level of power there is no need for abilities but only for a particularly effective form of alienation. Existing as a woman does not imply participation in male power, but calls into question the very concept of power. It is in order to avoid this attack that we are now granted inclusion in the form of equality.

Equality is a juridical principle. To the common denominator of all human beings justice should thus be rendered. Difference is an existential principle which concerns the modes of being human, the peculiarity of one's own experiences, goals, possibilities, and one's sense of existence in a given situation and in the situation one wants to create for oneself. The difference between woman and man is the basic difference of humankind.

A black man may be equal to a white man, a black woman to a white woman.

Woman's difference is her millennial absence from history. Let us profit from this difference; for once we have achieved inclusion in society, who is to say how many more centuries will have to pass before we can throw off this new yoke? The task of subverting the order of the patriarchal structure cannot be left to others. Equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture. It is the principle through which those with hegemonic power continue to control those without.

The world of equality is the world of legalized oppression and one-dimensionality. In the world of difference, terrorism discards its

weapons and oppression yields to the variety and multiplicity of life. Equality between the sexes is merely the mask with which woman's inferiority is disguised.

This is the stand of those who, being different, want to effect a total change in the culture that has held them prisoners.

We have realized not only the fact of our oppression, but the alienation generated in the world by our imprisonment. There is not one single reason left for woman to accept man's objectives.

At this new stage of consciousness woman rejects the levels both of equality and of difference, as a dilemma imposed upon her by male power. She claims that no human being or group should either define themselves or be defined in terms of another human being or group.

Woman's oppression is the outcome of thousands of years; capitalism has rather inherited than produced it. The development of private property expressed an imbalance between the sexes in the need of each man to hold power over each woman, while the power relationships among men were being defined. To interpret our destiny up till now on a purely economic basis is to make recourse to a mechanism whose primary cause is still ignored. We know that the instincts of human beings are typically oriented according to the satisfaction they may or may not achieve in their relationship with the other sex. Historical materialism misses the emotional element which lay behind the transition to private property. It is there that we shall look in order to identify the archetype of property, the very first object conceived by man: the sexual object. By discarding his first prey from man's unconscious, woman can unblock the origins of pathological possessiveness.

Women realize the political connection between Marxist-Leninist ideology and their sufferings, needs, aspirations. But they do not believe that women are secondary, a consequence of the revolution. They question the idea that their cause should be subordinated to the class problem. They cannot accept that the struggle be set in terms which pass over their heads. [ . . . ]

Subsuming the feminine problem to the classist conception of the master-slave struggle is an historical mistake. In fact, this conception comes out of a culture which dismissed the essential discrimination of humankind, i.e. man's absolute privilege over woman; it creates a new perspective only for men, as it poses the problem only in their terms.

Subordination to the classist perspective means for woman the acceptance of terms borrowed from a slavery quite different from her own; terms which actually witness to her misrepresentation. Woman is oppressed as a woman, at all social levels; not as a class, but as a sex.

This gap in Marxist theory is no accident, nor would it be filled by stretching the concept of class to make room for women as a new class. Why has it been overlooked that women play a part in the productive process through their work in reproducing labour-power within the family? And that their exploitation in the home is an essential function of the accumulation of capital? By trusting all hopes of a revolutionary future to the working class, Marxism has ignored women, both as oppressed people and as bearers of the future. Its revolutionary theory was developed within the framework of a patriarchal culture.

Let us consider the man-woman relationship in Hegel, the philosopher who saw the slave as the driving moment of history. He rationalized patriarchal control most subtly of all within the dialectics of a divine feminine principle and a human masculine principle. The former presided in the family, the latter in the community. 'While the community takes sustenance only by destroying the happiness of the family and by dissolving self-consciousness in universal self-consciousness, it produces, in that which oppresses and which is at the same time essential for it - in other words in femininity in general - its inner enemy' ('Spirit' from *Phenomenology of the Mind*). Woman never goes beyond the stage of subjectivity. She recognizes herself in her relations by blood and by marriage, and thus remains immediately universal. She lacks the necessary premises for leaving the family ethos and for achieving the self-conscious force of universality through which man becomes a citizen. Her condition, which is the consequence of her oppression, is treated by Hegel as its cause. The difference between the sexes is used to form the natural metaphysical basis both for their opposition and for their reunification. Within the feminine principle Hegel locates an a priori passivity in which the proofs of male domination disappear. Patriarchal authority has kept women in subjection, and the only value recognized as belonging to them is their being able to accept it as their own nature.

In accordance with the whole tradition of western thought, Hegel sees woman as, by nature, confined in one particular stage, which is given as much resonance as possible, but at which no man would ever choose to be born.

But the feminine, as the 'eternal irony of the community', laughs at the aging thinker who is indifferent to any pleasure and only cares for the universal. It turns to the young and finds an accomplice to share this scorn. Beyond the divine law which woman is meant to incarnate, beyond her duty to household gods, beyond the fine gestures from Greek tragedy with which she ascends from the depths of hell to the light of existence, woman reveals an attitude which would have