Feminism and Convivialism

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1. Which Affinities Exist between Feminism and Convivialism?

A quick glance at the fundamental theses of the *Second Convivialist Manifesto* (Convivialist International 2020 [hereafter cited as *SCM*]) suffices to note the affinity, or at least the convergence, with the concepts and proposals of feminist thinking. Both are radical perspectives that start from a critical and deconstructive perspective on Western and modern civilization and its pathologies and then draw alternative scenarios and outline, as the *SCM* (3) puts it, "the contours of the other possible world." This echoes a nice and fitting expression by Lea Melandri in which she sums up the objective of the women's movement: "modifying the self and modifying the world." This is no simple task, especially today, in a global world that not only seems to have lost, with the fall of the myth of progress, all faith in the possibility of the better but is also crisscrossed by regressive dynamics. These seem to upend the achievements we thought we had attained: from democracy to equal opportunities, from freedom to the right to a future.

The convergence between convivialism and feminism also seems to hold up against further differentiations within the concept of feminism itself: If it is true that there is not just one feminism but that there are in fact many strands, sometimes very different from each other, it is also true that in each of these strands we can identify some themes and problems common to convivialism. That alone is enough to enter into the diagnosis and start from what is the fundamental and central prob-

lem denounced by the *SCM*, namely, hubris—this excess, the *mother of all threats*, in which the origin of the pathological drifts of our civilization lies; this unlimited character that denotes the human being, but which in its extreme drifts leads first to the hegemony of utilitarian individualism and then to the perverse and destructive effects of speculative neoliberal capitalism, whether it is the absolute priority of economics and profit over any other principle or value or the mutual violence between human beings.

It is not difficult to see here the convergence with what is perhaps the heartbeat of feminism, that is, the critique of the modern subject: an autonomous, self-sufficient and egocentric Cartesian subject who defines himself in opposition to a devalued and hierarchically inferior alterity (be it the body or nature, the emotions or the feminine)—a subject, I must add, that in its *Hobbesian* and anthropological-social variations is described as an acquisition-oriented Prometheus, a selfish and instrumental *homo economicus*, an expression of boundless and aggressive individualism, aiming only at the pursuit of his own interest.[1]

However, what is distinctive about the feminist approach to this issue (even in relation to other voices of critical thought) is the conviction that these characteristics are not neutral and universal but rather the fruit, in addition to modern rationalism, of the *masculine and patriarchal culture* that has imposed its hegemony since its Hellenic origins and that must be challenged in its pretention to be neutral.

Thus, what the *SCM* calls the necessary "control of hubris" requires a radical operation of rediscovery and reconstruction of the self by highlighting aspects repressed or devalued by rationalist and patriarchal culture such as vulnerability and dependence, an approach that appears in the work of Nussbaum (2001) to Kittay (1999), from the Italian thought of difference to the theories of care, the opacity of the self (Butler 2005; Botti 2009), and hybridization with multiple forms of otherness (the postmodern feminism of Haraway [1991 [1985]] and Braidotti [2014]). In a word, it is necessary to think of a *subject in relation*, a concept

1 I addressed these themes in my book *The Individual without Passions: Modern Individualism and the Loss of Social Bond* (2012).

that is transversal to the various feminisms—in other words, a subject that is situated on a terrain that is opposed to both the hierarchical separation of the *res cogitans* and the solipsism of *homo economicus* such that it recognizes in the other, taken in its multiple forms, a constitutive dimension of the self.

It goes without saying that this last aspect is already inherent in the convivialist proposal when, against utilitarian individualism and the ideology of exchange and the market, it promotes the value of the bond, reviving a Maussian culture of giving and reciprocity. Indeed, to make just a brief parenthetical aside, it would be desirable that women, often too burdened by the legitimate concern of not reverting to punitive images (devotional and altruistic), welcome, to a greater extent than they seem to want to do, the fruitful novelty of this perspective, which has nothing to do with the sacrificial constraints of this image. However, feminism's emphasis on the *faults* of patriarchy and the critique of the neutral subject adds an element that can, even through that aura of *departure from oneself* that marked the beginning of the first phase in the 1970s (the feminism of difference, from Irigaray to Muraro to Cavarero), initiate a process of unveiling, in which lies in my opinion its most valuable contribution, that is, the capacity *to uncover the most hidden and apparently natural forms of domination*.

I will try to give two particularly significant examples. The first is the rediscovery of the value of care, which occupies a large part of what we can call the second phase of feminism, starting with Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982), in which the need emerges to move from the pure denunciation of oppression and the conflicting demand for difference to the desire to find new words to *express difference* and to fill it with new content, to construct another identity and even a different ethic. Starting from the denunciation of the abstract rationalism of the ethics of justice and rights (Rawls 1971), feminism establishes a new ethical paradigm based on care, inspired by the aforementioned values of interconnection and affectivity, interdependence, and vulnerability. But all this is possible, according to the theorists of the ethics of care (from Gilligan [1982] to Tronto [1994], from Kittay [1999] to Held [2006], from Sandra Laugier [2009a] to Fabienne Brugère [2014], to my-

self, Pulcini [2013a]), on the sole condition that the notion of care itself is rehabilitated. This means to remove it from the traditional patriarchal image, which, while apparently celebrating its qualities, reduces it to the stereotype of a sacrificial altruism that *by its very nature* characterizes women (frozen in the image of wife and mother) and confines care to the private sphere. In fact, what is hidden behind a positive value is oppression that is even more difficult to reveal. By separating care from this stereotype, women's thinking today demonstrates instead the extraordinary potential of care not only in the context of the public sphere, from which it has always been excluded, but also in its capacity to become a new and revolutionary "form of life" (Laugier 2009b or Jaeggi 2018)—a form of life capable of effectively combating the triumph of neoliberal capitalism if, as Joan Tronto (2013) has recently proposed, it is recognized as the essential value that democracy, increasingly dismissed by the tyranny of the economy and emptied of its *ethos*, needs today in order to begin a process of regeneration that transforms the way we think and love, feel and interact, imagine and plan.

And it is obviously in this sense—the result of a laborious effort of deconstruction and reconstruction that feminist thought pursues as a work in progress—that convivialism can today recognize care as a necessary element of a convivialist society: one that seems to be at the basis of the five principles (in particular, *common humanity* and *common sociality*) on which to institute the control of hubris.

A second significant example of feminism's capacity to reveal the most hidden forms of domination concerns the ecological crisis. This problem is increasingly serious and urgent, so much so that the *SCM* recognizes it, even in relation to the first manifesto, as unprecedentedly central, inserting among its five principles that of *common naturalness*, on grounds of the recognition that we are part of nature and that we are putting our own lives at risk if we do not take care of it.

The ecological crisis (from global warming to the depletion of finite resources to the loss of biodiversity) is undoubtedly the perverse fruit of this mad plundering of nature that has been perpetrated—especially in recent decades—by a predatory capitalism that is increasingly blind to the consequences of its development model, which today is paradoxi-

cally leading to the likely destruction of humanity and the planet. And if it is true that its roots lie in hubris, as the *SCM* rightly suggests, it is also true, as some feminist voices do not hesitate to point out, that in this case it is this particular variation of hubris that is *anthropocentrism*—that is to say, this vision of the world is entirely inscribed into the patriarchal culture that constitutes, with very rare exceptions, all Western thought. It legitimizes as natural a sovereignty of the human behind which once again is hidden the patriarchal male domination over the non-human world.

This is a truth that women had already expressed in the 1960s and 1970s in the hitherto little-known and ultimately emergent trend of thought known as *ecofeminism*,[2] in which the critique of anthropocentrism is paralleled by the recognition of a profound affinity between the different forms of domination inherent in patriarchal power (androcentrism), ranging from patriarchal domination of and violence against women and domination over nature, animals, and the environment. This clearly brings women's struggle closer to the ecological struggle for caring for the planet and for life (Battaglia 1997). This proximity is also manifest in the recent reflections of Donna Haraway (2016: 67), who in her book *Staying with the Trouble* accuses anthropocentrism of having led us to have to "liv[e] on an damaged planet" and hopes for a radical overcoming of it by creating new alliances, or rather *kinships*, between human and non-human otherness, because "we are humus, not Homo, not anthropos" (ibid.: 55), and therefore involved in networking forms of life that link us to other elements of the biosphere, such as the Earth to which we as humans belong.

2 The term was coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne, but the movement dates back to the 1960s and now seems to be experiencing a renaissance in the face of the ecological challenge.

2. The Ambivalence of the Relation of the Sexes and the Emotional Revolution

It is true, however, that the convergence between feminism and convivialism finds a limit and a moment of interruption each time the *conflict* between the sexes once again becomes a priority and a necessity in a society still far from real equality. This is because it pushes women each and every time to a legitimate and collective self-defense, inevitably hindering the construction of a project of sharing and cooperation with the other sex. This happens when patriarchal domination comes back surreptitiously or violently to reimpose itself behind and/or despite the proclaimed universal values of liberalism and democracy. And it is not just a question of the phenomenon of a persistent and silent devaluation and violation of the principle of equal opportunities, such as when, in all sectors of public and professional life, and despite their many achievements, women still do not manage to break through the *glass ceiling* that prevents them from obtaining positions of leadership or power that always seem to be reserved for men or when delays and ambiguities accumulate in family law and so forth.

Unfortunately, these are also regressive phenomena in which forms of male violence and oppression resurface, which we thought we had overcome. We see a sad and worrying confirmation of this in the contemporary landscape, where male violence comes to affect not only the dignity and freedom of women in our advanced societies but their very existence (understood as security and survival): femicide, stalking, and sexual harassment are the signs of a new assault on the female body that even requires new words to express it. In fact, we are not witnessing the pure and brutal return of old forms of violence but rather new phenomena rooted in reactive and vengeful feelings towards an emancipation only recently digested.

The proof of this is the spread of the "sad passion of resentment" (Pulcini 2013b) among men who may be willing to tolerate women's professional and social freedom but not their emotional autonomy, their right to deny them, to not love them (anymore); men who know how to exploit women's longstanding emotional dependence by addressing

their atavistic feelings of guilt and lack of self-esteem. It is when this phenomenon becomes collective and dangerously widespread that the alliance between the sexes is disrupted and the enemy becomes internal again, no longer clearly defined by a barrier of separation—such as that between rich and poor, capitalist and worker, privileged and marginalized—but within that same relationship of closeness in which love, companionship, and *philia* also exist (or should exist). Therefore, the collective response of women—who have long since learned that their revolution can only be permanent, which forces them to revive the spirit of struggle each time in order to reconstitute themselves as an antagonistic *political subject*—unfortunately becomes inevitable and very legitimate. We need only think here of the most recent forms of organization and protest such as #MeToo and NonUnaDiMeno (NUDM), which have also become points of reference for other movements (rooted in class, race, gender, or religion) and their demand for justice, thanks to the awareness of the intersectionality between the different forms of domination and discrimination.

But the struggle for justice, rights, and equity is not enough if it is not accompanied by the struggle for recognition (Honneth 1995 [1992]), which, in the case of the relationship between the sexes, plays out not only at the level of rights but also at the level of the *personal* relationship with the other and is all the more challenging as women have to confront the ambiguous double face of the enemy/friend of the male counterpart. It is a struggle that requires women to adopt other and different strategies, such as the courage to break through the wall of silence, fear, and guilt and to regain possession not only collectively but also *individually* of their own truth in the covert and crucial context of intimate and daily life. It is a struggle that presupposes women working on themselves in order to dismantle the self-destructive passions and the stereotypes that have been internalized for centuries—to learn, through emotional dynamics and confrontation with the opposite sex in the different spheres of existence, to break free of the tyranny of an imaginary that has often seen them as involuntary collaborators and to affirm their own dignity every time. In the end, it would be a question of recovering the deep meaning of this golden slogan of feminism—*the per-*

sonal is political—by enriching it today with the awareness that we must work on our passions, our myths, our symbols, our fantasies in order to be able to achieve this transformation of the self without which there can be no transformation of the world.

It is clear, however, that this tiring and never-ending work can only succeed if men also adopt it themselves, perhaps—why not?—by accepting the feminist practice of *starting with oneself* and confronting the deep passions that have always animated the patriarchal imaginary so as to understand and change not only its legal and political forms but also the mentality, the culture, the sensibility that guide their own lives and their relationships. In other words, the personal only becomes political when it does not avoid that necessary process of self-transformation that requires first of all to "cultivat[e]," to quote Martha Nussbaum (2015: 2 et passim), our passions in order to distill their empathetic and cohesive essence. I would say that the invitation that convivialism extends to humanity to follow the Maussian recommendation to "oppose one other without slaughter" (Mauss 1966 [1925]: 80) goes in this direction—that is to say, the invitation to adopt a principle that allows us to move from violence to conflict, thus reopening the space for mutual recognition of respective differences and avoiding the danger of their degeneration into inequalities. It is a valuable invitation, rarely accepted by critical thinking, to value the emancipatory quality of conflict and the capacity to manage it in order to prevent and control violence. This objective is not easy to achieve and forces us to ask even more profound questions about the forms that this strategy of neutralizing violence can take in the case of gender relations.

In fact, male violence seems to re-emerge as it is fueled by resentment towards women's emancipation and by tenaciously clinging to archaic images of the feminine. And the female response is restrained time and again, despite achievements on other levels, by paralyzing passions such as fear, shame, and guilt. The project of a convivialist society therefore requires the development of strategies not only to guarantee rights and justice but also to act on the affective life. This begins with an awareness of the traps that lie in the imaginary and the passions, in the dark and ambivalent dynamics of the psyche, which can unfortu-

nately interfere or clash with other undeniable goals. It is self-evident that the stakes are obviously very high, given the objective of building, as laid out in the *SCM* (1 and 7), "an art of living together." It might then be useful to introduce into the convivialist project a sixth principle on which to base the willingness of men and women to cooperate in taking care of the common world. It could perhaps be called the principle of *common affective emancipation*.

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