

## **Gender as an Integrating Force: The Potential for Dialogue between French and Italian Feminism**

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This paper will consider the role of gender as an integrating force within the framework of the European Union. Gender mainstreaming largely relies on benchmarking and examples of good practice. It will therefore be argued that, due to the late engagement with theories of gender and to previous successful collaboration between French and Italian feminists, at times with a clear European perspective, France and Italy are in a particularly suitable position to enter into dialogue both for the benefit of feminism in the two countries and the advancement of gender equality and the fostering of a common civic identity at the European level.

Gender equality has become a hotly debated issue in the context of the European Union. When it emerged at the beginning of the 1990s that specific actions in favour of women proved to be a partial solution because they prepared women for operating in a male-dominated culture without fundamentally challenging it, the focus shifted to the systems and structures themselves which maintain inequality between men and women. <sup>1</sup> Following the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the member states of the European Union committed themselves to gender mainstreaming. The Treaty of Amsterdam formalises the mainstreaming commitment at the European level: Articles 2 and 3 mention among the tasks and objectives of the Community the elimination of inequalities and the promotion of equality between women and men.<sup>2</sup>

Gender mainstreaming is defined by the Council of Europe as ‘the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making’.<sup>3</sup> However, although it may appear so at first sight, gender mainstreaming is by no means restricted to the formal policy level. On the contrary, the European Commission stresses that the root cause of the problem ‘lies in the social structures, institutions, values and beliefs which create and perpetuate the imbalance between women and men’;<sup>4</sup> therefore the focus has to be ‘on the social differences between women and men: differences that are learned, changeable over time and vary within and between cultures’.<sup>5</sup>

The issue is not how to ‘add’ women to the various decision-making structures and processes, but how to reshape these processes to create the space for women’s and men’s equal involvement. It is generally agreed that gender mainstreaming can only adequately address the pathology of inequality where it pursues a transformative agenda which, according to Johan, requires change on many fronts: ‘in decision-making structures and processes, in articulations of objectives, in prioritisation of strategies, in the positioning of gender issues amidst competing, emerging concerns, and in building a mass base of support among both men and women’.<sup>6</sup>

However, such a comprehensive view of gender equality which aims at neither the assimilation of women into a male-dominated structure nor at the maintenance of an essentialising dualism between men and women has been met with uneasiness and

opposition in some countries, such as France and Italy, where the notion of 'gender' has been a problematic one. Preference has been given to legislating gender imbalances away, the prime example being the French 'parity' laws which call for equal numbers of men and women at all levels of political representation. This is problematic in that the debate in the run-up to the passing of the laws was restricted to the narrow sphere of representational politics without addressing the issue of gender equality within society at large. Moreover, the laws address women as a biologically determined category without paying attention to the socially constructed nature of gender, differences between women and different types of discrimination they face where gender intersects with other factors likely to give rise to discrimination, such as race and ethnicity, religion or economic status.

Measures to promote gender equality have been difficult in France because of the presumed universality of all citizens of the Republic. In 1982 a law banning one sex from occupying more than 75 per cent of places in electoral lists in municipal elections (and thus implicitly introducing a women's quota) was passed by an overwhelming majority in Parliament, but was subsequently annulled by the Constitutional Court<sup>7</sup> based on Article 3 of the Constitution and on Article 6 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, citing the principle of equality as a fundamental element of the French Republic, which precludes the possibility of conferring specific rights on particular groups of citizens.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, in Italy, three laws that were passed in the mid-1990s asserting that both sexes had to have at least 30 per cent representation in the electoral lists, which significantly increased the presence of women in elected committees, were declared illegitimate by the Constitutional Court in 1995 because they were deemed to be in conflict with the equality principle asserted by the Constitution itself.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in 2005 three proposals in Parliament to increase women's representation which were named 'pink quotas' were rejected by an overwhelming majority of MPs.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the weak formulation of the parity laws themselves and a number of features which make it appear as if parity was designed from the outset to ensure that men would be able to retain their dominant position under the guise of promoting formal equality between men and women,<sup>11</sup> a major problem is that debates in France and Italy have not taken into account the gendered nature of social relations. The presumed universalism of men and women as affirmed by the Constitution has long been challenged by feminists: as the letter of the law assumes a male individual the universal citizen is, in Braidotti's words, no more than 'an inflation of masculinity into cosmic transcendental narcissism'.<sup>12</sup>

As it is not permissible to grant any special status to social groups, recourse had to be taken to biological determinism, and the parity principle affirmed sexual difference as an immutable characteristic of humankind prevailing over any other difference, and women as constituting not a social group but half of humanity. The rationale underlying the formal recognition of sexual difference has indeed legitimated women's increasing presence in politics under the name of parity, but the focus on biology has obscured, if not eliminated, the importance of power relations and gender relationships. The advanced vision of gender relations as marked by an essential complementarity served to distinguish sex difference from any other differences,

thereby defining it as a universal one acceptable to the French Constitution while rejecting any social embodiment of the abstract figure of the citizen. 13

The strengthening of essentialist notions works to consolidate the cultural repertoire of sexual difference as naturally given by failing to see gender 'as a consequence and symptom of particular, historical and socially constructed wholes'. 14 It is undeniable that there is a sexual distinction between men and women, but there are only versions of difference, no ultimate version. Biological difference is only the starting point for different cultural and social interpretations referred to as gender. 15

The turning towards questions of gender in most European countries has largely been influenced by recent Anglo-American feminist theory, notably Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. According to Butler, '[as] a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations'. 16 As such, '[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'. 17 Such an understanding of gender has been lacking in debates in France and Italy, rather there has been a dangerous conflation of biological sex and socially constructed gender or, at best, the assumption that gender is necessarily determined by sexual difference. Consequently, in both France and Italy the reception of Butler's work and subsequent Anglo-American feminist writing has happened almost a decade later than elsewhere, as the questioning of the existence of an essentially female identity and of the discourse of sexual difference was perceived as problematic. 18

In Italy there has been a surprising lack of critical discussion of Butler's work, and of *Gender Trouble* in particular. 19 In fact, the Italian translation of *Bodies That Matter*, which Butler wrote after *Gender Trouble*, was published first in Italy, leaving the audience aghast and unsure as to how to react to it without having the background of Butler's theories advanced in *Gender Trouble*. At first sight Butler's interpretation of gender, which can accommodate differences between women and recognises ambiguities and continual change in ideas about femininity and masculinity, seem to have a lot in common with Italian feminism. Nevertheless, from an Italian feminist point of view Butler overestimates cultural diversity, which may explain some of the resistance to her work. Braidotti argues that Butler's approach cannot recognise the intransigence of the symbolic structures through which sexual difference is defined, and how historically sedimented such conceptions are which makes them resistant to change. 20

Similarly, France has been slow in reacting to the influence of Anglo-American theory, and of Butler in particular. The French translation of *Gender Trouble* was only published fifteen years after its original publication in 1990, and it was preceded by translations of four of Butler's later works. Likewise, the French translation of *Bodies That Matter* was delayed by over a decade to be published only this year. It was only in the light of the parity laws and the legal recognition of gay and lesbian domestic partnerships that Butler's theory of gender was deemed to be of relevance in the French context. 21 The support of parity in the name of an essentialist ideology of sexual difference seems to have unsettled French feminists, and there seems to be a need to engage with Anglo-American theories of gender now that the 'presumption of

heterosexuality'<sup>22</sup>is being questioned.

To recognise the impact of Anglo-American feminist theory on French and Italian feminism seems all the more pertinent if we bear in mind the case of the German reaction to *Gender Trouble*, the publication of which brought in with a vengeance a long overdue discussion of gender identity and sexual difference and, crucially, a simultaneous radical deconstruction of these notions. If we take this as a possibility in both the French and the Italian case where feminists are, with considerable delay, engaging with Anglo-American feminist theory and with Butler's work in particular, and if we assume the challenging of notions of sexual difference which have a long tradition in both countries, then it would seem all the more instructive for feminists in both countries to engage with one another, and to analyse this exchange in order to draw lessons from it for the development of French and Italian feminism and the promotion of gender equality within the framework set by the European Union.

Indeed, dialogue and cooperation between French and Italian feminism has occurred on a number of occasions, but never in a sustained way, and with a different impact in both countries. French feminists, with the exception of Luce Irigaray, have been rather reluctant to open themselves to foreign influences, and Italian feminists such as Adriana Cavarero and Luisa Muraro have traditionally insisted on the distinctively Italian nature of feminism in their interpretations of sexual difference. However, adherence to clearly demarcated 'national' strands of feminism has become increasingly difficult as the impact of theories of gender is having an effect on feminist activism.

Gender mainstreaming within the framework of the European Union relies heavily on benchmarking and examples of good practice. Late engagement with theories of gender as well as previous successful collaboration between French and Italian feminists leaves the two countries in a privileged position to engage in dialogue and share their experiences. Luce Irigaray, for example, argues that we have a historic opportunity to develop a citizenship that goes beyond the nation state and rework the civic relation between men and women. The acceptance of new rights at the European level to protect women's right to be women by culturally dissociating themselves from a dominant masculinity and establishing the civic identities of the masculine and the feminine on an equal footing would grant women an equivalent identity to that of men, promoting a shared civil identity across Europe which seeks to foster a wider collective culture of respect for women's cultural identity. <sup>23</sup>

Irigaray was directly involved in a project aimed at fostering such a European civic identity. In the early 1990s she initiated a working collaboration with the Commission for Equal Opportunities for Men and Women in the region of Emilia Romagna in Italy, acting as advisor in promoting a training in citizenship, both for adults and children, at the regional and European levels. The project, which aimed to provide training in citizenship through respect for gender difference as a key to respecting other differences, showed great cultural and political potential. <sup>24</sup> In 1993, she became involved, together with the MEP Renzo Imbeni, in the writing of a consultative document called the Draft Code of Citizenship which was put forward to the European Parliamentary Commission for Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs. However, it was rejected by the European Parliament over the need to recognise the

difference between men and women and the way in which, according to Irigaray, identities were ascribed to them. 25

Such charges of essentialism are misguided, though, and based on a mistaken perception of the constructedness of gender. To refer to 'women' as a general category is not an essentialising move because it does not invoke an immutable female nature, but an enormous variety of women who differ due to their specific socio-historical locations and their personal experiences. 26 Contrary to the view that 'any use of "woman" as a generalised category commits one to metaphysics and essentialism', 27 it is necessary to follow Irigaray and theorise difference rather than sameness to construct an independent and positive category of 'woman' which allows for multiple female subjectivities. To this end, sexual difference should not be understood as biological difference, as it has often been the case in debates about equality between men and women, but as 'a difference of symbolisation, a different production of reference and meaning out of a particularly embodied knowledge'. 28 As such, Irigaray's notion of a European civic identity holds great potential for plurality and multiplicity and allows for a recognition of gender difference as well as other differences, attention to which has been lacking in France and Italy.

Equally, Rosi Braidotti resists any charge of essentialism. She offers the metaphor of 'nomad' as a way of conceiving a new feminist subjectivity located within language and geopolitical contexts, but without any desire for fixity. 29 To achieve this, Braidotti advocates a notion of sexual difference which does not rest on the dichotomy of male and female subject but, rather, on a multiplicity of sexed subject positions where 'the embodied subject is a term in a process of intersecting forces (affects) and spatiotemporal variables (connections)'. 30 Only a conception of sexual difference which perceives of bodily difference as one amongst many others, such as race, class and nationality, for example, can enable feminists to establish a female subjectivity that frees itself from the male-dominated tradition.

Like Irigaray, Braidotti considers gender as one of a number of factors which give rise to inequality and discrimination, and she stresses the political necessity to develop critical resistance to hegemonic identities of all kinds in the creation of a European identity. 31 Being a European nomadic subject means to be in transit but sufficiently anchored to a historical position to accept responsibility for it. European identity is thus a space of historical contradictions which have to be destabilised to undo their hegemonic hold in order to allow for the establishment of new subjectivities. This challenge to fixity pertains to sexual difference as well as to other axes of differentiations such as class, race, ethnicity, nationality and age. 32 While feminists obviously recognise the priority of gender in structuring these complex relations, Braidotti's metaphor of the nomadic subject refers to the simultaneous existence of complex and multi-layered identities which interact in the constitution of subjectivity.

For French and Italian feminism, Braidotti's approach holds great potential in that 'nomadic feminists are aiming to undo the power structures that sustain the dialectical oppositions of the sexes, while respecting the diversity of women and the multiplicity within each woman'. 33 By challenging the biological determinism inherent in many social and political structures and by taking into account other differences intersecting with gender, the conditions for dialogue arise, and they are favoured by the changed

nature of feminist activism which has taken to making extensive use of the internet, a prime example of intellectual ‘nomadism’ which has opened up great possibilities for exchange between French and Italian feminist groups and networks.

The examples of ‘Sexyshock’, a group of women and men (both biological and non-biological, homosexual and heterosexual) from all over Italy who connect with each other through the web, <sup>34</sup> and of ‘Prec@s’, who communicate, amongst other means, via a mailing list and a blog<sup>35</sup> could well be replicated on a supranational level to further dialogue between French and Italian feminism. In fact, dialogue between important groups and networks is already taking place in the form of ‘Nextgeneration’, an international third-wave virtual network promoted throughout the EU.<sup>36</sup>

Long-overdue engagement with theories of gender has thus put French and Italian feminism in a position where dialogue is not only beneficial for feminist theory and activism in the two countries but also holds considerable promise for gender mainstreaming within the framework of the European Union. Indeed, examples such as Irigaray’s engagement in fostering a European civic identity and Braidotti’s theory of nomadic subjectivity could be the key to turning gender mainstreaming into a truly transformative agenda in that they consider gender as one among a range of discriminating factors. It is suggested that the idea of gender mainstreaming ultimately implodes, and while the moment to abandon gender politics may yet be distant, the mainstreaming concept calls into question the privileged position of ‘gender’ as opposed to race and ethnicity, religion, economic status, age and other factors which ‘operate as a challenge to the liberal orthodoxy and the neutrality of the law’. <sup>37</sup> Ultimately, mainstreaming must rest its case on an appeal to broader political goals which transcend difference, and dialogue between French and Italian feminism seems as a very promising starting point to achieve this goal at the European level.

1. See European Commission, *EQUAL Guide on Gender Mainstreaming* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2005), p. 12.
2. See European Commission, *A Guide to Gender Impact Assessment* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1998), p. 3.
3. Council of Europe, *Gender Mainstreaming: Conceptual Framework, Methodology and Presentation of Good Practices* (Strasbourg: Publishing and Documentation Service, Council of Europe, 1998), p. 4.
4. European Commission, *EQUAL Guide*, p. 7.
5. Ibid.
6. Quoted in F. Beveridge and S. Nott, ‘Mainstreaming: A Case for Optimism and Cynicism’, *Feminist Legal Studies*, 10 (2002), 299-311 (p. 300).

7. See R. Sénac-Slawinski, *Evaluation des lois sur les quotas et la parité* (Paris: Observatoire de la parité entre les femmes et les hommes, 2002), pp. 11-12.
8. See K. Bird, 'Who Are The Women? Where Are The Women? And What Difference Can They Make? Effects of Gender Parity in French Municipal Elections', *French Politics* 1(1) (2003), 5-38 (pp. 7-9, 33).
9. See M. Guadagnini, 'The Debate on Women's Quotas in the Italian Electoral Legislation', *Swiss Review of Political Science* 4(3) (1998), 97-102 (p. 99).
10. See M. Calloni, '(Feminist) Academics and Policy Makers in Italy: A "Marriage" in Crisis or Alive?', in *The Making of European Women's Studies*, vol. VII, ed. by R. Braidotti and B. Waaldijk (Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2006), 56-82 (p. 79).
11. See A. Lipiez, 'Parité au masculin', *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 15(4) (1994), 45-64 (p. 57).
12. Quoted in N. Schor, 'French Feminism Is a Universalism', *Differences* 7(1) (1995), 1-14 (p. 22).
13. See E. Lépinard, 'Identity Without Politics: Framing the Parity Laws and their Implementation in French Local Politics', *Social Politics* 13(1), 30-58 (pp. 36-38).
14. J. Flax, 'Gender as a Problem: In and For Feminist Theory', *American Studies* 31(2) (1986), 193-213 (p. 206).
15. See S. Agacinski, 'Versions of Difference', in *Contemporary French Feminism*, ed. by K. Oliver and L. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40-55 (pp. 41-2).
16. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 15.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 33
18. See *ibid.*, p. x.
19. See P. Di Cori, 'Genere e/o gender? Controversie storiche e teorie femministe', in *Generi di traverso*, ed. by A. Bellagamba, P. Di Cori and M. Pustianaz (Vercelli: Edizioni Mercurio, 2000), 17-70 (pp. 22-26).
20. See R. Braidotti, 'Feminism by Any Other Name. Interview', in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. by E. Weed and N. Schor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 31-67 (p. 56).
21. See L.J. Disch, "'French theory" goes to France: Trouble dans le genre and

- “materialist” feminism - a conversation manqué’, in *Critical Encounters: Judith Butler’s Precarious Politics*, ed. by T. Carver and S.A. Chambers (London: Routledge, 2008), 47-61 (p. 47).
22. Ibid.
  23. See N. Stevenson, ‘European Cosmopolitanism and Civil Society: Questions of Culture, Identity and Citizenship’, *Innovation* 18(1) (2005), 45-60 (pp. 50-2).
  24. See L. Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 1-20.
  25. See Ibid., pp. 60-78.
  26. See T. De Lauretis, ‘The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain’, *Differences* 1(2) (1994), 3-37 (p. 5).
  27. T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 139.
  28. De Lauretis, p. 27.
  29. See C. Hughes, *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 73.
  30. R. Braidotti, ‘Becoming-Woman: Rethinking the Positivity of Difference’, in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, ed. by E. Bronfen and M. Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 381-413 (p. 391).
  31. See R. Braidotti, ‘Difference, Diversity and Nomadic Subjectivity’, p. 9. <http://www.let.uu.nl/~Rosi.Braidotti/personal/rosilecture.html> (accessed 14 March 2009).
  32. Ibid., pp. 10-11.
  33. Ibid., p. 15.
  34. See M. Galetto et al., ‘Feminist Activism and Practice: Asserting Autonomy and Resisting Precarity’, in *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi (2001-06)*, ed. by C. Ross et al. (London: Continuum, forthcoming).
  35. L. Fantone, ‘Precarious Changes: Gender and Generational Politics in Contemporary Italy’, *Feminist Review* 87 (2007), 5-20 (p. 8).
  36. Ibid., p. 9.



37. F. Beveridge and S. Nott, p. 311.

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