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Dear Professor Calloni, we would like to sincerely thank you for having generously accepted our invitation to participate in this issue of *Popular Inquiry* with an interview on the link between critical theory, popular culture and feminism. We believe that, first of all, it is very important to express your specific understanding of feminism and feminisms (from a theoretical standpoint) in relation to your way of being a feminist. In this manner, two fundamental teachings of feminism itself are called into play: the importance of positioning, hence the need for recognition of the speaker's position (primarily political and social) and, at the same time the fact that what is personal is political. In the wake of these reflections, and paraphrasing the famous question "What is the purpose of philosophy?," we wish to ask you a question that is both politically and ethically important: What is feminism for?

Marina Calloni (MC)

I am very grateful for your attention and interest in my work. I will try to answer your questions, letting my studies interact with my experience in research networks and international projects in several countries. These multicultural and multidisciplinary experiences have allowed me to re-think Western culture and reorient my profession in order to identify common strategies to be changed – to the extent that this is possible – such as aggressive mentalities, patriarchal awareness as well as forms of both symbolic and structural violence that are epistemological injustice's factors of reproduction. We therefore should refer to feminism as feminisms, as a complex and open plurality of different practices (both past and present) that women's movements have globally experienced, combining different cultures, but always based on common ground for protests and demands for transformation, as we also nowadays see in mass mobilizations. Thus, feminism

cannot be reduced to a *unicum*. As we know, during the world conference organized by the United Nations in 1995 in Beijing, the “protective maternalism” performed by Western women was firmly criticized by women from post-colonial countries. They are active subjects, able to speak in their own voices and on their own terms against any form of domination and one-sided thought.

Feminism has always been capable of self-reflection and self-criticism through processes involving continuous inclusiveness. Feminism also continues to persist through defeats and the failure of rights that once seemed to have been acquired forever and for everyone. Feminism – understood in the broadest sense – is an intercultural and interclass bottom-up practice. It is the result of multiple struggles that were initiated by women (intellectuals, workers and activists) at the end of the 18th century, and continued over time, battling for the recognition of citizenship and human rights, as well as equality/equity in all public and private spheres (from the workplace to education, politics and scientific environments to the domestic space). Feminism has thus implied a “cultural revolution” that has not ended yet. In fact, forms of discrimination and inequality continue to survive and that is the reason for which it persists.

You asked me what it means “to be a feminist.” It is a very difficult question to answer because the reply should focus on a multiplicity of (personal, professional, political and social) aspects that affect my daily practice, my work, my institutional collaborations and my relationships with civil society’s associations. This can be summed up in an overlapping approach, which means respect for human dignity thanks to action taken against all forms of abuse and violence, starting with the persistence of gender inequality.

This conviction leads me to answer the second part of your question concerning the meaning of “positioning,” which feminist epistemology has defined as “situated knowledge.” Standpoint theory argues that knowledge always relates to the observer’s point of view and, consequently, gender dimension. Feminist scientists stress the centrality of a gendered subject (i.e., sex difference and gender relations), rooted in concrete contexts of daily life. She/he/they are situated selves. Cognitive processes are thus criticized if based on a supposed impartial subject and on a concept of rationality that conceives it as objective and neutral. A concrete knowledge is also based on fair relationships that become expressions of care and emotions in rethinking social ties and institutional politics.

Starting from the reality of a tangible and contextually rooted self, which thinks and acts autonomously (contrary to Descartes’ perspective), in my opinion feminism has two fundamental implications: an epistemological and a normative one. On the one hand, feminism implies the need to include in the sphere of knowledge disciplines and studies that – due to a narrow patriarchal idea of rationality, as women’s history shows – have hitherto been repressed and neglected, by introducing new points of view and research questions. On the other hand, once

again in my opinion, feminism has a normative and at the same time critical and socio-political dimension in analysing social pathologies and human rights violations, which must necessarily be opposed. In both cases, education, training and cooperation with both institutions and civil society associations become pivotal in the prevention of gender-based violence and the planning of social policies. This implies a rethinking of our roles as teachers, researchers, global citizens as well as activists, intersectionally united by cross-border networks.

In particular, women philosophers have had to fight against age-old prejudices. In philosophy the battle is still ongoing because philosophy – from a male perspective – was considered the “queen of sciences” and the expression of a capacity to think and act. Artistic, statuary and pictorial images have usually depicted philosophers as men capable of “thinking the world,” thanks to their distinctive reasoning faculties. Philosophers were thus depicted as assertive subjects able to provide a theoretical structure to a shapeless world. The *School of Athens* – painted by Raphael – presents us with an assemblage of men, with an elderly Plato at the centre of the painting, pointing to the world of forms and ideas, and a young Aristotle turning his hand towards factual reality. Indeed, the history of (male) philosophy marks a long, self-contradictory and self-reflective process, perpetuating itself through schools of thought and, at the same time, renewing itself through epistemological change. Philosophy’s self-criticism thus marks self-critical paths through the admission of denial processes: rational thinking has usually been depicted using male bodies and minds, distinguishing between the public sphere of politics and the intellect, on the one hand, and the private space of needs, devoted to biological and everyday reproduction, on the other. The age-old prejudice consisted in the belief that women, reduced to a mere expression of feelings, lacked rationality.

In my opinion, Hannah Arendt has been considered the most important 20th-century female philosopher also because she always applied to her own philosophical reflections the ethical principle of individual responsibility, hence the praxis of *Selbstdenken*, the need to think for oneself autonomously, despite criticism and prejudice. However, the path to the “recognition of female philosophers,” both in academic and public debates has been and still is very bumpy. There is still much resistance – if not derision – to using the name “philosopher” when addressing a woman (“filosofa,” in Italian) who is involved in philosophy as a profession or as a public commitment. It should also be stressed that the number of female professors in the different philosophical fields – especially in fields such as logic and philosophy of science – does not differ too much from the presence of female academics engaged in STEM disciplines, stressing the persistence of both a still resistant dominance and a millenary prejudice connecting philosophy and (male) rationality, so that it has become a form of self-inhibition and self-deception for women.

The kind of “reason” that feminism has put into play – thanks to social experiences and biographical practices – against a model of self-referential rationality, has consisted in the ability not only to think theoretically, but also to point out the forced dichotomy between the public and the private. The core of philosophical reflection has on the contrary become the conceptualization of the meaning of relationships in their twofold and dialectic significance: a manifestation of discriminatory violence, as well as a founding element for radical social and cultural transformations. A substantial democracy can function only when repressive attitudes, traditional mentalities, and images of violence are replaced by concrete forms of gender equality in all spheres of life. This is a daily task for both men and women.

Reframing your question: “What are philosophy and feminism needed for?”, I would say that feminism – as a plurality of actions, thoughts, traditions, cultures, knowledge aimed at achieving dignity, freedom and equality – still needs to refer to counterfactual normative principles and maintain utopian contents that cannot be fully realized in the political and social sphere. I believe that – by maintaining a complex balance between social criticism, realism and idealism – feminism is still able to keep a potential of concrete utopian contents as pragmatic tools that refer to the possibility of changing existing power relations. Despite all the failures and conflicts, the desires and aspirations for a different world remain intact in feminism. Human dignity and justice cannot be separated from moral feelings and passions. The goal of utopian aspirations is to improve human conditions, to increase respect between human beings, to open new horizons in our lives, learning from each other, reinforcing networks and common projects. However, utopia cannot be fully realized. Feminism remains a sort of resistant and resilient utopianism.

VA and SM

Having focused our attention in the first question in this interview on a few very general problems – namely, those concerning the general meaning of philosophy and feminism, and the relevance of one’s “positioning” at a personal and political level –, we would like to focus now, more in particular, on your specific position in contemporary philosophical debates. By saying this, we refer to your belongingness, as a philosopher, to the “paradigm” or “tradition” of critical theory of society, founded by such thinkers as Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno. In your essay dated 2005 “Adorno e il femminismo: un incontro mancato?” you defined the relationship between a critical theorist such as Adorno and feminism in critical terms, as “a failed encounter.” What is your opinion concerning the relationship between critical theory of society and feminist struggles, also beyond the first, second (Habermas) and third generation of Frankfurt thinkers (such as Honneth, Benhabib, Fraser and Jaeggi)?

MC

The question of my “belonging” to critical theory is quite complex because it is not simply a theoretical-philosophical issue, but also an existential matter, which includes my teaching experience and research activities in many different countries. My sense of being a social-political philosopher interested in gender studies concerns first and foremost an attitude towards choices, i.e., what one decides to study, which research aspects one enhances, which collaborations one develops and, last but not least, in which direction does one want to go. My sense of being part of the tradition of critical theory is therefore linked to my studies and frequentations. I would say that I have diachronically and synchronically navigated several generations of critical theorists, starting with my stay in Frankfurt in the late 1980s.

I obtained an MA in Philosophy at the University of Milan with a thesis on the concept of the public sphere in the German debate, and at that time was more favourable to a radical notion of *Öffentlichkeit*, as developed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, than to Habermas’ perspective. My supervisor, Emilio Agazzi, was one of the first Italian translators of Habermas’ works, and he aimed at introducing new approaches to the reinforcement of Marxism in crisis. Thanks to my research, I was awarded a scholarship under the supervision of Habermas, who had recently returned to Frankfurt after the Starnberg experience. During my stay in Frankfurt, I continued to work on the founding fathers of the Frankfurt School - in particular on Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse -, but also on Kracauer and his criticism of modernity in the Weimar Republic. I edited a number of documents and correspondences dating from the difficult post-war years and the return from exile. In particular, I edited the sharp exchange of so far unpublished letters between Marcuse and Heidegger. I remember that at that time there were still discussions and critiques – thanks to the testimonies of feminists who had taken part in students’ protests – against male colleagues, but also memories about the astonishing reaction from Adorno, who had always thought of himself as a critical thinker but was now criticized as a patriarchal thinker. Negative dialectics were turning against his author. His thought showed deficiencies: a gender-based perspective. Adorno’s unexpected death made it impossible to establish a real encounter with feminism and the political-theoretical claims of his female students. Yet critical theory was strengthened by including something that had been denied: an anti-patriarchal gender-based viewpoint.

During those years, every Monday evening, I used to attend the famous *Colloquium*, where Habermas discussed his new writings, and where researchers and eminent guests - such as Gadamer, Rawls, Rorty and Searle (among others) - presented their works. The collective dynamic was very interesting and stimulating. Many strong objections were usually raised against the various speakers. In particular, I remember quite well the radical criticism that some American feminist

theorists directed at Habermas. It is no coincidence that later on Habermas recognized his shortcomings, acknowledging in the “Preface” to the new edition (1990) of his 1962 book on *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* the important role played by feminist thinkers in stressing the patriarchal features of the public sphere (although he was not so convinced at the beginning). The role of women’s movements in creating a new form of a deliberative public sphere was recognized. Later on, in *Between facts and Norms* Habermas devoted a chapter to feminist policies on equal opportunities, in order to show the dialectics between juridical equality and factual equality, and the necessity to rethink the traditional framework of social and distributive justice in the perspective of a procedural idea of deliberative democracy.

During my years in Frankfurt, I also remember very well – among others – the active participation in debates by Sheila Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Iris M. Young and Jean Cohen. At that time Honneth was Habermas’ assistant. As a young scholar – coming from the tradition of Italian history of philosophy, where we had to repeat what authors said and not what we thought about them – I was very much impressed by the possibility to freely express my viewpoint, also contradicting Habermas. It was – and remains – a fundamental experience and lesson for me to practice and express my convictions without restraints, to learn reciprocally from criticism, to include otherness. In 1990, together with some Italian friends, we founded the *Seminario di Teoria Critica* and some years later the *Società Italiana di Teoria Critica*, which gather scholars interested in the different generations of the Frankfurt School. Nowadays I am still in touch with many friends and colleagues who attended the *Colloquium*, meeting them at conferences or at the annual Colloquium “Philosophy and Social Science” held before in Dubrovnik and now in Prague. At the end of the 1980s, faced with the affirmation of Habermas’ intersubjective paradigm and post-metaphysical thinking, multiple debates were raised by a conflicting group of academics and intellectuals, who instead believed they were the true successors of the Frankfurt tradition, according to a renewed Marxist tradition based on the theory of the value-form and the centrality of work over interaction.

My interest in gender studies also grew during my years in Frankfurt and concerned the reconsideration of the German tradition of Romantic women (such as Günderrode, Brentano, and others) in light of East German literature by women writers. Illnesses and depression seemed to refer to a deeper social and political malaise. A paradigmatic example was Christa Wolf’s novel *Kassandra*: the so-called “bringer of misfortune” had simply predicted what reality was; namely the fall of an unjust system. Troy’s walls represented the fall of Berlin’s barriers. Thanks to my classical studies, I thus began to identify in literature, artistic depictions and myths those signs of gender violence, perpetrated throughout the centuries that sought redemption in generations to come. My researches in critical theory, socio-political philosophy and gender studies have been

enriched by a deconstructive/reconstructive approach to “imaginal philosophy,” aimed at investigating – by interpreting signs and hidden meanings – the dialectics between violence, struggles against domination, and emancipation. Violent cultural representations and images, understood as complex verbal and non-verbal languages that have persisted over the centuries, must be carefully decoded, in order to understand their significance in the present and in order to be opposed to prevent the perpetuation of violence. With regards to my belonging to the tradition of critical theory of society, I can say that I have passed – albeit in different ways – through three different generations. Now I am very happy to see the global development of a fourth and even fifth generation, following different orientations and theoretical influences. This is also a sign of the fruitfulness of critical theory, which has always been open to new challenges, in order to understand the present in relation to new conceptual and pragmatic tools due to poli-emergencies and overlapping crises, as empirical factuality tragically shows us.

VA and SM

In the context of a special issue of the journal *Popular Inquiry*, specifically dedicated to the topic “Popular Culture and Feminism,” it is difficult not to be spontaneously reminded of a concept such as that of “the culture industry.” As it is well-known, this concept was originally coined by Horkheimer and Adorno, in a famous chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), not only to critically refer to mass culture but also to immediately emphasize, already at a terminological level, the strictly industrial characteristics of *all* mass culture. According to Horkheimer and Adorno this was tantamount to denying that *any* form of mass culture (popular music, films, comics, fashion, etc.) could have a potential for human emancipation, given their idea of the culture industry as an organ of “the administered world” and thus as an agency of “mass deception.” Do you think that such a critical perspective on popular culture is still useful and valid, or can popular culture also now offer some opportunities for human liberation (including women’s emancipation)?

MC

Horkheimer and Adorno were among the first theorists to develop a radical critique of the culture industry, conceived as a decisive instrument allowing the manipulation of human beings, resorting to propaganda, inducing consumerism and restricting free will. Their criticism of the cultural industry appears as a further destructive effect of instrumental reason, the genealogy of which was identified by Horkheimer and Adorno in Odysseus’ purpose-driven action, whereby nature and human beings are exploited and reified, if not annihilated. The radicalization of the Frankfurt thinkers’ anti-modern position was also the result of the fact that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written in exile – due to a dual persecution of these intellectuals as anti-Nazis and

Jews – between 1941 and 1944, in the bloodiest years of the global conflict, when the end of the atrocities was not yet foreseeable because of Nazi deportations and exterminations. The idea of domination became totalizing. Albeit with necessary differentiations, on the one hand Nazi barbarism became a totalitarian lethal regime in Europe, while on the other hand – *mutatis mutandis* – capitalist society in the U.S. was reinforcing forms of control that subjugated the human soul. This meant that, despite the existence of democratic systems, instrumental reason would continue to survive in the economic sphere through capitalism and in society through mass media culture. And yet Horkheimer and Adorno's criticism can be considered as a form of "performative contradiction," as Habermas pointed out from a normative view point. From which perspective can the Frankfurt thinkers exercise their critique, if they live in a context of totalizing power and instrumental reason? How can their claims for validity be legitimized? An immanent and normative counter-factual position is needed, defining the idea of "another kind" of non-authoritarian reason that supports our argumentation. Yet Horkheimer and Adorno's reflections can be also applied nowadays to the debates on "surveillance capitalism" in an age of neo-libertarianism, due to the advent of new social media. It can also be useful for a critical understanding of the ideology of "exporting freedom," where motivations to wage war on non-democratic countries are identified with the financial imperatives of globalization.

To answer your question, in my opinion the meaning of popular culture and mass culture do not necessarily coincide. For example, popular culture has a dialectical meaning for feminism. "Popular" can imply an interest in minorities or forgotten cultures, those who the intellectual elites did not consider as fundamental or worth knowing. They represented forms of minor, non-heroic, non-hegemonic knowledge. Popular culture also implies studies on "material" everyday life, as the French *Annales* school did in rethinking historiography. Women's movements and feminist scholars have supported the historical and scientific significance of such knowledge, coming from bottom up. This approach highlighted aspects that heroic and patriarchal knowledge had left out. However, it is possible to see in these "official" narratives the very roots of patriarchy and the reasons for its reproduction through imaginaries, scientific disciplines, and schools of thought. In this sense, we can better understand the connections and differences between popular culture, mass culture, and cultural industries.

Through the medium of mass media, prejudices and gender-based stereotypes contribute to perpetuating images of violence, discriminatory languages, and misogynistic communication. This fact opens a new front for the development of innovative research, educational intervention and public policies against hate speech now propagated through the abuse of social media (sexting, revenge porn, stalking, etc.), which can change the very nature of the public sphere. Thanks to social media, each individual becomes without moderators the author of

contents that are mostly produced in the private space of his/her own home and then launched as messages and videos to a potentially unlimited online public space. Echo chambers contribute to confirm and reproduce beliefs and news (as well as offensive messages) without any barriers. Women are the ones most subjected to personal attacks. Forms of public regulation and awareness-raising action are thus needed. Anti-violence campaigns must start in the early school years, adequate training for teachers must be envisaged, in-depth research as well as cooperation with civil society associations must be reinforced. Social media can only have an emancipatory function if deprived of violent imageries and hate speech that continue to be reproduced in “popular” songs, films, videos and representations.

Feminism must fight against all those representations that reduce women to passive objects, rather than represent them as active subjects, capable of transformation. If we conceive social media in a dialectical way, we can also identify its empowering potential. It is no coincidence that totalitarian regimes always try to restrict the free flow of ideas. As we have recently seen, telematic networks are repressed when regimes aim to limit protests and allow mass repression: action – as we are seeing – that is impossible to manage. We live in a society of multiple networks that cannot be stopped entirely: we are all interconnected.

VA and SM

After analyzing the contemporary relationship between the cultural industry and feminism, we would like to ask you how, as a philosopher and feminist, you conceptualize being/feeling a woman in relation to the cultural industry. This is clearly an issue that calls into question several fundamental nodes such as that of female representation/under-representation in relation to the cultural industry; the relationship between gender and power; feminist critique of neoliberalism, considered particularly in relation to its ability to include/subsume gender and sexual differences in production and valorization processes. Is there, in your view, an adequate – hence theoretically, politically, ethically useful – way of thinking about (and/or rethinking) gender, as well as gender roles and differences in our present day? Again, this is a question that opens up a range of particularly interesting issues, which you have focused on several times in your writings, and which can be explored, in order to answer the question. Among these, in particular, the problem of gender violence and, more precisely, the private roots of political and gender violence; the relationship between feminism and everyday life; the issue of equal opportunities.

MC

Feminism has been recently challenged by different forms of cultural-theoretical and socio-political claims, which indicate the need for additional rethinking. I refer here to studies and statements

promoted by researchers and activists working on LGBTQI+ issues. Although they find their origins in gender studies, these new political and cultural schools of studies claim their own autonomy as being separate from feminism. This position radicalizes the tradition of sex/ gender differences in the form of a critique of heterosexual “binarism.” The debate on gender fluidity thus shifts the question concerning biological differences to the idea of a “mobility” or “fluidity” of gender identity.

With regard to my current educational, scientific, political and social commitments, I can say that I have been involved for many years in fighting this, but, above all, in preventing gender-based violence, and especially domestic violence. In fact, it is in the family that respect and the grammar of moral feelings should be learned; however, vice-versa, the home can often become a space of ongoing abuses and terror, if not death, with repercussions on future generations and society as a whole. The example of the prevention of gender-based violence can summarize different tasks for feminism from an interactive viewpoint: normatively, it implies respect of principles; scientifically, it implies research on situations involving violence; didactically, it implies educating students and training professionals; socially, it implies cooperation with civil society’s associations; politically, it means cooperation with institutions. It is a continuous interdisciplinary, intersectional and inter-institutional job. This is why I am involved in various cross-border projects, in networking and training, thanks to collaboration with extraordinary colleagues and activists. For example, I coordinate a Departmental Research Centre at the University of Milano-Bicocca, called ADV -Against Domestic Violence, an inter and intra-professional programme called SFERA (almost 1900 participants were formed), the Academic Network UN.I.RE. (Networked Universities Against Gender Violence for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention) in collaboration with the Council of Europe. I have been a consultant to the “Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Femicide, as well as on all Forms of Gender-based Violence” at the Senate of the Italian Republic, and also a delegate of the Italian Ministry for University and Research on issues related to contrast gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination. Mindsets and institutions must be changed thanks to cooperative and integrated projects and policies, in which different professional and scientific competences can proficiently interact in order to avoid the escalation and perpetuation of violence. The battle against gender- based violence is primarily a cultural battle.

Feminism succeeded in breaking the great dichotomy that separated the public from the private. Private issues – as shown by domestic violence – are political. As is generally understood, political philosophy has removed the private roots of public violence, although the latter has been clearly visible in depictions and myths since antiquity. Violence was only understood as an intra-male issue, as a matter of war or power struggles. The suffering of women and children was not recognized as a form of coercive subjection. We had to wait until 1993 to see gender-based violence recognized by the United Nations as a human rights violation; until the end of the last century, it

had not received any public recognition, and only since then have nations had to provide legislations and policies, in order to address it. Feminism and critical theory are crucial also in terms of personal orientation, when our actions are constantly subjected to self-reflection: we can all inflict violence and power, imposing control and oppression on other human beings in different spheres of life. Empowerment praxis can contribute to the development of human capacities and promote equal opportunity policies, monitoring democratic institutions, because fair representation is not only a matter of quantitative parity but also a qualitative statement of those needs that arise from the sphere of everyday life and that traditional politics has failed to take into account. Feminism and critical theory are therefore closely linked to each other from a theoretical, cultural, political and personal viewpoint. They also interact as persistent judgment in relation to how we have to act in order to oppose discrimination, violence and forms of intolerance, which are increasing even more in the present emergencies associated with pandemics, wars, socio-economic and environmental issues. Due to the endurance of traditional forms of discrimination and violence that we thought we had now overcome, what remains is the prospect of a continuous unfulfilled legacy of women's movements and battles over the centuries, as well as the perspective of common goals yet to be achieved. One cannot be free, if everyone is not free from domination. Feminism certainly does not only concern women.