Feminisms in Postwar Italy

A trans-local and trans-national history

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Defining feminism: never a waste of time

In 1988, the American historian Karen Offen dedicated an essay to the comparative history of the category of ›feminism‹, persuaded – on the wave of Lucian Febvre – that »it is never a waste of time to study the history of a word«.

> »What is feminism? Who is a feminist? How do we understand feminism across national boundaries? Across cultures? Across centuries? These questions and their corollaries are raised every day, both here and abroad, by activists in the contemporary women's movement, by scholars, in the press, and in informal conversation. Everyone seems to have different answers, and every answer is infused with a political and emotional charge. To many people, inside and outside of the academy, the word ›feminism‹ continues to inspire controversy and to arouse a visceral response-indeed, even to evoke fear among a sizable portion of the general public. If words and the concepts they convey can be said to be dangerous, then ›feminism‹ and ›feminist‹ must be dangerous words, representing dangerous concepts.« (Offen 1988)

A conviction moved Offen into this project. In the early 1970s, when her generation of American historians began to investigate the history of women's movements, feminism was understood in a rather simplistic and straightforward way. According to the most American dictionaries, this term meant a theory and/or a movement concerned with advancing the position of women through such means as achievement of political, legal, or economic rights equal to those granted men. The notion here was based on a legalistic definition of ›equal rights‹ which proposed the standard of male adulthood as the norm. Given this limited interpretation, scholars have had to try to broaden the concept, distinguishing between a variety of feminisms: »old« and »new«, »first wave« and »second wave«, »classical« and »modern«, »maximalist«

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and »minimalist«, and so on. Moreover, the definitions have taken different forms in each country.

As Perry Willson has noted, the terminological issue in Italy is still thorny today because of a real terminological confusion regarding the women's movement of the liberal age. Unlike what happened in many other countries, in fact, until recently most women's historians in Italy have been reluctant to use the term »feminism« to describe the movement active from the Liberal period to the rise of Fascism. Instead, many have used »emancipationism«, or have resorted to periphrases such as »women's associationism« (a generic category that can also include organizations without any particular feminist intent) or »women's movement«. Many scholars – Willson continues – have generally preferred to use the term »feminism« only to designate the movement of the 1970s and subsequent decades. Considering that already in the early 20th century many activists for women's rights actually used the term »feminism« and called themselves »feminists«, rather than »emancipationists«, the refusal by some historians to attribute the label »feminism« to their movement offers food for thought. There is, however, a crucial element to bear in mind: the role played by Fascism and its legacy. During the Fascist period, the women's movement was reduced to silence, like all other independent political organizations, and thus experienced a real cover-up. In those years, feminism became a démodé concept, at best (Willson 2019).

This negative connotation survived the fall of Mussolini. Only in the 1970s did »feminism« return to prominence. If the first groups did not adopt it (I am thinking of the *Rivolta Femminile*, the *Movimento di Liberazione della Donna*-MLD, the *Fronte Italiano di Liberazione Femminile*-FIILF), already in the early 1970s many activists overcame their reluctance, mistrust of this term and re-appropriated it to describe their own movement. The use of this expression, however, served to make a distinction. On the one hand, (true) feminism, which aimed at women's liberation and emphasized the value of sexual difference; on the other hand, emancipationism, a political approach that was considered to be limited to the demand for equality, both in the case of the activists of the previous century and in that of the contemporary women's associations. »Emancipationism«, in fact, acquired a substantially negative meaning, especially when used to refer to the mass women's organizations born in the postwar period (the *Unione Donne Italiane*-UDI, and the *Centro Italiano Femminile*-CIF), which were considered too moderate or too conditioned by the political parties.

Where does this need to mark a discontinuity come from? Luisa Passerini has underlined the tendency of feminist movements of every period to cut ties with historical precedents, as if they were at the mercy, wave after wave, of a cyclical anxiety of refoundation and innovation (Passerini 1992, p. 96). Anna Rossi-Doria spoke of a conflict that was above all generational, between mothers and daughters; some-

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thing similar to the tensions between different political generations that – in different forms – we see acting in our present as well.

> »I think we can say that the idea of difference then served above all to support the claim for ›liberation‹ against ›emancipation‹ (with the numerous terminological misunderstandings deriving from the different 19th and 20th century use of the second term), a claim that served above all to polemize against the older women who appeared to be the bearers of emancipation. In other words, it was essentially a matter of a harsh generational conflict, in particular with the women of the Udi (who instead began to approach feminism at the 9th congress in 1972 [...]), but not, unlike what would happen in the 1980s, of a theoretical opposition of difference to equality.« (Rossi-Doria 2005, p. 6)

Although it is true that there was a struggle against equality as the banner of mothers (the UDI) and brothers (the New Left groups), it is nevertheless important to focus on the elements of novelty that marked and caused the explosion of a new cry of protest in the late 1960s. In the following pages we will therefore trace the birth and development of 1970s feminism in Italy, highlighting both its local peculiarities and its transnational dimension. To do so, we will draw on a now stratified historiography in which the gaze of the historian-witnesses intertwines with that of subsequent political and historiographical generations. New questions are in fact renewing the need and duty of witnessing, moving away from of transforming an impressive work of memory construction into a »cult of memory« (Bertilotti 2004, p. 229).

The feminist and movement's archives increase year by year, fill their shelves, launch digitization projects, employ professional staff, and welcome Italian and international scholars. They are certainly encouraging new research projects. In addition to that, academia also proves to be much more welcoming today for the women's and gender history. But the most convincing hypothesis is, in my opinion, political. The presence on the public scene of a lively and diverse transnational network of feminisms not only prompts questions about the past, but also guarantees greater security and investigative and interpretative autonomy. In current research projects, the signs of the contemporary political debate – that focuses on self-determination in the reproductive sphere, gender violence, and the rights of queer people – are evident. In this scenario, the echo of the forms of activism that increasingly arise in post-colonial countries and the so-called Global South is also discernible. Frequent re-readings of the past are which are sensitive to the margins, to decentralized or ›minor‹ experiences, and looks at the many ›trickles‹ of feminisms (Stelliferi/Voli 2022). The adoption of diachronic and global perspectives, moreover, is contributing to broadening the perspective of analysis and to valuing large-scale exchange networks, the interconnections and interweaving, also thanks

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to articulate interpretative keys that give voice to diversities and disparities, even those between women and between feminists.

The origins and the context of the 1970s Feminism in Italy

The end of Fascism and the founding of the Republic brought with it the recognition of new political, civil and social rights and the entry into force of a constitutional text. Twenty-one women, elected in 1946 through universal suffrage, participated in its drafting, becoming a symbol of a promising female political protagonism (Tambor 2014).

The post-fascist transition, however, did not mark a complete discontinuity neither on the political-institutional nor on the symbolic level. Despite the entry of women into the public sphere, the elements of continuity with the past were numerous and often hindered a profound innovation from the point of view of gender roles. In the newborn democracy, for example, prostitution remained regulated by the state, through the system of brothels (*case chiuse*) in force from the Unification of Italy (precisely from 1860) until the closure of state brothels in 1958. The Constitution assigned the family (considered as a »natural society founded on marriage«) a fundamental value within which women were expected to perform an *essential* function (Gissi 2020). Divorce was not introduced into the legal system and, on the basis of the Civil Code of 1942 (confirmed in the democratic regime). As a symbol of this discrepancy, different regulation for the crime of adultery by husband or wife and, more generally, a family law based on a substantial inequality between spouses that would be reformed in 1975. Moreover, the ONMI (*Opera nazionale per la protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia*) remained in operation until the mid-1970s; it was dissolved while counselling centers for family and maternity assistance were set up by the no. 405/1975 Law. In addition to the Civil Code of 1942, the 1930 »Rocco« penal code also remained in force in Republican Italy, whose Title X, dedicated to »crimes against the integrity and health of the race«, was emblematic of Mussolini's demographic policy and a conception of maternity as a service to the nation (Pavan 2009; Filippini 2020; Gissi/Stelliferi 2023).

In this scenario, full of continuity with the past, the perception that formal, and not substantial, equality had been achieved with the right to vote gradually gained ground. The generation born between the end of the war and the advent of democracy incubated the awareness that in order to ›liberate‹ women, it was necessary to question above all the dichotomy between public and private space. During the 1960s, along the Italian translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*, the idea that women's inferiority condition had a cultural and social, and not a biological or natural, origin began to spread, especially among younger women. It was thus that alongside the ›strictly political‹ battles for equal rights and emancipation to be

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won within the ›society of men‹, the claim for a new women's politics gained ground, capable of undermining the patriarchal system and the hierarchy of power based on the exploitation of women's reproductive function.

Proposing an alternative to UDI politics, avoiding the risk of equality understood as homologation to men, going to the sexual root of female oppression: these were some of the objectives of intellectual groups that can be considered the forerunners of the new feminism. Among these, the DEMAU (Demystifying Authoritarianism-*Demistificazione Autoritarismo*), founded in Milan in 1966 with the aim of freeing both women and men from predetermined social roles based on the »male as dominant value«; the MLD, federated with a secular-liberal oriented party, the Radical Party, influenced by the culture of the American New Left but also by neo-Malthusian organizations (such as the Italian AIED –Italian Association for Demographic Education). The MLD was committed to the fight against the economic, psychological and sexual exploitation of women and in favor of the decriminalization of abortion, and the liberalization of contraceptives (until 1971 hindered by Article 553 of the Penal Code) (Spagnoletti 1974).

The process of politicization of sexuality was also favored by the progressive separation between procreation and sexual pleasure, enabled by scientific innovations in the field of contraception (think of the spread of the contraceptive pill, marketed in the USA since 1960 and in Italy since 1965, although as a drug and not as a contraceptive). Finally, among the groups that were also open to men, the FILF (Italian Women's Liberation Front-*Fronte Italiano di Liberazione Femminile*), which was characterized by an anti-capitalist and Global South outlook not very common at the time. The FILF interpreted women as a ›fourth world‹ that escaped the logic of opposition between the blocs of the Cold War and that could borrow forms of struggle from the so-called Global South.

In the wake of Global 1968

As the months and then the years went by, the feminist collectives increased. Undoubtedly, the long wave of the 1968 movement spread the reflection on the economic and sexual exploitation of women beyond these pioneering groups and towards »large, visible minorities intertwined with the majority« (Bravo 2008). The connection between feminism and youth protest has achieved a high resonance both in historiography and in memoirs. Here I will limit myself to recalling the influence of the anti-authoritarian spirit of the student movement, which affected both the school and the family, as well as the Church and the forms of traditional politics, giving shape to a purely generational political and cultural phenomenon. Mass cultural consumption played a leading role in cementing the baby boomers' generation: music (English and American rock in the first place), avant-garde literature, the

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reinterpretation of Marxism, the new social sciences, the issue of a qualified critical knowledge not disconnected from technical work, as well as the rejection of a consumerism that was considered typical of Western societies and based on the exploitation of the so-called Global South countries.

As in other western societies, therefore, the new feminism in Italy was nourished by the ferments of the ›Sixty-eight years‹ during which alternative lifestyles and politics were experimented with, looking for anti-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian and libertarian practices. The cycle of turmoil, counting assemblies, demonstrations and occupations, favored opportunities for socialization and political participation hitherto precluded especially from girls. Actually, these experiences had a particular impact on the women's lives because they began to observe, through the lens of an unprecedented awareness of gender difference, both family roles and the power dynamics within political groups. The rebellion, in fact, did not only invest social institutions (the family *in primis*), but the movement itself, considered to be cloaked in a universalism blind to internal power dynamics: the egalitarianism of Left-wing political cultures shattered against the awareness of sexual difference. And not only in Italy; indeed, attempts to combine the struggle for social and gender equality, communism and feminism abounded in 20th-century European history, »in a spectrum ranging from complete fusion to the postulation of their radical antithesis« (Strazzeri 2022). Emblematic is, from this point of view, what happened in Trento, in the first sociology faculty founded in Italy, where the students felt the need to create ›separate‹ spaces (i.e., women-only groups) within which to reflect, starting from individual experience, on the condition of all women in capitalist society. Out of this disruption came the *Cerchio Spezzato* collective, the document *No Revolution Without Liberation – Women and Blacks. Sex and Colour (Non c'è rivoluzione senza Liberazione – Le donne e i neri. Il sesso e il colore)* and later the book *The Conscience of the Exploited* (*La coscienza di sfruttata)* which in one of the cover images, in 1972, paid homage to Angela Davis (Abbà et al. 1972; Bellè 2025).

»Let's spit on Hegel«: Rivolta Femminile

In order to understand the origins phase, it is necessary to adopt a broad perspective that brings together multiple uprisings and rebellions, that looks simultaneously within and outside universities, within and outside the Marxist political tradition. For many, the 1968 movement was crucial, for better or worse. Nonetheless, the generation that became feminists in the wake of the 1968–1969 protests was a substantial component of the 1970s women's movement, but not the only one. Not all the collectives were founded by young women and female students away from home. A leading role was also played by a group of women who were no longer very young at the time, who had graduated well before 1968, without previous political

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experience in political parties or the New Left, and who were united in the *Rivolta Femminile* collective. The most important radical Italian collective was largely animated by women born in the 1930s, cultured, bourgeois, who worked mainly in the cultural and artistic fields, including Dacia Maraini, Elvira Banotti, Carla Accardi, Ginevra Bompiani, Cloti Ricciardi and sisters Marta and Carla Lonzi.

Rivolta Femminile (*Women's Revolt*) claimed separatism since the beginning and experimented, among the first in Italy, with the consciousness-raising groups. They consisted of exploring personal experiences with other women to the point of revealing their social, cultural and political dimension (Blakemore 2021). Even if this political practice was borrowed from the US, the Italian experience took on a distinctive character, becoming known as »*autocoscienza*« (self-awareness). The aim was the rediscovery of the invisible links between individual biographical experience and social condition, between the personal and the political.

In the summer of 1970, some leading figures of Rivolta – Carla Lonzi, Elvira Banotti and Carla Accardi – synthesized the theoretical elaboration matured in the preceding months in a *Manifesto* that called for a tabula rasa, that is the creation of a physical and mental space characterized by the absence of men and free from patriarchal conditioning and dominant ideologies, considered intrinsically patriarchal and proponents of sexual oppression (Conte et al. 2011, Ventrella/Zapperi 2020).

> »Woman must not be defined in relation to man. This awareness is the foundation of both our struggle and our liberty.
> Man is not the model to hold up for the process of woman's self-discovery.
> Woman is the other in relation to man. Man is the other in relation to woman.
> Equality is an ideological attempt to subject woman even further.
> The identification of woman with man means annulling the ultimate means of liberation.
> Liberation for woman does not mean accepting the life man leads, because it is unlivable; on the contrary, it means expressing her own sense of existence [...].
> From now on we do not wish to have any screen between ourselves and the world [...].«
> (Lonzi 1974)

In closing the *Manifesto*, the authors made their feminist consciousness-raising program explicit: »We seek the authenticity of the gesture of revolt and will not sacrifice it to either organization or proselytism. We only communicate with women«. It was not equality that was being pursued, but sexual difference. As stated in another document by Carla Lonzi, the goal of equality was deconstructed: »Equality is what is offered to the colonized people on the level of laws and rights. It is what is imposed on them at the level of culture. It is the principle by which the hegemon continues to condition the non-hegemon« (Lonzi 1974).

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In July, the *Rivolta Femminile* manifesto was posted on the walls in Rome and Milan, thus conventionally marking the birth of 1970s feminism. More than 50 years separate us from the elaboration of these texts, printed in 1974 by the publishing house of *Rivolta femminile* in the anthology *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Let's spit on Hegel). Yet, these writings have retained all their power, which explains the success of Carla Lonzi, read and studied today, much more than in past decades.

A (nearly) mass movement, from margins to center

If the formation of the first radical groups dedicated primarily to internal discussion, theoretical elaboration or experimentation in the practice of self-consciousness dates back to the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s, the two-year period 1972–1974 should be credited with a process of filiation and ramification of groups stimulated also by news and documents coming from abroad.

The practice of self-awareness spread rapidly. Through listening and self-narration, »small group meeting« (*piccolo gruppo*) became the privileged space for a process of political subjectivation, individual and collective at the same time, in which the political dimension of the private sphere could be touched upon.

In this phase of growth, moreover, the reference to Marxism remained frequent (Voli 2015; Strazzeri 2023; Forenza 2025). Many were the collectives that tried to combine the struggle for women's liberation with the class struggle, often practicing the so-called »double militancy«, that is, the commitment both in the women-only feminist collectives and in the extra-parliamentary left groups (such as *Manifesto, Lotta Continua, Avanguardia Operaia*) (Stelliferi 2015a). What Marxist feminism contested to left-wing political cultures was the legitimacy of analyses of society that started from class contradiction alone, removing that of gender; an approach considered insufficient to understand the relations of production and exploitation in the capitalist system. From this point of view, the contribution of *Lotta Femminista*-LF (Feminist Struggle) was fundamental. This collective was formed in Padua in 1971 on the initiative of militants coming from *operaismo* (workerism) and then spread to other cities in the peninsula, from Veneto to Sicily. LF focused its analysis on the issues of unpaid reproductive labor, on the value of reproductive and care work and on the claim of wages for housework, promoting the transnational campaign Wages for Housework (Dalla Costa 1974; Federici 1975; Cuninghame 2008; Gissi 2018; Tupin 2018).

As we have seen, the development of the movement took place within a context strongly influenced by the birth of the extra-parliamentary left groups, in the wake of the student and workers' mobilizations of 1968–1969. At the same time, one of the directions towards which the first Italian feminists looked was undoubtedly the US, despite an ›anti-Americanist‹ sentiment that was widespread in the Italian and European left. A complex and uneven dialectic with US feminism therefore developed,

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contributing to a circular diffusion of feminist thought: from the US to Italy and vice versa. These transatlantic relations composed an interconnected flow; a vast network that in turn was made up of local and extra-local nodes, through which imaginaries, theoretical reflections, and militant practices converged into what, over the course of the previous decade, had been configured as a new transnational left (Rebora 2023).

The ›revolts‹ of feminisms crossed regional and national boundaries, both transatlantic and within Europe (Delap 2020). To borrow the title of a book from several years ago, feminism took the form of a »travelling theory« (Davis/Evans 2011). The participation of some Italian feminists in international meetings (the first was in France, in Vendée, in 1972) was accompanied by the translation of French, German and English as well as North American feminist texts by both the militants themselves and publishing houses sensitive to the demands of social movements. Think of the international collection of writings *Donne è bello* (Women are beautiful), edited by the Anabasis group in Milan in 1972, or the Italian version of the American *Ourbodies, ourselves*. The health manual written by the Boston Women's Health Collective, circulated around the globe and among Italian feminist activists, too, and then was published by Feltrinelli in 1974. Despite the US origins of the collective, Kathy Davis argues that it was not imposed as »cultural imperialism« on women in other locations but was reworked to reflect the embodied knowledge of its local adapters (Davis 2008).

In the middle of the decade, the feminist landscape became broader but also more heterogeneous. After the campaign for the referendum on the divorce law in May 1974, there was an increasing participation of women, more or less young, more or less politicized, from the North to the South. 1975–1976 was, from this point of view, a watershed period: while the Mexico City Conference launched the United Nations decade for women, an apical phase began with respect to the expansion of the movement and its visibility on the public plane. Some collectives maintained a visceral relationship with writing and theoretical elaboration, rejecting contamination in the public space. Many others, instead, claimed practical actions and interventions in the social sphere. Between 1975 and 1976, the groups that opened up more to external referents increased: cultural associations, theatre groups, collectives of female magazine directors, women's bookshops, women's studies journals like DWF-*DonnaWomanFemme* which came out in 1975. In addition to that, feminist albums and songbooks were published; the foundations for lesbian feminism (*lesbofemminismo*) were laid; women only collectives were founded in the workplace and factories and women's co-ordinations within the major Italian trade union confederations (Frisone and Tolomelli 2017). The latter contributed greatly to the innovation of the 150-hour courses, but also to the fight for the right to health by paying specific attention to the issue of miscarriages caused by work conditions, the so-called »*aborti bianchi*« (white abortions).

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Collectives dedicated to sexual health played a crucial role. In years when the democratization of medical knowledge and the right to health (especially in the workplace) were becoming increasingly important on the agenda of parties, trade unions and extra-parliamentary groups, the politics of feminism placed reproductive bodies at the center of its demands. One of the key words became, in fact, self-determination (*autodeterminazione*): an expression hitherto used mostly in reference to the right of peoples to autonomously choose their own system of government and to be free from all external domination, which was given a new meaning in the light of the link between freedom and responsibility in the procreative and sexual spheres. The fundamental principle was that women's freedom should begin with the sovereignty over their own bodies.

The groups engaged on the front of women's medicine experimented with the practice of *self-help* (the gynecologist's self-view, to be carried out alone or in groups), wrote information leaflets inspired by the now best-selling book *We and Our Bodies* and, in some cases, founded self-managed counselling centers: political spaces for socializing, as well as reference points for those who needed information on contraception, gynecological examinations and backstreet abortion. During the 1970s feminism imagined, created and practiced forms of self-management in the field of health. From 1974 onwards, in fact, the first self-managed feminist counselling centers began to take shape in a number of Italian cities: in Milan, the Bovisa counselling center, close to a factory that employed mainly female workers; in Padua, linked to the LF collective; in Venice, the *Gruppo salute*; in Rome, first the counselling center opened by Simonetta Tosi via dei Sabelli, in the San Lorenzo district, and then other groups that emerged within »neighborhood collectives« (Stelliferi 2015b; Barone 2023). In some cases, self-managed counselling centers were started by occupying the premises of the ONMI, which was about to be suppressed. There were also experiences of collaboration between feminist collectives and AIED, an organization actively involved in disseminating knowledge on contraceptive methods but with a distinct perspective on health and sexuality compared to the political agenda of feminists (Porta 2013; Giss/Stelliferi 2023). This was the case with the Aleksandra Kollontaj collective in Bolzano-Bozen, which in 1973 opened the local branch of the association, two years after its foundation. The self-managed feminist counselling centers represented an attempt to re-appropriate women's knowledge about the body in a context in which talking about sexuality, pleasure and contraception was taboo (and until 1971 also a crime) they were places where information, knowledge and techniques were made available and shared. On the one hand, they responded to an almost total lack of statal services dedicated to women; and on the other hand, through critical approaches to medicine, forms of knowledge sharing, and non-hierarchical relations between experts and users, they implemented a different concept of health, where the personal was indeed political.

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»For whose pleasure?« Against the criminalization of abortion

Reproductive justice battles were characterized by a transnational and intersectional approach that suggested the possibility of a global women's health movement (Bracke 2022). Similarly to the present, where we record a global feminist network for reproductive justice, in 1970s the battle for free and legal abortion transcended national borders. Feminism's practical response to the consequences of the criminalization of abortion was first and foremost the organization of so-called »trips to London« (or other foreign cities where regulations were already in place) (Tafuro 2022, Gissi/Stelliferi 2023, pp. 142–145). The abortion self-management groups (*nuclei per l'autogestione dell'aborto*) clandestinely acted in Italy, reproducing what was happening in other countries, especially in France, where the MLAC (*Mouvement pour la liberté de l'avortement et de la contraception* – Free Abortion and Contraceptive Movement) was engaged in the diffusion of a faster and less invasive abortion method (the so-called Karman) (Stelliferi 2022, pp. 113–115). Moreover, the practice of public self-denunciation for procured abortions rebounded from France to Italy to Germany. In any case, the goal was to guarantee freedom of abortion for all women, without health risks and without economic, cultural or social discrimination, in an atmosphere of solidarity, free from stigmatization.

It was precisely around the battle over the legalization of abortion that the feminist movement grew, became a mass phenomenon, and gained political legitimacy and authority. The relationship with external referents and, specifically, with the parties was neither linear nor uniform. Alongside the strictly anti-institutional approach of some experiences, one can trace in this phase a closer and more frequent relationship with law and the state than was explicitly claimed. This is clearly demonstrated by the battle for abortion, for counselling centers, and finally the battle against sexualized violence which, more or less directly and intentionally, promoted legislative processes and influenced public debate.

In the case of abortion, the focus of feminist politics was on freedom from forced motherhood, and the assumption of responsibility on the part of women. But if the principle of self-determination functioned as a common denominator, the conflict between decriminalization (elimination of the crime from the penal code, without positive norms) and legislative regulation exploded the internal contradictions of the movement. Carla Lonzi from the very early 1970s claimed the end of the criminalization. In light of the very high number of clandestine abortions performed each year in Italy, she considered Title X of the Rocco Code *de facto* obsolete. However, she did not consider the passing of a law to regulate access to abortion a feminist goal:

> »We will access freedom of abortion, not new legislation on it […]. Man has left woman alone before a law that prevents her from having an abortion: alone, denigrated, unworthy of the community. Tomorrow he will end up leaving her alone in

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> the face of a law that will not prevent her from having an abortion: alone, gratified, worthy of the community. But the woman asks herself: ›For whose pleasure did I get pregnant? For whose pleasure am I having an abortion?‹« (Lonzi 1974, 67–69).

A few years later, during a phase of intense mobilization in January 1975, the Via Cherubini collective in Milan took a similar position in favor of liberalization and not of a new law. This collective claimed to be doing »different political work«: recognizing procreative sexuality as the most insidious form of man's domination over woman. A domination that, through legalized abortion, would in no way be undermined but legitimized, with the effect of making men irresponsible (Stelliferi 2022, p. 117).

In any case, the demand for legislative reform became the majority, as demonstrated by the huge marches on 6 December 1975 and 3 April 1976 for »free, free of charge, and assisted abortion«. The second demonstration was also joined by the UDI, committed to introducing the principle of self-determination within the Italian Communist Party.

Despite this, the approval of 194/1978 Law, *Norms for the social protection of maternity and the voluntary interruption of pregnancy*, left a bitter taste in the mouth even among many of those feminists who had demanded and urged a law. The result of the political compromise between the PCI and DC, which matured in the dramatic days of the kidnapping and murder of the prominent member of Christian Democracy Aldo Moro by the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades), was based on the rejection of the principle of self-determination. To some women, the 194-law appeared above all a limitation of sovereignty over their own bodies and destinies. Others saw it as a necessary step, at least not to die because of backstreet practices, and certainly a considerable discontinuity with the past. The clandestine abortion market was in fact substantially defeated and class discrimination considerably reduced. The plans to limit women's sovereignty over their own bodies, however, would not be silenced by the defeat in the 1981 referendum[1] but would take new paths. Even today, in fact, the intention to control reproduction unites, throughout the western world, the parties of the radical right and the Christian-conservative movements, determined to play their identity game on this ground (Serughetti 2023).

1 Referendum 17/05/1981 on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy (proposed by the Radical Party, *Partito Radicale*). Direzione Centrale per i Servizi Elettorali (1981). *Referendum 17/05/1981*. Eligendo. Available at: https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=F&dtel=17/05/1981&es0=S&tpa=I&lev0=0&levsut0=0&ms=S&tpe=A (last access: 8 June 2025).

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A foray into the 1980s and 1990s

As we have seen, not all the collectives were formed in the big cities or in the inner-city districts. On the contrary, the suburbs and provincial towns played a crucial role for Italian feminism, in which thousands of women participated: students, housewives, teachers, photographers, lawyers, graphic designers, painters, musicians, young and old. The hierarchy between the margins and the center emerged inverted. From Trento, a small provincial town, the American debate on the sexism-racism analogy spread throughout Italy and one of the first and harshest critiques of the universalism of the student movement developed. The working-class neighborhoods of Milan, Rome and Turin were the political laboratory for the experience of self-managed counselling centers. They tell us how the feminist movement did not limit itself to claiming services but wanted to be an active part in their invention and management, up to and beyond the institution of public family counselling centers with law no. 405/1975.

As the hierarchy between center and periphery broke down, the theatres of political action changed. Inscribing itself (more or less consciously) in a long tradition of re-signifying male-dominated environments, the feminist movement appropriated new spaces for political activism (Delap 2020, pp. 101–107). Private homes hosted meetings of ›small groups‹ and were read as places of conflict, like factories. Courtrooms became the scene of protests against a juridical culture seen as inherently patriarchal. This happened increasingly from 1976 onwards, when a rape trial held in Verona (again, a small provincial town) started a new season in the fight against gender violence (Filippini 2022). The occupied spaces took the name *Casa delle donne* (Women's Houses) and brought together anti-violence centers, cultural associations, editorial offices, radio program editors, and heterogeneous collectives. The square was also rethought and creatively inhabited. Political activism merged with artistic performativity, in discontinuity with the sit-ins, processions, pickets, political stages and, more generally, with the style of political action – considered traditional – of political parties, trade unions and extra-parliamentary left-wing groups.

It was in this context of transformation of the practices of occupying public space that one of the most relevant and original demonstrations of the feminisms of the 1970s took place: the night procession of 27 November 1976 in Rome against male violence against women, *Riprendiamoci la notte* (Let's take back the night). Despite the rainy evening, at least 10,000 women (according to the press) marched from Termini station to Piazza del Popolo, passing Via Veneto and Trinità dei Monti lit by thousands of torches, finally claiming a city of women and for women (Moretti 2024). This march, like so many others, reminds us that the feminist ›revolts‹ did not limit themselves to claiming entry into the ›city of men‹, but intended to shape a new idea

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of the political, to build a new idea of citizenship towards which to necessarily strive, oscillating between needs and desires (Kern 2020).

What happened in the following decades is not the subject of this essay. Based on the research that has begun to study the transformations of feminisms after the 1970s turmoil, I will limit myself to recalling that the 1980s will see the struggle for the environment and against nuclear power, disputes over sex work, and an increasingly pressing mobilization on the issue of gender violence. More generally, the 1980s will see the global dimension strengthened. A network of international groups and associations will become the protagonists of the decade dedicated to Women by the United Nations, launched with the Mexico City Conference in 1975. Ten years later, in Nairobi, the critique of African American and post-colonial feminism of the limits of the idea of sisterhood and the claimed universality of Western feminism will open a new season that we hear resonating in the present.

In March 2015, following yet another femicide in Argentina, at the cry of: *Ni una menos!*, a wave of protests against gender violence erupted and crossed the borders of South America within a few years. From that moment on, experiences of struggle against male violence and in favor of practices of self-determination have been set in motion. They include different generations of activists, make use of the intersectional analytical perspective and widely exploit the communicative potential of social media. In 2016, in Poland, the *Czarny Protest* – a mass mobilization against an anti-abortion bill – launched a cycle of protests that quickly garnered international solidarity. The first »global women's strike« was held on 8 March 2017: it was an internationally coordinated action to make the exploitation of domestic and reproductive labor visible, which is still largely carried out by women and frequently considered ›non-labor‹. 2017 was also the year of *#MeToo*, the movement in favor of denouncing sexual abuse and harassment that, from the US, has spread virally to many parts of the world. In recent years, moreover, communication campaigns on abortion have been borrowed from Latin America in other countries with the aim of rejecting stigmatization and guilt and enhancing the agency of those who decide to have an abortion. In Italy, too, the presence of feminist groups, associations and networks appears much more diversified and noisier than twenty years ago, in the Berlusconi era. The backlash against feminism helped the rise of »Berlusconism«. In this cultural and political phenomenon, the centrality of a discourse around freedom evoked aspiration and entrepreneurship, free from state interference and leading to material satisfaction. Referring to women, it also suggested ›free‹ sexual behavior, that is, women's availability to men (Bracke 2014 pp. 202–204).

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Conclusion

The cultural and political tradition of feminisms, as we have seen, does not always proceed linearly, but rather based on breaks. Anna Rossi-Doria, almost forty years ago, wrote that the thread between generations of women did not unravel, and does not unravel, but was and is continually broken: »Heirs and rebels – she continued – means that we should together avenge and vindicate this fact, that is, rejoin the thread, but preserving the traces of its breaking and the knots« (Rossi-Doria 1986, p. 299).

This sentence brings to my mind the huge demonstration against gender violence on 25 November 2023, a few weeks after a femicide: that of Giulia Cecchettin, killed by her ex-boyfriend (Filippo Turetta). A real sea of women flooded Rome's Circus Maximus with old and new slogans and a clear enemy: patriarchy. This category was, until then, mainly used in some areas of feminist activism and, with not always overlapping connotations, in historical, anthropological, and philosophical research. The words of Elena, Giulia's sister, with a letter sent to a local newspaper, »Corriere del Veneto«, brought this label back to the center of public debate:

> »Turetta is often referred to as a monster, but monster he is not. A monster is an exception, a person outside society, a person for whom society should not take responsibility. Instead, there is responsibility. Monsters are not sick, they are healthy children of patriarchy, of the culture of rape [...].
>
> It is often said ›not all men‹. Not all men, but they are always men. No man is good if he does nothing to dismantle the society that privileges them so much. It is the responsibility of men in this patriarchal society given their privilege and power to educate and call out friends and colleagues as soon as they hear the slightest hint of sexist violence [...].
>
> Femicide is a state murder, because the state does not protect us. Femicide is not a crime of passion, it is a crime of power. We need widespread sexual and affective education; we need to teach that love is not possession. We need to fund anti-violence centers and we need to give those in need the opportunity to ask for help. For Giulia don't hold a minute of silence, for Giulia burn everything.«

By recontextualizing a slogan from the 1970s that politicized and de-essentialized the male violence (f.i. »the rapist is not sick, he is the healthy child of patriarchy«) Elena ensured that the story of her sister Giulia did not end up being as just another case of femicide, seen a sort of sad but inescapable fate; but instead, she made it appear as a political fact. Heir and rebel within the long feminist revolution.

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