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(doi: 10.1423/96110)

Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia (ISSN 0486-0349)

Fascicolo 4, ottobre-dicembre 2019

Ente di afferenza:

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Feminisms in neoliberal times

From neoconservative agendas to global protests

by ROSSELLA GHIGI and CATHERINE ROTTENBERG

1. Introduction

As we write this introduction, transnational protests have spread across Europe, the Middle East, South America and Southeast Asia. Protesters around the world are pushing back against austerity, the abuse of power by corrupt regimes, looming climate catastrophe, and rising authoritarianism. Indeed, people are filling the streets due to increasing fury at the dire effects of neoliberal economic policies and political agendas. And even as these effects manifest themselves differently and unevenly across the globe, it has become clear that neoliberal capitalism is universally extractive and predatory, undermining civil society and weakening democratic institutions and processes wherever it has taken hold. The end result, moreover, has been the same everywhere: increasing misery for ever more people.

It is no exaggeration to say that we are currently living in a moment of profound crisis. In some parts of the world, anger at neoliberal policies and political elites has taken the form of collective demands for democratic reform. Yet in other places the devastation wrought by neoliberalism has facilitated new forms of tribalism, with its concomitant racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism. As Joan Tronto (2013) has argued, these new forms of tribalism, which promise a kind of in-group security, can be seen as a reaction to neoliberal policies by segments of the population that have been disadvantaged and even unmoored by them. But this trend also needs to be understood as a consequence of growing disillusionment with left-libertarian parties and liberal democracies since the 1980s (Betz 1994), which have facilitated and even promoted the col-

onization of market forces into more domains of our lives. This marketization has not only brought us to the brink of climate catastrophe, but it has also undermined communities through privatization and undone social ties by encouraging competitive and entrepreneurial individualism. The unraveling of the social ties that bind us, has, in turn, helped to create conditions conducive to the rise of neoconservatism and ultra-nationalism. As Wendy Brown (2019, 21) has recently argued, neoliberalism has not only eviscerated democracy but it has also activated so-called «traditional morality in place of legislated social justice» thus preparing «the ground for the mobilization and legitimacy of antidemocratic forces in the second decade of the twenty-first century» (*ibidem*, 7).

It is not, therefore, coincidental that as unregulated market forces weaken democracy while devastating the natural world, we have witnessed a resurgence of chauvinism and anti-gender movements in many Western countries. The force of the appeal to traditional masculinity and gender regimes, especially for «angry white men» (Kimmel 2017) should not be understood merely as anger at losing privileges, but also as an attempt to regain a sense of control over a world that increasingly feels out of control. As Brown (2019, 180) puts it, «the white male supremacy in contemporary traditional values politics becomes explicit, then, not only because nihilism pulls the moral drapery off those values and makes them contractual or instrumentalizable, but also because this supremacy has been wounded without being destroyed». Conventional gender norms and the gendered division of labour become sites of intense affective investment because they represent a return to an imagined past in which stability and security reigned.

It is against this complex backdrop – of mass protest, existential threats to human thriving and increasing authoritarianism and neoconservatism – that feminism has also reemerged on the global landscape as a potent contemporary force. This Special Issue is an attempt to map some of the historical legacies that have led to feminism's current resurgence as well as to some of its most urgent challenges.

2. *Feminism: past and present*

Over the past decade or so, feminism, conceived as both a political movement and a theoretical perspective, has faced numerous new challenges. On the one hand, feminist issues have been mainstreamed and popularized in unprecedented ways in many Western democracies. If just ten years ago, the vast majority of high-profile women in the West refused to identify as feminist, today many famous actresses, singers, and politicians are publicly coming out as feminists, denouncing the widespread gender discrimination and sexual exploitation in Hollywood, the entertainment business, and the political sphere (thus contributing to the popularizing of feminism itself, see Banet-Weiser 2018). Moreover, in many countries feminism's goals have been partly incorporated as part of institutional governance, while equality and attempts to eradicate discrimination have become crucial aspects of national agendas.

Responding to feminism's heightened visibility and legitimacy, some scholars have argued that gender mainstreaming has resulted in feminist knowledge being converted into de-politicized technical expertise (Mukhopadhyay 2004; de Jong, Kimm 2017). Others have argued that as neoliberalism becomes more entrenched, feminist ideals of solidarity and social justice are being reformulated through the language of the market (see Eisenstein 2009; Prügl 2015; Rottenberg 2018), thus defanging «feminism» and rendering it useful for neoliberalism. Still other scholars have described the current encouragement of individual women's success, financial satisfaction and (hetero) sexual realization, as part of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Lewis *et al.* 2017) inciting women to be confident and resilient (Gill, Orgad 2017), which has effectively covered up continued structural gender inequality.

No matter how we account for feminism's mainstreaming and popularization, these processes have undoubtedly generated a number of arguably unexpected and even contradictory effects. The #MeToo and #TimesUp hashtag movements, for instance, are products of the widespread popular embrace of feminism. Yet, at the same time, as notions like gender parity have been mainstreamed, they have also been taken up by a variety of virulently anti-emancipatory movements: from right-wing political parties mobilizing gender issues against immigrants to men's

groups invoking gender equality to foster sexist sentiments in social media.

On the other hand, the flourishing of chauvinisms – like the revival of extreme right movements and political parties, leading to the undermining of hard-won reproductive rights in many countries, and renewed attacks on LGBTQI recognition and/or rights – has led to mass feminist protest on the ground. Indeed, in the last couple of years, we have witnessed the resurgence of grassroots transnational feminist mobilizations, sometimes with new names and very often in quite militant forms. We see this with *Ni Una Menos* movements, the resurgence of mass women's movements in the Global South, new kinds of radical digital feminist activism and the *Global Women's Strike* (whose platform has been interpreted in the well-known manifesto *Feminism for the 99%* by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, 2019). In addition, within the academy, scholars continue to engage with new challenges to feminism's traditional boundaries, whether in the form of religious feminism, trans theory, or contentious discussions around commercial surrogacy, particularly when advocates come from within the LGBTQI community.

In many ways, then, we are at a crossroads. Against the powerful anti-emancipatory and destructive forces currently facing us, there are signs of hope and newly energized resistance. We have mass grassroots feminist movements, which are part of the wave of transnational protests against the ravages of neoliberalism. We have intersectional feminism and feminist solidarity – in contrast to popular and neoliberal feminism – experiencing new currency on the ground, in the academy, and on social media. These developments are not merely reactive, but are attempts to think and enact feminism anew: feminism as part of a radical transnational, postcolonial, anti-capitalist and eco social justice movement.

This Special Issue hopes to contribute to this «thinking anew» by addressing two main aspects of contemporary feminism: 1. the contradictions of current popular, mainstream and right-wing feminisms, but also 2. the challenges that new theories, movements and global settings pose for social justice feminism today.

3. *The contradictions of current popular, mainstream and right-wing feminisms*

In the first section, we include Christina Scharff's essay on young women's deliberations on gender inequalities at work in the era of #MeToo. In contrast to the 1990s and 2000s when rejections of feminism were widespread (McRobbie 2009), Scharff's research highlights that the feminist label is now widely embraced among this cohort. Moreover, these young women offer incisive critiques of the persistent gendered hierarchies in the cultural and creative industries. Yet, through her analysis of eighteen qualitative in-depth interviews with classical musicians in the UK, the author also shows that these women most often respond to inequalities through individual narratives of self-transformation, resilience and empowerment. Many of the interviewees also articulate their belief that merit and hard work will ultimately be rewarded, thus rendering the existing structural inequalities in the industry less visible. In other words, Scharff highlights the complex entanglements between popular forms of feminism and individualism. These findings can be read in the light of what Rottenberg (2018) calls the rise of «neoliberal feminism», which spawns a responsabilised and entrepreneurial feminist subject that takes it upon herself to manage ongoing gender inequalities.

Scharff's work provides key insights into how the acknowledgement of gender inequality has become increasingly compatible with neoliberal and neoconservative political and economic agendas. This is also the theme of Elia Arfini, Rossella Ghigi and Sveva Magaraggia's contribution. Based on in-depth analysis of the discourse which three prominent Italian female political leaders draw upon to talk about women's emancipation, this article explores how these women address: sexual difference and second-wave feminism; women's role in the family and in the labour market; and reproductive rights. The analysis shows that these leaders adopt an «emancipatory complementarism»: they assume some aspects of second-wave feminism, but they do so selectively and without addressing the structural and economic undergirding of gender inequality; they glorify women while endorsing a traditional and hierarchical vision of society; they support a male breadwinner model but with some liberal elements, such as freer sexuality; and they advocate for policies that would enable women to balance work and childrearing,

but they do so in the name of an essentialist understanding of gender difference and in order to increase the Italian birthrate. Rather than the *righting of feminism* (Farris, Rottenberg 2017), these leaders *feminize the right*, making a conservative agenda more appealing for gender sensitive voters.

Similar to Arfini, Ghigi and Magaraggia's article that examines the particular ways that second-wave feminist politics are misrepresented or mobilized strategically in order to advance a right-wing agenda, Manolo Farci and Nicola Righetti's paper focuses on Italian Men's Rights Activists network on Facebook, which is part of a wider international revival of masculinist politics. As the authors highlight, this revival is multi-faceted and rather ambivalent, since it oscillates between a narrative explicitly hostile to feminism and one that considers feminism anachronistic given its ostensible successes and women's current equality. Even though affective practices are channeled by these activists into anger and rage, thus reaffirming traditional gender norms, the article also shows how the continuous appeal on the part of these men to emotions and feelings can be understood as a sign of emotional discomfort with hegemonic masculinity. Thus, overcoming the traditional association of masculinity with violence and self-control, and accepting vulnerability as part of a shared cultural conception of masculinity, may in fact create the potential for dialogue between feminists and moderate members of the men's rights movement who are genuinely struggling to find ways of coming to terms with shifting gender norms.

All three of these articles focus on notions of empowerment and choice, women's self-transformation and the denunciation and/or misrepresentation of second-wave feminism. These concepts are also the focus of the *Interview* section, which includes the professional biography of one of the most influential feminist thinkers in the areas of gender, media and neoliberalism today, Rosalind Gill. While Gill's contribution to feminist scholarship has been broad – she has introduced important terms such as «new sexism» and the «sexualisation of culture» – she is arguably best known for changing the way in which scholars understand postfeminism. Postfeminism, as Gill describes it, needs to be understood not as an analytical perspective but rather as a critical object of analysis and as a cultural sensibility. This novel way of conceiving it has not only informed an entire generation of scholars but has also transformed the field of feminist media

studies. The interview conducted by Catherine Rottenberg outlines the history of the notion of «postfeminism», particularly in the light of feminism's new luminosity. The interview also underscores how Rosalind Gill's professional biography – as well as her widespread influence – cannot be disentangled from her political engagement and feminist commitment.

Misinterpretations, assimilations and new understandings of feminism are also at the core of the *Roundtable* section. The roundtable discusses a book by one of the most prominent feminist philosophers of our times, Nancy Fraser, who is best known for her theories of recognition and distributive justice. The book is *Fortunes of Feminism* (2013), a collection of Fraser's writing on gender over a twenty-five years period. It tells the story of the shifts in feminist imaginaries and paradigms during the rise and entrenchment of neoliberalism, arguing that as feminist discourse was assimilated into capitalistic institutions, recognition and identity politics gained ground at the expense of struggles for economic redistribution and social justice. As Fraser herself puts it, her objective is to clarify the process by which neoliberal hegemony was, in part, constructed by coopting feminism's emancipatory charisma. Her book also urges us to look forward, and to think about how we might reactivate feminism in its anti-capitalist form. Discussing *Fortunes of Feminism's* importance and the polemics it raises are scholars from three different European countries: Jo Littler, who is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Director of the Gender and Sexualities Research Centre at City, University of London. Her research focuses on in/equality, meritocracy, and neoliberal narratives; Eric Fassin, professor of sociology at the University of Paris VIII St-Denis, who has written extensively on contemporary sexual and racial politics in France and the United States; and Barbara Poggio, a sociologist and Vice Rector for Equality and Diversity at the University of Trento. Poggio's research focuses on the social construction of gender, particularly on its cultural and symbolic dimensions, and on gender and science as well as gender and entrepreneurship.

4. *The challenges that new theories, movements and global settings pose for traditional radical feminism*

The second section of this Special Issue addresses the challenges that new theories, movements and global settings pose for feminism today. As we described above, the present geopolitical context is characterized by the rise of social and political forces that oppose a multicultural vision of society and that support nationalist political projects. In some countries, the response to increasing migration and the influx of refugees has been to mobilize women's rights to foster ultra-nationalist agendas by denouncing non-Western societies as exceptionally sexist: a phenomenon that Sara Farris (2017) has termed «femonationalism». This is linked, again, to the wider trend of «righting of feminism» (Farris, Rottenberg 2017), namely the appropriation of feminist ideals by ultra-nationalist parties, the convergence between some feminists and right-wing groups in their critique of multicultural society as well as the merging of feminism with neoliberalism.

The righting of feminism is the point of departure for Erika Bernacchi's work, whose aim is to find ways of resisting femonationalism. Presenting some key findings involving women's intercultural associations in Italy, which attempt to pursue both feminist and anti-racist aims, she asks whether these associations have been successful in fighting gender-based violence involving migrant women without reproducing racist attitudes. She also queries whether and how these associations have been able to confront the reality in which migrants often provide domestic and care work that facilitates Western women's entrance into the public sphere and professional life. Through the analysis of interviews with members of these multicultural associations, Bernacchi argues that their approach and praxis should be considered postcolonial, and that such intersectional postcolonialism feminist practice can indeed counter femonationalism and the righting of feminism in its various manifestations.

Interculturality and migration in the Global North are also the points of depart for Alberta Giorgi's article on feminism and the post-secular turn. In recent years, against the backdrop of the rise in religiously-inspired conservative movements that target women's and LGBT+ rights on the one hand, and the increasing visibility of religious feminisms (particularly Islamic feminisms) on the other, there has also been a profound rethinking of es-

tablished ideas about feminism's relationship to religious values, from both an analytical and normative perspective. Giorgi addresses three aspects of the way in which the opposition between feminism and religion has traditionally been understood in the Global North: the assumption that feminism is incompatible with religion, since religion is understood to be part of patriarchal oppression; the notion that feminist definitions of agency and individual autonomy are fundamentally at odds with post-secular subjectivity; and the conviction that feminism's conceptualization of justice, equality and inclusion are irreconcilable with religiosity. The article, by combining the fields of «gender and religion» and feminist studies, is a critical literature review (as the section *Maps* requires) and underscores that the feminist-religious divide needs be re-conceptualised as a dynamic relationship that is both fraught and fluid.

Globalized landscapes are also challenging feminism in terms of labour markets and transnational chains of care. These concerns set the scene for Sabrina Marchetti and Daniela Cherubini's paper on domestic labour. Since the 1960s and 1970s, feminist scholarship and movements worldwide have engaged in theorising reproductive labour as an undervalued and invisible element of local and global economies, as well as a constitutive feature of women's oppression. Feminist theorising and activism have often pushed for domestic labour to be recognized as labour and to be seen as a fundamental activity with social and economic value. Since the late 2000s, however, the demands for equal labour rights and social recognition have increasingly been put forward by paid domestic workers. In many ways, their demands converge with feminist demands for recognising «domestic work as work». Yet, the overlap between the recent mobilization of domestic workers and feminist activists remains under researched. In their article, the authors present a comparative analysis of the relationships between feminist activists and domestic workers' organizations in two Latin American countries, Ecuador and Colombia. Drawing on a larger comparative study on domestic workers' rights, they show that in Columbia there has been a strategic convergence between domestic workers and feminists around the common idea of the «care economy», while in Ecuador domestic workers' organizations have not managed to build a coalition with the feminist movement and have prioritized class inequalities and labour rights.

In the last thirty years, globalisation and migration have also affected a specific labour market in Europe: the sex industry, a sector where we have witnessed an increase in migrant workers and their exploitation as well as a move toward internet-based work. Correspondingly, in the last decade, issues linked to sex work and trafficking have attracted renewed attention from policy makers, international institutions, as well as activists. Focusing once again on Italy, Giulia Garofalo Geymonat and Giulia Selmi present the complex contextual dynamics prevalent in the country over the last decades and link these dynamics to the global circulation of discourses related to sex work, which have become increasingly polarised around the «pro-sex work» and «sex work as a form of violence» approaches. In contrast to the so-called «feminist alliance» model dominant in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, the authors show how this polarization has permeated debates on sex work in the Italian context. The authors further argue that feminism can learn from the strengths of the earlier Italian model, since it acknowledged the diversity of experiences of women in sex work. Yet given the new realities of migration, such a model must expand its frame by positioning sex work within a broad analysis of migration and social vulnerability.

All the articles that appear in this Issue, whether they are *Research Articles* (Saggi e ricerche), *Scenery* (Osservatorio) or *Maps* (Mappe), have been reviewed in a double-blind process (in the case of Arfini, Ghigi and Magaraggia, the process was managed by the editorial board of the Journal), while the *Interview* and the *Roundtable* were solicited by the Guest Editors. Our initial call for papers addressed various themes, ranging from new interpretations of feminism, feminism in neoliberal times, and globalization and intersectionality, through gender and the care economy, all the way to men's involvement in feminism. The call for papers was a tremendous success – well beyond our initial expectations – with more than 70 abstracts submitted from across the globe. Decisions were therefore very difficult and we had to be extremely selective given the specific focus of the Special Issue. Throughout the process, we have also relied on the generosity of dozens of international reviewers. We would like to underscore the incredible response to our call for papers as well as the time and commitment that has gone into making this Issue possible not only to express our immense gratitude to everyone involved but also – and just as importantly – to stress

how many scholars are still actively and passionately engaged with feminism. Feminism, as we understand it, is an on-going project, and one that continues to inspire, transform, and challenge us. We therefore want to conclude our *Introduction* by stating that feminism – as theory and praxis – provides us both with a profound sense of solidarity as well as a glimmer of hope in these dark times.

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