

Daniela Bandelli, Giorgio Porcelli

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Critical Sociology and Beyond. A Redescription of Representation of Femicide

A Response to Comments

by Daniela Bandelli and Giorgio Porcelli

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We would like to thank our colleagues for their comments insofar they offer us the opportunity to clarify the aim of our article and the methodology of our analysis. The most crucial point in both Giomi [2016] and Pavan's [2016] critique seems to concern the dialogue, or better said the correspondence, between two separate spaces in which femicides occur and need to be understood by sociologists: one of media representations/construction and one of social/factual reality. The dialogue between these two levels of analysis is an open issue in sociological debates where there is a widespread impression of crisis: the crisis of a sociology in search of itself and of its roots.

One of the greatest theoreticians of contemporary sociological thought, Niklas Luhmann, in one of his last works described with clarity the reasons for this crisis, and suggested a possible way out. The crisis, according to Luhmann, would be due to the fact that nowadays it is the media system both in its traditional and digital version that produces a daily description and interpretation of social phenomena and social problems. It is a potent and at the same time effective description of the world much more attractive than a dry academic treatise and simpler in reception compared to the numberless research reports teeming with data and cross-tabulation analysis. Therefore, in Luhmann's perspective, sociology should not do the same thing: it would come out as the game loser. What is needed now is that sociology should be displayed at an upper level of abstraction recovering a long lost critical perspective, though not in an ideological albeit etymological sense. Critics derives

from the Greek word *krisis* which means to make a distinction. Thus if the media system produces a description, or rather its own descriptive perspective of reality, it is necessary that sociology finds as its specific object of analysis these same descriptions or, as Luhmann puts it following Von Forster's theory, first-order observations.

As a foremost Luhmann's scholar wrote:

The mass media construct a reality: they construct the common reality of society. What we know in general about our society we know through the mass media [Moeller 2006, 151].

Luhmann further explains:

For the approach introduced above, first-order observation is sufficient, as if we were dealing with facts. For the second (critical) approach, it is necessary to adopt the attitude of a second-order observer, an observer of observers [Luhmann 2000, 4].

Moeller continues:

The question of the construction of reality by the mass media is a complicated issue of second-order observation. We must observe the mass media as an observing system that produces both its own reality and the reality of what it observes by its observations [Moeller 2006, 151].

Here according to Moeller we arrive at the heart of Luhmann's "operational constructivism."

This theory does not lead to "loss of world," it does not deny that reality exists. However, it assumes that the world is not an object but is rather a horizon in the phenomenological sense. It is, in other words, inaccessible. And this is why there is no possibility other than to construct reality and perhaps to observe observers as they construct reality [Luhmann 2000, 6].

In this direction:

Sociological analysis shows that a sufficiently complex self-description of society has to articulate itself in the factual, temporal and social dimensions. But at the same time it observes what restrictive requirements have to be taken into account if the dimensions are condensed into self-description forms; and to this extent sociological theory behaves *critically* if it gears its own analytics to this condensation. It will note that and how the individual meaning dimensions are already occupied and will therefore have to undertake a *redescription* of the self-description of the societal system [Luhmann 2013, 342].

Current mainstream new media analysis treats the media mainly as a grammatical object whose reality coincides with the operations proper to the media: it is then a first order observation. Luhmann suggests turning media analysis within a theory of

society into a second order observation. This analysis is critical in the ethimological sense of making distinctions. Turning media social theory into a redescription of self-description would help us to understand the complexity of the structural couplings between systems. The sociological analysis that will come out will be both critical and selective. This is the current challenge for sociology that if lost will force social scientists to place their tool box in the attic.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is the methodological approach we used in our study, offers a possible way forward to bring sociological media analysis to that second order observation envisioned by Luhmann and thus using data resulting from media analysis to ultimately advance social critique and sociological theory. Indeed, CDA was born as an interdisciplinary field of study across Cultural Studies, which were inaugurated by Stuart Hall in the 1960s to investigate the relationship between culture and power by looking how texts and practices convey dominant ideologies, and Critical Sociology, which is a stream that reappropriates the original engaged spirit of the study of society, as it was intended by the father sociologist Auguste Comte, lost with the functionalist/empiricist turn in 1950s whose most prominent representative is Talcott Parsons [Curran *et al.* 1996; Threadgold 2003]. Therefore, influenced by the application of Critical Theory to Socio-Linguistic, CDA's original aim is to understand the content and practice of different representations of reality (discourses), how one of these different possible articulations of meaning becomes dominant while others remain at the margins or are even prohibited [Hall 1982, 2007; Fairclough 2010; van Dijk 2008]. In other words, CDA helps to reveal how in the language that dominant representation of reality is ingrained and thus transmitted to the public. The ultimate goal is to contribute to social critiques of power through a critique of the discourse itself, understood as a mediating space between texts and society, and constitutive of a field of knowledge and social identities [Fairclough 2001, 2003; Foucault 1970].

In this sense, text is studied in its “dialectic” relation with the social context, as a document that is an expression of the culture in which the authors are immersed, a document in which social researchers can find meanings and lines of thoughts that are injected in society and reproduced. This means in practice that discourse analysts needs to bring into the study a detailed knowledge of the social and historical context of their area of study [Diaz-Bone *et al.* 2007].

To sum up, our CDA of *femminicidio* narrative follows the framework of Luhmann's *Critical System Theory of Society* insofar we attempted a “second order observation” or a “redescription” of representations of social phenomena (femicide and VAW) which are fabricated in selected media texts. Our critical spirit is therefore to be understood as an aim of highlighting how the concept of femicide is socially

constructed and transmitted by the media system and specifically how it has been used by different actors (pressure groups and lobbies) to influence policy makers. This is precisely the aim of our analysis, which was not to verify whether media coverage of femicide reflected an increase in the crime (this information had already been confirmed by data of the Ministry of Interior [Corradi 2014] which show that male homicides of women did not increase while the issue of *femminicidio* was gaining visibility in the media). Rather, our aim was to investigate how the social problem of femicide and VAW was constructed in the so-called politicized media discourse by a narrative revolved around the neologism *femminicidio*. Therefore, our claim that *femminicidio* can be studied as media hype or moral panic does not suggest in any way that intimate femicide and more generally VAW are not real threats to women and society at large.

Also, in this regard, we find Giomi's comment on the proportionality between media attention and the threat described intriguing insofar that it reflects a broader question in media studies literature on whether it is tenable to compare media coverage with the incidence of a given social phenomenon and suggests on this basis that we are witnessing media hype or moral panic. We would like to quote Vasterman's take on this point:

the media affect the social definitions on which the "real" facts are established. Comparing media coverage with statistics on violent crime can be a pitfall, because intensive media reports on violence may lead to changing perceptions among the public, to an increase in the reporting of violence, to more criminal investigations and ultimately to rising figures on violence. What are the "real" facts here? [2005, 512].

This reflection enables us to better specify an important component of our thesis, which might not have been fully understood: the *femminicidio* narrative, as it has been re-contextualized in the Italian mediatized political discourse, affected the social imaginary of femicide by exposing the domestic dimension of the phenomenon and thus emphasising the threat of violence for women from their male partners and exes, thus in the domain of heterosexual relationships.¹

The notion of mediatized political discourse [Fairclough 1995] enables to analyse how different actors, namely political representatives and activists construct cer-

¹ We would like to clarify that "domestic violence" is the predominant tag in the sample of 385 news items selected through Factiva. "Heterosexual relations" is not an expression explicitly used in the news items we analysed. It is rather a qualifier that we felt we needed to use to specify that the discourse of femicide pertains to man/woman relations, which are framed as potential occasions of male violence. It is important to underscore that the heterosexual couple, and not for example the homosexual couple and family, is the social institution redefined by the *femminicidio* discourse.

tain social issues in the media.² Therefore, in our analysis political and media levels of discourse were not treated as two separated arenas and it was not our interest, in this specific piece of work, to investigate the role of journalists in framing the issue. On the other hand, it was not our aim to provide an analysis of different positions on femicide offered by different voices and at the same time we did not pretend to claim that the whole political élite, the whole feminist movement or feminist scholarship necessarily agrees with the *femminicidio* narrative, its associated monolithic representation of male VAW and themes such as the strategy of pink quota. In our study, we would like to reiterate, we analysed how feminist voices (only those reported in the sampled texts) and political representatives concur to construct the *femminicidio* narrative in the media.³ That the issue of *femminicidio* also has a political nature is suggested, even before data resulting from our analysis, by the very intention of campaigners to make femicide and VAW political issues, in other words to bring these social issues to the attention of decision makers.⁴ Assessing to what extent *femminicidio* has become a feature of political discourse, following the 2013 elections, and thus extending the timeframe of our study, would be an interesting angle for further research.

Having provided details on our methodology, let us conclude our reply by clarifying our thesis on the gender frame of violence conveyed by *femminicidio* narrative, by linking to another interesting point raised by our colleagues: the relation between the GBV framework and feminist scholarships. We argued that an interpretative framework of violence, once developed within the feminist movement and scholarship, has been exposed in the mainstream through the *femminicidio* narrative. On the essay “Femicide in Italy. ‘Femminicidio,’ Moral Panic and Progressivist Discourse” [2016] we summarized the GBV framework as such:

² We decided to search voices in a specific type of media, namely news-wires. Although we agree with Pavan’s point on the non-neutrality of news agencies (no media is effectively neutral), they are still a good platform where researchers can detect and extrapolate direct quotes spoken by primary sources. This is because of the concise style of reporting typical of news-wires and because they are often the first level between the “facts” and other media.

³ Although the majority of the speeches included in the microanalysis were given by “political representatives,” in response to Pavan’s note, we would like to specify that the following female voices belonging to civic society were also included: Vittoria Tola, Susanna Camusso, comedian Luciana Littizzetto, and representatives of two NGOs, Amnesty International and Save the Children Italia.

⁴ Each news was categorized according to the “subject” of the news, answering the question “what is the reported event?” We found the following categories: “crime cases”, “mobilizations/campaigns and releases of reports”, “political representatives’ declarations or speeches”, “political party events”, “cultural programmes such as theatre pieces, TV series etc.” Quantitative data would have reinforced our arguments, which in this study however we had decided to formulate on the basis of a strictly qualitative method as described in paragraphs 1 and 4. We’d like to recall that empirical data are not necessarily quantitative, and in social sciences arguments can be also supported by purely qualitative evidence.

VAW is explained as a pillar and product of a patriarchal society and sexist culture, more precisely as a phenomenon originating in and functioning to maintain the normative relationship between men and women, characterized by inequality and fixed paths of socialization [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 4]

Later we added:

GBV paradigm infers that violence, whenever it is perpetrated by men against women, is committed because of male will of control and should be approached separately from other kinds of aggressions in virtue of the victim/aggressor's gender [2016, 5]

The GBV framework is certainly dominant in feminist theory, although within and outside feminist scholarship different elaborations as well as critiques of the framework have been also developed. This specific understanding of male VAW is theorized and applied by feminist scholars in Italy (e.g. Romito, Creazzo, Danna, etc.), it appears to be dominant in *femminicidio* narrative, and thus it is influencing the public imaginary on VAW, by rendering this imaginary partial and stereotypical, notwithstanding that a more complex reading of violence, including also female violence, offered by scholars in different disciplines, feminists and non-feminists, does exist. In regards to the topic of female violence against men, Giomi expressed perplexity on the CTS methodology used in studying and revealing gender symmetry in domestic violence.⁵ Our response will not deal with a detailed discussion on methodological criticism, a task that Giomi's herself acknowledges is not to be carried out here. However, we would take the opportunity of her comment to call attention to the fact that criticism has been widely raised, not only as to the methods and results of studies revealing gender symmetry in domestic violence, but also regarding the methods and results of studies focused on VAW, including ones used by anti-violence centres and national institutes of statistics including the Italian ISTAT. For further documentation on the shortcomings of VAW surveys we suggest the following readings: Macrì *et al.*, [2012]; Badinter [2004]; C.H. Sommers [1994]; McElroy [2016].

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⁵ Kimmel is included in our list of references as one of existing “empirical studies on domestic violence which [...] tell us that women too can be violent against their partners” [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 14].

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A Response to Comments

Abstract: The authors reply to the comments by Elisa Giomi and Elena Pavan, explicating some arguments of the original article.

Keywords: *Luhmann; Critical Sociology; Critical Discourse Analysis; Media Representation.*

Daniela Bandelli has concluded her PhD at the University of Queensland, School of Communication and Arts, in 2016. She is interested in how social movements construct social issues and challenge dominant discourses on family and identity; she contributes to the critique of the gender framework. She is untenured lecturer and research assistant at the Department of Human Studies at the LUMSA in Rome, where she is exploring the topic of gestational surrogacy. Contact details: daniela.bandelli@gmail.com

Giorgio Porcelli MA, PhD is Lecturer and member of the Department of Social and Political Sciences (DiSPeS) and Adjunct Professor of Theory and Practice in New Media, Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes, Sociology of the Family at the Department of Humanities (DiSU) of the University of Trieste. He is also member of European Sociology Association RN18: Sociology of Communications and Media Research. Contact details: giorgio.porcelli@scfor.units.it