Feminist Politics as Reflexive Citizenship
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Abstract: **The feminist politicization of experience has gradually brought the Private (the Self and the domestic) into a close dialectical relationship with the Public. This substantially paves the way for a new individual/collective conception of citizenship, where the real progressive concern for the multicultural human condition and the politics/ethics of difference are reflexively realised on the very ground of everyday life.**

This paper seeks to critically describe and explain the antagonistic relationships between feminist knowledge/politics and the private/public divide. The reification of this divide has undoubtedly been inducive to women's seclusion, marginalization and exclusion from the democratic light of the so-called "public sphere" (Habermas). However, the feminist "politicization of experience" has brought the Private (the self, the familial, the domestic and the intimate) into a close dialectical relationship with the Public. Within this analytic framework, the concept of "citizenship" becomes reflexively decontextualized from its reductionistic legal connotations and is dynamically transformed into a contested social process, which radically cuts across the received private/public dualism and promises the emergence of a strengthened cosmopolitan civil society.

Feminism, more than any other social movement, systematically attempted to include the historically neglected field of subjective meanings and personal

experiences in the critical analysis of the social world and, in particular, of the "deeply gendered" nature of social institutions. This inclusion is a particular "critical method" (MacKinnon 1982) for understanding and changing reality. From the very start of the "feminist renaissance" (in the 1960s and the 1970s), academic feminism, located predominantly in sociology, has fruitfully re-energized fundamental questions of the mainstream sociology of (scientific) knowledge.

In general, the feminist critique of the social sciences employs three interrelated anti-foundationalist/anti-essentialist epistemological tactics, increasingly prioritizing the central idea of (female) subjectivity. First, "feminist empiricism" naturalizes epistemology (*towards a social theory of knowledge*) and introduces women *as scientists and as participants* (creatively mixing referential/critical and endogenous/instrumental forms of reflexivity), so that their normative concerns become essentially unavoidable and further emphasized.

Second, "standpoint epistemology", which has drawn fire from Marxism as well as from postmodernist philosophy, starts from the radical position that all knowledge and all social identities are precariously constructed and performed from a specific social location. The sovereign, totalizing view from "nowhere" (or "everywhere") is forever impossible. There is no universal, context-free, or "innocent" knowledge (Flax 1992). In other words, perspectivism is always inescapable (cf. Pels 1997, 2000). What is actually important here is *"who needs truth?"* (Harding 1992: 585). According to this "reflexive" approach, however, less partial knowledge can

possibly result when those who have previously been marginalized or excluded from the dominant order (*status quo*) become actively involved in the knowledge-production process.

Third, "feminist post-structuralism", which in principle disavows the realist concepts of "representation", "false consciousness" and "distortion", stresses that judgments about truth and falsity are themselves always performatively constructed and negotiated, because they are inescapably partisan in character and necessarily informed by moral, political and cultural concerns. It also interconnects "womanhood" and "motherhood" with social and interpretative processes and looks for meanings that are taken for granted, hidden and suppressed, strategically privileging quality over quantity, culture over nature, relations over substances, constructions over essences (see, for example, Flax 1990, Henwood 1993). The so-called "social text" is now creatively re-written by the feminist researcher (in close collaboration with her research subjects).

Indisputably, the common denominator of these subversive "epistemological tactics" is the strong insistence that feminist politics and feminist knowledge should work out from women's subjectivities. In a more methodological way, Sandra Harding asserts that, in order to gain a reflexively critical view of society, the best method is to start thought from "women's lives" (Harding 1991: 123, 167, 282, 286-7). Women's lived experiences are therefore drawn upon to enrich scholarship and scientific theories as well as to offer the necessary epistemological basis for *consciousness raising*

where the personal can become political. As Catharine MacKinnon (1989) observes, feminist theory is perhaps the first theory to emerge from those whose interest it affirms. As a consequence, the Private becomes strategically re-valued in relation to the Public. Contrary to dichotomized (or dualistic) ways of thinking about the Private and the Public, private actions are politically meaningful and, to use Zygmunt Bauman's words, "private problems are translated into the language of public issues" (Bauman 2000: 39).

Increasingly, feminist practice has successfully challenged the "old" or "traditional" (rigid) boundaries of politics, moving attention towards the private field of everyday life and relationships. Hence, its manifestations can be seen not only in the overtly political arena, but also in activities not conventionally theorized as political, in the enactment of *small revolutions in the here-and-now*. By the mid-1960s, second-wave feminists effectively deepened first-wave criticism (namely, Virginia Woolf, Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, Juliet Mitchell, Shulamith Firestone) by explicitly interrogating the complex relations between public and family/personal life. In particular, adopting a *sociological* rather than legal stance, they challenged the modern cultural contrast between the public domain as "artificial" or "constraining" (that is, as equated to necessity and disinterestedness) and the home as a "private castle" (or an emotionally loaded, apolitical "world of freedom"), behind which men (male citizens) enjoy rewards of their labour outside the family. According to this "androcentric" contrast, women and children are doomed to be confined to a space characterized by

the cultivation and protection of individuality as well as by intimacy, seclusion, and "personal fulfilment".

In the last instance, second-wave feminism offered women a valuable public language to express themselves, to break the silences of personal life, to communicate their suppressed personal despair, and to gain access to the benefits of democratic citizenship. Personal choices are regarded as intrinsically political ("everything is political"). The Private does not signify a "power-free", "exclusive", "isolated", "closed" space (or a "space of silence") any more. On the contrary, it is a particular meaningful kind of "political community", with duties and rights, performatively structured by relations of power and open to contestation and change through multiple forms of human action (Fenton 2005). Its relationship with the Public constitutes an uncertain, permanently undecidable, historically contingent and socially constructed *process* of "dynamic negotiation" (Stuart Hall).

Such an approach allow women not to sacrifice emotions to reason and domestic matters to public affairs. Private and public matters are not mutually excluded or mutually reducible; they can indeed co-exist in an absolutely balanced and harmonious way. Both the Public and the Private can be thought as *symbolic/physical* spheres of continuous political struggles (broadly conceived) and transformative action, composed of rational/emotional, knowledgeable subjects working peacefully toward the common good.

In addition, they can be thought as having equal significance for critically re-understanding the practices and meanings of citizenship. This is closely associated with "furthering a project of rethinking citizenship and its relationship to space, whether classified as private or public" (Fenton 2005: 182). In other words, the innovative feminist idea that "the personal is political", a knowledge-political slogan which initially became popular in the 1970s and radically de-reified the socially sanctioned and gender-biased public/private distinction, is now offering us a valuable analytic lens through which we can view citizenship (as "membership in a community") beyond its conventional (universalist/rationalist) socio-legal status, typically defined by T. H. Marshall (1950)[1].

Citizenship can be also "private", by constantly exercising normative responsibilities, consensus (through conflict), reason, free dialogue, virtue, tolerance and friendship. It is thus reflexively sensitized and becomes *a way of being simultaneously in private and in public*. In an ideal-typical (and perhaps programmatic) level, this new, broader/borderless form of *reflexive citizenship*, as a kind of non-linear system, self-critically turns into itself, discovering its limitations, weaknesses, gender biases, temporal/spatial dimensions, ambiguities and potentialities, as well as revising, re-inventing and enriching its normative orientation and value vocabulary, within a complex cosmopolitan "risk society" (Beck 1992). It

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[1] According to Marshall's well known theory, citizenship involved a "discourse of stability by which the modern state could achieve a degree of integration by compensating for the inequalities of class" (Delanty 2003: 598).

reflects upon its own history and perspectives, where it has been and where it is going. It also strongly emphasizes its *practical/discursive* and inter-contextual/cultural – rather than theoretical/propositional and formal – properties, linking radical politics to everyday life and local issues (*soft and low politics*), in the light of the on-going flows of new advanced technologies, mobile markets and heterogeneous immigrant populations (Ong 2006).

Most importantly, the reflexive expansion, pluralization and deepening of (self-confronted) citizenship enables both the Private and the Public to complement and reinforce each other, mutually contributing to the democratic renewal of civil society and to the struggles against symbolic manipulation and *cultural/symbolic exclusion*. By using the feminist methodological tool of reflexivity, this kind of re-conceptualization of citizenship is able to further foster respect for differences (dialectically interrelating unity and diversity, sociality and individuality) and consolidate multiculturalism on the level of political culture. It therefore efficiently responds to the urgent and pressing contemporary need for a serious "comparative sociology/anthropology/history" (Nicos Mouzelis), based on the desire to cultivate a new sociological imagination, or an "aesthetic of existence" (Foucault), and understand better ourselves and the others.

Both the Private and the Public can reinforce progressive politics, by maximizing the chances of "social learning" (John Barry) and promoting active participation of *all* citizens in building more equal social orders, more just and

sustainable (political) communities. In the context of a feminism-inspired reflexive citizenship, which self-consciously seeks to formulate a new normative agenda, the feminist challenge of "theorizing experience" (Mohanty) dynamically interacts with the political challenge of "democratising democracy" (Giddens). This articulates a fluid view of the citizen who can live in the private and the public as well as in the local and the global *at the same time.*

Reflexive citizenship signifies a new possibility for omnipresent *emancipative* "life politics" (Giddens), for the development of a stronger and more cosmopolitan civic culture, and for the generalized defense of the rights of the individual based on the principles of liberty and equality. It also signifies the vital need to foster moral responsibility, capacity for self-assertion (autonomy), and conversation that facilitates learning through open, genuine dialogue, encouraging a flexible politics of "voice" (Raymond Williams). This can substantially alter inequalities and increasingly generate the enabling conditions for an empowering *"glocal" civil society* in which space is provided for the marginalised/oppressed and silenced sections of society, including women.

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