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**KINDNESS IS THE ANTIDOTE
TO A MALE CHAUVINIST WORLD**

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Abstract

The aim of the present contribution is to highlight the limits of some forms of feminism of the last thirty years, including the feminism of difference, to which we can even trace back some thoughts on women recently expressed by a well-known Italian historian, Alessandro Barbero, who asked in an interview with a national newspaper: “Is it possible that, on average, women lack that aggressiveness, swagger and self-confidence that help to establish themselves?”. Barbero is right. From the 1980s onwards (although the signs were already visible in the second half of the 1970s), when the feminist slogan “The body is mine and I manage it” became a big success, feminism has stood out for a strong sense of freedom of expression and decision, which, however, has also been marked by the emerging culture of individualism. Feminism develops in a society that has fully shared now Margaret Thatcher’s statement that society does not exist, but only individuals exist. It was the prerogative of feminism to somehow accept and validate in communicative terms the fact that it must not be posed a limit to individual freedom. Sure, the slogan had its meaning because it was, and it is, necessary and legitimate to affirm that the last word on sexuality and motherhood must be the woman’s. In my contribution I show how some aspects of current feminist debates are very likely to be addressed in a better way by resorting to some skills that have characterized a certain type of stereotypes about women: kindness, patience, the ability to wait and live in uncertainty, trying to progressively adapt moods and behaviors to the perceived changes, even infinitesimal ones. Such an uncertainty can be faced, if you really want warmer and more consistent relationships with others. In my view, what needs to be changed is society as a whole, and also the educational modality implemented towards the male gender and beyond. Kindness is the women’s strength and outlines a clear strategy for navigating everyday life with charm, attention and prudence. Kindness is the antidote to a brutal world.

Keywords

Kindness. Uncertainty. Limit. Freedom. Competition.

A king’s son ate at the table. Cutting the ricotta, he injured his finger and a drop of blood went to the ricotta. He said to his mother, “Mom, I would like a woman as white as milk and red as blood.” “Eh, my son, whoever is white is not red, and whoever is red is not white. But look for it, if you find it.”

Italo Calvino, “The Love of the Three Pomegranates,” in *Italian Folktales*

1. Red as Blood, White as Milk

Alessandro Barbero, a well-known Italian historian specialized in Medieval history, said in an interview with a national newspaper: “Is it possible that, on average, women lack that aggressiveness, swagger and self-confidence that help to establish themselves?” The answer to this rhetorical question that I would like to give here is: “Yes, it is possible. Fortunately!”

For the most part, women do not adhere to those soft skills. Thank goodness, since 95% of the murders in the world are committed by men. Today many women have introjected or projected certain values – and, therefore, they implement certain consolidated behaviors – in a male-driven society: aggressive, bold and appreciative of self-confidence. In fact, we all suffer

from aggressions every day, on average we don't appreciate swagger, and we live in a social and cultural context characterized by uncertainty.

Emma Sulkowicz became a performance artist and an anti-rape activist after that, in August 2014, she walked around the Columbus University Campus with the mattress in the place where a brutality by a classmate had happened, during the first night she was staying there. Since that day Emma has tried in every way to convince the University management, the police and even friends that what had happened to her was rape, and that her tormentor deserved to be punished. Despite the fact that she filed a complaint, the alleged culprit did not suffer any consequences, and so she has stubbornly staged a protest-performance ever since.

We cannot fail to consider rape as a torture and an expression of sadism, of sexual pleasure derived from the enjoyment of the humiliation of the other. Rape is an act in which pleasure becomes the pleasure of pleasure, a form in which sadism and narcissism come together in a revealing union of the evil potentialities inherent in the human being.

Rampant narcissism is the result of a culture that, since the 1950s, has theorized the supremacy of the individual over the community, generating diversified forms of estrangement, ranging from egotism to selfishness up to pathological narcissism. This was due to the fact that the educational, cultural, social and psychological conditions favored – and continue to favor – the primacy of the ego over everyone and everything else. Narcissism is such a pervasive pathology that it has been suggested to declassify it in DSM (Diagnostic Statistical Manual) from a disease to a “trait” of a wider mental problem; an explanation for this possible “downgrading” could be precisely the effect of its excessive diffusion.

Kindness, the ability to listen, the respect for others are the attitudes that, as Sigmund Freud argues (Freud 1921), represent the “psychic dam” that pushes to oppose cruelty and aggression. It is a dam that it is required by society to simply survive, while instead we are facing today the individualization of the individual, the *hýbris* (the excess), that in ancient Greece implied that the hero would succumb and be punished by fate.

Narcissism can degenerate into attitudes that damage fundamental ways of social relations, including cooperation, solidarity, kindness, availability, when the benevolent form of valorization is distorted, culturally and socially, by the exaltation of the concept of individual freedom, making it become the Golem to whom we should sacrifice the quality of our relationships (Lasch 1979; Ballatt and Campling 2011).

It gets worse. There is no doubt that femicide is red, red like the blood that comes out of the bodies of Hannah, Elisabeth, Mary, Eleanor, Sylvia and at least 53,000 women who, in the world, every year die a violent death at the hands of partners, husbands, lovers, fathers,

brothers, cousins, grandparents, and rarely even at the hand, or with the complicity, of other women (Magaraggia and Cherubini 2013).

In *Syngué Sabour* (2012), a drama movie directed by Atiq Rahimi, blood instead comes out of a man's body, killed by an unnamed woman, a woman for all women. "Those who do not know how to make love go to war" are the words pronounced by the protagonist to represent the feelings of women living in a country, Afghanistan, that is impregnated with permanent warfare. The woman whispers the truth of a relationship devoid of love and affection, she welcomes the truth of one's life and the conditions to survive, and she affirms and fights for the truth of her existence: in doing so, she invades the room with her own body, a room in which almost the entire film takes place. It is a body that accounts for her interiority and that is her life. Painful images accompany a long anguished and ferocious monologue which tells of the suffering and the need to perform unacceptable gestures for the tribal human beings that are, at the same time, indispensable for her to be accepted and not repudiated as a wife. The narrative is made possible by the fact that the husband is a passive hearer, rendered helpless by a bullet lodged in his neck, a bullet fired from the weapon used by a guerrilla of the same faction. This passivity gives rise to an inversion of the roles and causes the increasing vitality of the protagonist's body that thus becomes symbolically the sign of rebellion against male power. The fact of escaping rape implies to declare herself a prostitute, as this practice is, in turn, the emblem of a constantly violated body who is deprived of its own intimacy and that therefore, according to the logic that the film puts on, no longer adheres to the law of "purity" – so that the potential rapist, if he intends to remain pure, cannot come into contact with it. Where there was an "illegitimate" penis he cannot "immerse himself" his own, because at that point he himself would become impure. This is well stigmatized again by the words uttered by the woman: "Because putting his filthy male organ in a used hole doesn't give him any manly pride." This is a sentence reminiscent of the novel *Les Hommes qui marchent* by Malika Mokkedem, set in Algeria in 1962, where the male crowd is described in this way:

Herd of sexual misery, they segregated women and because of their absence they were so hungry, that the sight of a girl without a veil upset a whole multitude. They were bursting with abstinence. The old sperm that fermented in them did not ejaculate [shortly after defined "rancid sperm"], foamed at the corners of their lips. Cries of "manhood," of hatred and misogyny, faces deformed, knotted, mutilated by perpetual frustrations, until they become nothing but feral bestiality! (Mokkedem 1990, p. 284; cited from the Italian edition).

It is in the Torah that the female body becomes a paradigm of the pure/impure. It is a paradigm that then gives life and origin to this categorical dichotomy that has characterized European

thought and culture. The impurity is attributed to the body of the menstruating woman and the woman in childbirth in the Torah, in the Koran and in many texts of Hinduism. It was women who first went to check the body of Christ to the sepulchre and recognized the Resurrection, whose absence is the metaphor *par excellence* of a male body that rises to purity.

After all, in New Guinea it is the concept of impurity, related to the female body, that explains the presence in the villages of the structure of “man’s house,” necessary for the separation of boys from women in view of the complicated initiatory ceremonies which will lead them to the status of men and future warriors. Beyond the concept of impurity linked to menstruation and childbirth, in this area of the planet the idea of impurities is also linked to the denial of the importance of the female role in procreation (Langness 1974). This may suggest an analogy with the Mediterranean world, in this case with the Greek world of the 5th century B.C., where the denial of a woman’s generative capacity was explicitly stated on the theatrical scene through the myth of Orestes who kills his mother to avenge the murder of his father and is acquitted by the court, on the grounds that the only parent who “creates” the child is the father, while the mother simply offers the place. This Greek mythical theme has been used by Johann Jakob Bachofen, in his famous *Mutterrecht*, to explain the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy.

In the contemporary world we are undeniably witnessing an ambivalence and we can observe the paradox of feminine charm passing from the body in its entirety, or from certain parts of it, such as hair, eyes, voice, movements, skin, clothing, emotions and sentiments transmitted, forcing to reconcile, on the one hand, seductiveness and self-affirmation, and, on the other hand, the discomforts of menstruation or the alteration caused by the belly in motherhood with the relative deformation of their image: a belly that, in some cases, is proudly displayed and that, in other cases, is vice-versa a mere burden, regardless of whether motherhood is an event that occurs very early or at a more mature age. Hence today, like yesterday, women are vagabonds, restless, curious, submissive, rebellious, loyal, modest, sober, industrious, merciful, graceful, taciturn, graceful, faithful, irreproachable and more, and in being so they use clothes, jewels, make-up and everything else available, or they choose not to use it.

2. Power, Domination, Freedom

There are many examples of literary, cinematographic, theatrical stagings, where the fear of lack of power over one’s life can lead to sadistic violence that illusorily promises to fill the void of power and precisely because of its illusory character, carries with it the need for the sadistic act to repeat itself. Those who rape do not rape once, but carry out a behavior that can only be serial, because it is generated by an insatiable appetite to inflict torment, havoc and pain, and to subjugate a body and its ravines to martyrdom in order to remove death from oneself by inflicting

it psychologically and physically to another person (a woman), not looking – as happens with death – in anyone’s face, not listening to any plea to be spared, in order to let people know with the blows of one’s penis that one is stronger and more inexorable and that there is no wealth that can overcome the need to affirm his thirst for power. Conversely, the raped woman experiences rape as a single, singular, personal, specific, exclusive act, addressed only to itself: hence, an experience that is opposite to the “impersonal” experience of the rapist. For the woman, after that act, nothing will be ever the same again and nothing will be the terrible fault of being a woman, to be both the symbol and the flesh of a coveted and missed power which can only be exercised by subtracting dignity from the identity of others (Waldenfels 2006). This becomes possible thanks to the paradigmatic staging of gestures which become obscenities and which feed on imagination. The guilt of being a woman is confirmed by the sin of the sexual act, an act imposed by a supposed unmanifested desire: “You enjoy being raped, it’s your secret desire, I know this, even if you don’t admit it.”

Power is really such, if it takes away the freedom of others, and it is all the more powerful the more it is exercised on the body of the other person (a woman). The Israeli film *Viviane* (2014), by Ronit Elkabetz and Shlomi Elkabetz, plastically stages the difficulty of abandoning dominion over the life of the other person (a woman), and freedom – divorce – is formally granted only if the unwillingness to use one’s body is obtained as a guarantee in sexual acts with other men.

A completely different image of the idea of freedom can even cause emotional reactions, like the one we feel every time we watch the ending of the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989). We watch the film and we are troubled when professor John Keating, fired by the dean of the school, leaves the classroom for the last time and his pupils do not surrender to the decision and, in order to pay homage to him, one after the other, stand up on the counter and shout: “O Captain! My Captain!” The pupils repeat that gesture and that phrase over and over again, and accordingly they turn an individual event into a collective rite. The movie and its persistent relevance testify the human need for someone to show us the way to go, a way to salvation from a world in which you feel that you have been thrown in the sea of existence (with its constitutive burden of uncertainty) without knowing how to swim, or how to navigate. The protagonist of *Dead Poets Society* is a man, and his pupils are men, just like the vast majority of CEOs in banks and private or public companies are men. Buddha, Christ and Gandhi were men, and God has always been “imagined” as a male figure. The persisting stereotype is that men are the masters who indicate the “right” path in life, that men are the models to imitate.

A woman, a teacher of life, is imagined as sexless, savvy, perhaps not too sweet or, vice-versa, very sweet, a little authoritarian or completely submissive, or even a holy woman who juggles alchemical tools and saving potions. The teacher of life is not a mother, but the teacher

of life is a father (Recalcati 2012, 2013a, 2013b), so much so that the male teacher becomes a father and in Christianity man became the Father *par excellence*, the Father of all fathers. Not by chance, also the opposite of God, namely the Devil, is male and has followers and disciples, and is in turn a teacher.

The male thus embodies both the best of all goods and the worst of the evils.

Stalin and Hitler have become the symbol of extreme crimes which are accomplished when one attacks humanity as such, that is, when everyone's right to exist is denied because all persons are different from each other. It is difficult in History to find traces of female figures that have been the protagonists of such crimes that are so structurally and rationally designed; in rare cases, women can be identified instead as supporting actors.

For several years we have been witnessing the denunciation of the loss of the paternal dimension and this absence would be the cause as well as the product of a new form of cynicism, the "narcinism": a neologism coined by Colette Soler (2009) on the basis of her work on Jacques Lacan. From this perspective, we would be faced with the exasperation of our appetites to the detriment of all responsibility and respect for each other. At the same time, narcissism triumphs with its "lack of humanity," "denial of feelings," "hunger for affection," absence of remorse, pursuit of power and drowning in envy, up to the denial of the individual identity of others.

Some dynamics grafted by social networks unequivocally endorse the advancement of the dimension of "narcinism." Let us just think of the fact that C. P., after stabbing his wife to death, posted on his Facebook page the sentence "You are dead bitch," and 308 people expressed their consent through a "Like."

These elements justify the demands for equality of the historical feminists of the 1970s and 1980s: those demands meant that equality could exist without being considered an appendix, a draft or an imperfect declination from the original, the masculine. Those feminists weren't facing a narcissistic and narcissistic collectivity, but they were facing a community that was still firmly founded on solidarity and collective responsibility, in which the single person was responsible for everything.

It is a dysfunction, that of narcissism and "narcinism," that Amelie Nothomb has expressed with these metaphorical terms: "I am hungry [...] By hunger I mean that scary hole in the whole being, that emptiness that grips, that aspiration not so much to utopian fullness as to simple reality: where there is nothing, I implore that there is something" (Nothomb 2004, p. 57).

What is described is an emotional hunger induced by the desire to swallow the other or oneself, generated by a hole in the stomach up to the irrepressible desire for a particular food which can express the need for something to bite, to face, to approach, to swallow, to make ours, to digest, to elaborate. Nothomb puts "devouring the other" at the center of her research, which

happens in a way that ensures gratification and peace from one's anxiety, in the illusion of withstanding the blows of life in a better way, to distract from the fatigue of living, to be satisfied quickly, to delude oneself of governing the constitutive uncertainty of life. Thus, each one individually and all together, we become people hungry for sensations, stimuli, attention and recognition. "Eating" the other becomes a kind of comforting and gratifying pacifier. Despair, anxiety, sadness, but also excitement and craving, become ways to express one's autonomy, by entrenching oneself in one's own inner space and not allow any possibility of exchange with the other, because if the other is not eaten, he will eat us. If so, then it is not worthwhile to display kindness, but it is better to attack first.

On the pediment of the Delphic temple of Apollo is engraved the motto "Know yourself." In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* the warning "But not too much" follows to the motto "Know yourself." The problem highlighted by Plato is that of the *limit*. A limit that is insurmountable, due to the very nature of the human being: aiming to overcome the limit would mean to commit the sin of *hýbris*; aspiring to know oneself truly and fully, in perfect self-sufficiency, would be tantamount to turn the sea into a land. It is an entity, the earth, that the human being, thanks to technique, presumes to be able to dominate and subdue, while the sea presents itself as an entity that does not allow to be mastered or conquered, not only because of its size, but also because of its very fluid nature.

In order not to err on the side of *hýbris*, the investigation into oneself must be limited and cautious, it must not run the risk of trying to peer Eckhart's "bottom of the soul."

The only way to know yourself without wanting "too much" is relating to the experience of the other and to the experience that the other has of me. To have the possibility not only of a correct *gnosis*, but simply of an adequate *theoría*, the presence of the other is required. But the other is hopelessly a foreigner, the other is the transcendental condition of the individual's self-knowledge. In other words, it can be said that one always knows oneself as a stranger to himself or herself. Bernhard Waldenfels in *Grundmotive* writes that "the ego is another because strangeness begins at home" (Waldenfels 2006, p. 32).

Identity is therefore instantiated in the relationship, but while women (as the other) have been questioning this relationship for a long time, men (as the other) have struggled to investigate this relationship because on the social level they have been considered the top and the privileged subjects.

The ego is configured in terms of a split from the beginning, as Plato had already well described in the *Symposium*:

In the first place, let me treat of the nature of man and what has happened to it; for the original human nature was not like the present, but different. The sexes were not two as

they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which had once a real existence, but is now lost, and the word “Androgynous” is only preserved as a term of reproach. In the second place, the primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely alike; also four ears, two privy members, and the remainder to correspond. He could walk upright as men now do, backwards or forwards as he pleased, and he could also roll over and over at a great pace, turning on his four hands and four feet, eight in all, like tumblers going over and over with their legs in the air; this was when he wanted to run fast. [...] After the division the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces, longing to grow into one, they were on the point of dying from hunger and self-neglect, because they did not like to do anything apart; and when one of the halves died and the other survived, the survivor sought another mate, man or woman as we call them, – being the sections of entire men or women, – and clung to that. [...] When Zeus in pity of them invented a new plan: he turned the parts of generation round to the front, for this had not been always their position, and they sowed the seed no longer as hitherto like grasshoppers in the ground, but in one another; and after the transposition the male generated in the female in order that by the mutual embraces of man and woman they might breed, and the race might continue; or if man came to man they might be satisfied, and rest, and go their ways to the business of life: so ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man. Each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the indenture of a man, and he is always looking for his other half (Plato, 189c – 193e).

Being split off, being separated, being alienated from oneself is the first step in the separation from others, in the alienation of relationships and, in our case, of the relationship with the other (the woman). Etymologically, *alienus* unequivocally refers to *alius* and means “belonging to others,” because “to alienate” means “to transfer possession of a thing to others.”

The discrimination of the other from oneself, and in oneself, implies a denial of freedom in a double sense: firstly, the denial of the freedom to express and exchange different views, and secondly, the denial of the freedom to act and to be able to establish a mutual comparison. In other words, the essential character of this form of domination consists in destroying what constitutes the founding element of identity, that is, the constitutive plural and communal character of humanity.

What takes shape is, on the one hand, the perspective of plurality, the unfolding of the power to act in concert, the experience of equality of power; on the other hand, the prospect of isolation, the will to dominate the other (the woman), which embodies man's fear not to be able of dominating himself.

So, while power calls into question responsibility – because power can be asked to account for how it is exercised –, conversely the dominating person is configured as a-responsible: in fact, he who dominates does not ask himself the question of responsibility towards the dimension of his domination. Power includes demand, domination excludes it.

Tyranny is based on total domination and brings about the destruction of relationships, generating a power not *over* individuals but *among* human beings. In this way, “ruins” are generated, because the horizon of meaning is destroyed, namely the horizon that cements the bond between individuals and that each individual contributes to enrich and nourish with his/her own being in the world, being the subject who projects himself/herself into and through death, where the latter is the dimension that is configured as the limit that each one tries to overcome. The totalitarian form of domination, as Hannah Arendt argued, shows that evil is never radical but is just extreme and has neither depth, nor a demonic face. So much so those partners, husbands, lovers, fathers, brothers, cousins, grandparents who abuse women are “normal” people, namely individuals that are anything but inhumane, so that the worst atrocities can arise from people who apparently seems harmless and banal.

If the history of feminism is the history of the rejection of hierarchies in the relation between female and male, then there is no doubt that these long years of battles failed to scratch the mentality linked to domination and power.

3. Freedom, Biocapitalism, Individualism

In recent years, there have been many debates in which it has been raised the question as to whether the modalities and contents of feminist struggles had not ended up becoming an ally of biocapitalism (Fraser 2013), a useful accomplice in the construction of the discourse on the theme of casualization, that is, organizational devices in the work-life imposed by the new paradigms of accumulation. Over the past forty years, many women wanted to escape from home life and the sole care of children, in order to emancipate themselves in the public space. However, it is possible that precisely these struggles have helped to segment and further to fragment the labor market. If so, then the critique of sexism may have provided a justification for new forms of inequality and exploitation.

This could explain why a certain number of feminist ideas, that were once part of a radical worldview, are used today for individualistic purposes. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists

criticized a society where careerism was promoted, while now women are advised to “trust.” Women’s movement had established social solidarity as a priority, while today it celebrates female entrepreneurs. Feminist perspectives at the time valued in a positive way “taking care” and human interdependence, while now they encourage individual progress and meritocracy.

The common thread with history is the fact that women have always aimed to be freer, happier, more fulfilled. These are ambitions that the most fruitful and most reflective strands of feminism – emerged in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, such as *essentialist and deconstructionist* (Irigaray 1974, 1984, 1989), *sexual difference* (Braidotti 1994), *gender issues* (Buffer 1990, 1993, 1997, 2004), *cyborg theory* (Haraway 1991), *nomadic subjectivity* (de Lauretis 1996) – have always indicated as objectives to be pursued. These goals have been the harbingers of new clichés and stereotypes, also received from feminism itself, which have generated the exclusion of all non-women and non-female subjectivities, as well as all non-man and non-male subjectivities. The latter are the “other” genres that have the same kaleidoscope of desires that women have and that, as happens with women, may also change over time.

What is certain is that, from the 1980s onwards (although the signs were already visible in the second half of the 1970s, when in Italy the feminist slogan was depopulated: “*The body is mine and I manage it*”), feminism has stood out for a strong sense of freedom of expression and freedom of decision: something which, however, was clearly marked by the emerging culture of individualism. Different forms of feminism developed in a society that fully shared Margaret Thatcher’s famous statement according to which “There is no such thing as society,” but only individuals exist. The idea that underlies this perspective is the idea that life is a jungle, in which only the strongest wins and in which the feminine should endow itself with the aggressiveness of those who are “more men than men,” thus giving life to the so-called (in Italian language) “uoma”: that is, in English, “woman-man.” This bizarre expression means an aggressive, competitive woman, who mainly (if not solely) takes care only of herself, and is therefore a narcissist.

It was the prerogative of feminism to somehow accept and validate in communicative terms the fact that one must not pose any limit to individual freedom. Of course, the slogan had that meaning because it was, and still is, necessary to affirm the women’s right to have the last word on both sexuality and motherhood. However, it remains true that the criticism only of patriarchy and the vindication only of individual freedom have turned that slogan into a forerunner of a kind of feminist thinking marked by individualism. This has led, as evolutionary biology can teach, to enhance competition more than cooperation. In this sense, our current society is a society that is culturally marked by individualism. The goal of the present contribution is to highlight the limits of these thirty years-old forms of feminism, including the so-called feminism of *sexual difference* to which also the abovementioned statement by Alessandro Barbero seems to refer.

The second wave of feminism emerged as a critique of capitalism instantiated after the Second World War, but many feminist positions have soon become ideologically compliant to the structural foundations of contemporary capitalism: “disorganized,” globalized, neoliberal.

In 1961 the novel *Revolutionary road* (Yates 1961) appeared, a novel in which the protagonist prefers to die as a result of an abortion rather than continuing to live with a profound sense of existential failure, having been forced to give up her ambition to be an actress, finding herself in the condition of leading a purely closed life at home, and not feeling any consolation in the “happy” condition of marriage and maternal care. The novel took shape in a social and cultural humus in which the contradictions of the lives of American women were evident, since a survey made in 1957 by the psychologist Betty Friedan, released in 1963 with the title *Mysticism of Femininity* (Friedan 1963), had revealed that a large part of American society was made up of disheartened housewives. This social climate was staged in the 2000s by the television series *Mad Man*: Betty, the first wife of the protagonist Donald “Don,” is the archetype of a “desperate housewife.” Behind the appearance of a fulfilled woman, Betty actually feels dissatisfied and unhappy, so much so that Don, after some initial resistance, agrees to have her undergo psychoanalysis sessions, a practice legitimized by the general American public in those years. Friedan’s essay describes the society that took shape following the demographic boom and shortly before the consumer boom: a period in which American women, after the emancipation occurred between the two world wars, were forced to “go home,” thus suffering from the new generalized situation. This represents one of the many examples that do not allow to conceive of a linear development in the path of liberation and freedom. Friedan focuses on the strength of the symbolic, since society is able from time to time to present ideals of “happiness” aimed at the female world; for this reason, she focuses her criticism on the sneaky character played by persuasions, both when they have a manipulative intent in the background and when the latter is not present since the possibility of escaping – on a material or a reflective level – is never very simple. Let us think, for example, of American films from the 1960s and their typical model personified by the beautiful little house with a garden, in which the cool appliances are the blender, the vacuum cleaner and the lawnmower, and the man is a helpful domestic worker. Those were the same years in which Katherine Hepburn wore pants in private life and played as an actress in *The Desk Set* (1957), a film that stages the figure of an emancipated, proud, dazzling woman, who, in her work, is replaced anyway by a first mammoth electronic computer, which should allow her to engage in positions of greater responsibility.

It is precisely since the 1960s that the mysticism of femininity has taken on the most diverse forms but has not lost the characteristic of normativity of roles, thus giving rise to new stereotypes, that is, to rigid and often distorted perceptions or concepts that support

interpretations of reality often based on unsubstantiated facts. Charisma, determination, authority are the qualities that the non-female world does not tend to recognize in us; these three properties have been considered indispensable for directing and do not conform to the thesis of Egidio Romano, according to which the soul follows the constitution of the body: since, in his opinion, women have a soft and unstable body, consequently they are unstable and mobile in the will and desire. After that, other stereotypes such as vulnerability, courage and authenticity were understood indeed as the defining characteristics of the feminine (where vulnerability does not necessarily coincide with weakness), although nothing hinders the possibility of being charismatic, determined and authoritative.

With hindsight, we can argue that the women's liberation movement has simultaneously pointed to two different possible futures. In a first scenario, it designed a world in which gender emancipation went hand in hand with participatory democracy and social solidarity; in a second scenario, it promised new forms of liberalism, capable of guaranteeing women, as well as men, the "goods" of individual autonomy, expansion of choices, merit-based advancement. In short, "second generation feminism" was ambiguous in this sense: being compatible with both representations of society, it was therefore susceptible to lead to two different conceptions of history.

The male breadwinner and the female housewife models were central to post-World War II capitalism and its organization. Feminist critiques of that model now help to legitimize "flexible capitalism." This new organizational form of contemporary capital relies heavily on waged female labor, especially at low cost, in services and manufacturing: a labor that is guaranteed not only by young single women, but also by married women and women with children.

Feminism has also provided a second cultural contribution to liberalism: criticisms of domestic and sexual violence, and of reproductive oppression. By rejecting economicism and politicizing the personal dimension, feminists have broadened the general political agenda, adding to it the theme of the hierarchical construction of gender difference. The expected result was to expand the struggle for social justice, encompassing both cultural and economic elements, but the actual result was instead an extreme focus of feminism on the theme of "gender identity," to the detriment of the issues that have to do with labor and capitalist exploitation.

In all these cases, the ambivalence of feminism has been resolved in favor of a liberal neo-individualism. But certainly, the other side of us, that is, the perspectives represented by solidarity feminism, could still be alive. The economic and social crisis that began in 2007, accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the current war in the heart of Europe, offer the possibility of further expanding this approach, reconnecting the dream of women's liberation with the vision of a society based on solidarity. To this end, feminists need to break the dangerous relationship with liberalism.

There are different realities on the planet than the one that has been described so far. For example, in the province of Yunnan, in China, women have the monopoly of authority and administer the economy, marriage does not exist, love is practiced freely and without coexistence constraints. Shortly after puberty, women receive a room, where they can decide to let the man that they want in, just once or for months and years. This is a sort of “walking marriage,” or rather a love bond (called *axia*), that is radically different from what we mean and that does not include to have any property in common. Everyone stays at home, so that when the bond is broken the consequences are less severe for women and men and for the children. The latter live in the mother’s family, cared for – just like the elderly – by the grandmothers, by the sisters of the mother and also by the uncles, because here the father figure does not exist, so much so that it is even irrelevant to know who they really are from that point of view. Women work, always and a lot, and at the same time they hold the power and the purse strings. Men do heavy or humble jobs, and intervene in big decisions, but only sporadic ones, for example when it comes to mediating between neighbors. For the rest, they rest and play cards. Much more central is falling in love and the relative sexuality, playful and free, which the Mosuo never thought of placing – unstable and complicated as it is – as the basis of the family.

4. The Triangle of Complexity and the Thousand Colors of Genders and Sexes

Today women must face a thematic triangle that is composed in a complex way by neurobiological and genetic discoveries, new technologies, and economic crises. This is the underlying layer with which it is necessary to confront: a triangle around which spaces of democracy, and the characteristics of rights and duties (and their limits and boundaries), are formed, as well as categories and facts, on which individual, relational and social responsibilities are defined.

In this triangle, freedom must be the focus of the new feminism: this must include the desire for freedom and the recognition that “claims in the name of freedom” are something different and do not always go hand in hand with those aimed at eliminating status hierarchies or injustices of treatment. The concept of freedom is a difficult one to formulate, and, furthermore, it is also a contested and certainly dangerous one. The process of investigation of freedom is a process that women (and, with them, the social, cultural and educational context) have only partially completed; it is a very contradictory and contrasted path, which I nevertheless believe to be important, inasmuch as it has been started, and presumably unstoppable. This process is a path inside and outside of oneself, which generates new behaviors, new forms of aggregation, and also the search for new passwords, together with the repercussions that can hinder or place strong limits to freedom and the general process of emancipation.

Undoubtedly, a critical articulation of stereotypes has fortunately happened, in particular of the cruder ones such as those of the “obedient daughter,” the “efficient housewife,” the “good mom” and the “understanding wife.” This has led to the possibility that the conducts or attitudes of a woman take on a character that is no longer unique, without losing their prescriptive essence.

The strands of feminism that I have referred to, on the one hand, have allowed to stop interpreting the outward traits of corporeality as a natural datum; on the other hand, these strands have been feeding themselves in the duality of categories, they have in many ways excluded all that is eccentric, multiple, undisciplined and in constant movement with respect to the boundaries assigned to the female or male gender, and have not allowed to focus one’s attention on the variations of sensitivity and personal identity over time and on the variations that take place on an organic and cultural level. We have lives and identities on the way, and Africa, that has always been “Mama,” is constitutively associated with the idea of femininity and life bearer, thus representing for everyone the paradigm of the contradictions of the feminine.

The different forms of feminism have made it clear that gender is not a biologically “pure” given, but is also something that is culturally defined. The concept of culture can be traced back to the same non-hierarchical principle: in fact, today more than ever it is not easy to define what *popular culture* really consists of, because it does not seem possible to really distinguish between culture and popular culture, inasmuch as all the aspects of a culture are inexorably intertwined, especially in an age, like the present one, in which communications in social media are depopulated and do not require specific skills or knowledge to have the right to use them.

The researches that refer to the man/woman dichotomy, trying to understand if the two genders have identical brain bodies, start from a genetic heritage that is based on the different chromosomal coupling, heteromorphic (XY) for males and homologous (XX) for females. These researches show that the range of the possible conditions that may exist between the masculine and the feminine is capable to cause many “headaches,” thus questioning, at the root, the dichotomy that underlies the distinction between the genders, that is, how can we really define if someone is a boy or a girl. The matter becomes even more complex if we examine the relationship between genetic heritage, hormones, central nervous system and the generation of specific neurons. These complex interactions can explain how, in the same individual, there may be many intermediate nuances that cannot be “read” only as dichotomously attributable to a woman or a man, or account for the presence of masculine attitudes in “women” and feminine ones in “men,” or for transgenders, transvestites or crossdressers, drag queens, drag kings, gays with feminine attitudes, lesbians with masculine attitudes, and so on: namely, for all those persons who experience a gender identity that is not congruent with their form of appearance. If the form persists throughout life, then the described interactions act in such a way as to modify the definition of the

individual parameters constantly and continuously in us. So, we are always sexually different from who we were a moment before, and we cannot know who we will be sexually tomorrow (Del Giudice 2009a and 2009b; Del Giudice, Ellis and Shirtcliff 2011; McCarthy and Ball 2011).

Whether sexual and gender differences are of a biological nature or of educational, cultural and social nature, is only in part an open question, since the constraints that are given by the “sketch” that we are at the time of conception (so to speak, the form we take) play a role, but also brain plasticity and epigenetics are decisive. In fact, the latter describe how permeable the structure of the individual is, first of all from internal hormonal influences and from those caused by the environment, starting from intrauterine life and continuing with neonatal, pubertal, adolescent and finally adult life.

The biology/culture dualism, which has markedly invested gender issues, can only lead to generate a new perspective, since feminist thought in its various facets has often been nourished by the man-woman, male/female dichotomy. The first has been usually attributed to the organic domain, while the latter to the cultural field, and from their nature normative and prescriptive categories, aimed at controlling who one is and how one is, have been derived. From which it follows that one thing is sex and another is sexism.

In my view, it is not enough to embrace the position of Judith Butler, the famous theorist of “gender performativity,” who emphatically theorized that the body one is born with has little or no importance, and that what really matters is rather the gender that you choose to belong to. For me, it is not even enough to admit, as Butler later did (and, in doing so, partially denying her previous assumptions), the existence of “an incontrovertible material residue,” that is, the sexed body (Butler 1993, 2004).

Today we are faced with countless scientific researches and behaviors that strongly question dichotomous visions both between the sexes and between genres, and above all between nature and culture, and also between different aspects of culture, so much so that sex and gender are intertwined and confused with each other, and give life to a reality in which the articulation of behavior is expressed in shades of color, where the rainbow is the archetype of main reference for this experience. All this requires taking on the dimension of uncertainty, firstly one’s own and then that of the other, given that the genetic characteristics, with their phenotype and genotype, can be altered and modified by educational, cultural and social conditions, just as the latter are undoubtedly influenced by genetic-biological bonds. We are immersed in a context that makes us live in a perennial, constant and endless interaction which results in constant co-adaptation of each of us with the environment and vice-versa.

A work that will never end is the one linked to highlighting the traps generated by the social constructions of identities and differences in their various facets; it is a question of

eradicating at the root the logics that carry normativity, which rely on a close relationship between *nómos* and *lógos*. It is the multiplicity that must be brought to light, in a “natural” light, which requires to overcome the dichotomies and an alleged sense of superiority, each time differently defined, that makes it possible to nullify the face of alarm, dismay and insecurity coming from the “other,” from the different.

In everyday reality, the meanings of sex, gender, domination and power continue to determine each other. Even on the cognitive level, this mutual determination is still re-proposed: men are supposedly good at mathematics, while women are supposedly inclined to take care of others; boys are hyperactive, while girls are chatty.

These are gender stereotypes that have been apparently supported by a vast scientific literature – and also well rooted in what we may call the collective imagination – and that are extremely hard to die (Stoet, O’Connor, Conner and Laws 2013).

What has been seriously questioned from a scientific point of view is, instead, what we may call the dual membership scheme: women and men. Thus, sex and gender as such, with their metaphysical significance, are now, on the scientific level, archived.

However, we are all borderline figures.

The very widespread simplification, in particular in the field of communication, but above all its desire, are potentially perceived as a card to be played in difficult, tough, hostile, competitive, competitive and even cruel social conditions. And so, simplification and its own desire become attractive to shelter one’s heart (so to speak) or relegate one’s expressiveness to the cliché of the *femme fatal* (as long as the registry allows it) or that of the woman who “by nature” is suitable to take care of children, of elderly parents, of life companions, even of the whole planet.

We are all, apparently and deceptively, on the same level. In reality, this is not the case, we live in an unequal world that is based on inequality. We all know, for example, that the so-called viral character of certain messages is often managed by those who have more power, financial and technological resources.

There are three aspects that are very likely to be addressed in a better way by resorting to other skills that characterize a certain type of stereotype about women’s meekness, kindness, patience, ability to wait and live in uncertainty, trying to progressively adapt their moods and behaviors to the perceived changes (even infinitesimal ones).

In this regard, questions concerning the ethics of care, such as those proposed by Joan Tronto, should be carefully evaluated. Tronto proposes to set free the ethics of care from its traditional link with female morality, because this connection would be doubly deleterious, because it could lead to treat birth, mortality, and care as “women’s matters” (and, consequently, as secondary issues), and also because it could be used to bind women only to maternal and filial

functions. Therefore, Tronto strongly criticizes the feminist thesis that was summarized by the suffragette slogan according to which, if women had the right to vote, then there would be no more wars: in fact, for Tronto this slogan accredits the idea that women would be more moral because they are mothers, at least potentially, and therefore strengthens the roles that have been culturally attributed to women and the latter's alleged extraneousness to the economic processes and dynamics that characterize the market. Tronto raises objections against the idea according to which an ethics of care would be the expression of an essentially feminine morality, whereas an ethics of rights and justice would be the expression of a specifically masculine morality (Tronto 1994, 1998 and 2006; Adams and Donovan 2007).

For example, we can observe the story of the mothers, and especially of German women during Second World War (but not only), who were very proud to send their children to war; or still, the increasing presence of women in armies and the request to be the first; or still, the behavior of female soldiers in the Iraq war and specifically in the Abu Ghraib prison; or still, the presence of women in acts of terrorism and their role in organized crime: all these events certainly do not offer support to the idea according to which there would not be any "acts of war" in a world ruled by women.

It is certain that, with the changes that are currently taking place, women must confront and deal with new slogans, in particular with the concept of *limit*. When the male gender was able to do this, he set no limits in expanding his power and it is necessary to develop a complex relation on this (a reflection that, for now, is still missing).

The idea of a supposedly essentialist superiority in taking care of someone, or an imaginary feminine meekness, has ensured that women have been almost entirely excluded from political, institutional and cultural power until today. The strategy of crediting a supposed female moral supremacy made women fall into traps which were strategic to prevent them from taking on significant roles and functions. Therefore, an integration process would be needed: not a meek behavior but rather a kind behavior between individuals belonging to different "sexes / genders."

Kindness is an important component of care: there is no doubt that care brings with it the practical concept of kindness, and the latter has a fundamental value in the context of human relationships. Kindness is a first step in the relationship with the other, usually a stranger. We know from experience that kindness calms aggression and that, in case of heated arguments, the anger subsides. Kindness therefore has a relational dimension, based on the respect of the dignity of the other.

As an adjective, *kind* means having a sympathetic, helpful or forbearing nature, and – quite importantly for our subject – being inclined to bring pleasure or relief. The Old English noun *cynd* metamorphosed through Middle English to become *kinde* and, in our modern

language, *kind*. The word meant “nature,” “family,” “lineage” – “*kin*.” It indicated what we are, who we are and that we are linked together, in the present and across time.

The word “kindness” indicates the quality or state of being kind. It describes a condition in which people understand and feel their interdependence, feel responsibility for their successors, and express all this in attitudes and actions towards each other.

Also, in the case of kindness it is important to return to its basic conditions, namely the neuroscientific ones.

The brain is a complex, self-organizing system that simulates and represents experiences through a competitive as well as a cooperative activity of populations of neurons, at both local and global level. Its optimal functioning depends on the flexible, dynamic balance between specialized, locally segregated activity, and more generalized global integration. Both excessive segregation and excessive integration can lead to suboptimal functioning. Interestingly, to fully prosper, the human community needs to similarly continuously adjust toward optimal balance between individual freedom and social responsibility, between national sovereignty and globalization (Turri 2012).

Recent researches have shown that training kindness can increase positive emotions, social connectedness and pro-social behaviors. It can decrease negative feelings and social biases, and even slow biological ageing (Cutler and Campbell-Meiklejohn 2018).

Several key emotional competencies contribute to the capacity for kindness, especially empathy and sympathy (feeling with another), compassion (feeling for another’s distress), and the theory of mind (the ability to understand another’s beliefs and intentions). These are all skills that depend on mirror neurons and simulation neurons. The brain networks involved in these competencies show hierarchical structuring, from relatively simple perceptual-motor circuits to highly complex ones such as those involved in the theory of mind. In particular, empathy and compassion have been found to involve three levels of processing: firstly, an initial assessment performed by the amygdala and the components of mirror neuron system in the inferior frontal/pre-motor and inferior parietal cortex; secondly, affective simulation involving bilateral insula and the anterior and middle cingulate gyrus; thirdly, the cognitive component engaging the executive system for emotion control via attention and re-appraisal in the fronto-parietal and temporal areas, and the areas associated with theory of mind in the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex and temporo-parietal junction.

Additionally, compassion has been found to activate systems for reward and positive affect, involving ventral tegmental area, nucleus accumbens and the orbito-frontal cortex (Turri 2012; Turri 2019).

Recent researches in the field of contemplative neuroscience have shown that kindness and related competencies can be trained, resulting in both functional and structural neural plasticity. In altruistic individuals, increased activity in the posterior superior temporal cortex has been reported (when compared with less altruistic individuals). Individual acts of kindness release both endorphins and oxytocin and create new neural connections. The implications for such plasticity of the brain are that altruism and kindness become self-authenticating (Fredrickson and Kok 2016; Turri 2019).

Jo Cutler and Daniel Campbell-Meiklejohn collected data from 36 previous studies in which 1.150 participants had undergone functional MRI scans while they were produced in acts of generosity or selfishness. Through a detailed analysis of all the brain scans, these two scholars were able to identify biological differences between two forms of kindness: the genuine and fully altruistic one, and the one defined as “strategic” (so called because it involves a return in terms of reputation or an asset), which provides a benefit for those who do their utmost in the act of generosity. These two forms of kindness manifest themselves in a biologically different way in our brain, activating specific areas of the brain. When one performs an act of strategic kindness, the reward area is activated, highlighting greater activity (i.e., more oxygen consumption) in the striatum. Selfless kindness also activates the reward area; however, the greatest activity is evidenced in the anterior cingulate cortex. It is a brain region in which problems and dangers to which we are exposed are processed unconsciously, preparing the brain to face any unexpected events. In practice, that warm feeling of well-being resulting from being purely altruistic (what the Anglo-Saxons call “warm glow”) really exists, because it corresponds to a biological response that is different from that of being kind for interest (Cutler and Campbell-Meiklejohn 2018).

A thorough examination of kindness reveals the great strength of this course of action in deploying the ability to shape liberal and pluralist practices of citizenship. Kindness can only be asserted if its value is recognized, thanks to a strong reorientation and eradication of the culture of narcissism that has reigned over the last years. Especially after forty years of a culture that has exalted individualism with all available means, we cannot avoid thinking of our behaviors, our experiences and our reflections that have remained immune from it. The different forms of feminism have not been exempted and they have nurtured, given life and green light to articulated, widespread and permanent forms of individualism, and also to its psychopathological aspect, namely narcissism.

Barbero reminded us that all of humanity can be different, if human beings can and if they want to. In order to do so, people must take on the uncertainty of life in a more articulated and conscious way, which is individual at a psychological level, but is also a dimension that is generated by the social reality.

Uncertainty can be faced if one really wants warmer and more consistent relationships with others. In fact, what must be changed is society as a whole, and also the educational modality implemented towards the male gender and beyond. Kindness is the strength of women and outlines a clear strategy for navigating everyday life with charm, attention and prudence. Kindness is the antidote to a brutal world.

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