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# UN/DOMESTICATED FEMINISM

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## Clues

A few months ago, Italian public television's main network, directed at a generalist audience and used to "educate" Italian families by blending political moderatism, mediocre entertainment and edifying tales, broadcast a drama series titled "From Father to Daughter".<sup>1</sup> Emphatically announced as the first ever feminist TV drama and scripted by two female screenwriters themselves no strangers to feminism, it does not escape the golden rule of Italian television series: it is the micro-story of a family that the incursions of 'macro-history' upset only momentarily, ending up reconfirming the immutable family rules bar a few adjustments to the changing times. In our case, the micro-story spans the late 1950s and the late 1980s: a time when, in 'macro-history', the economic boom, the '68 Movement and Feminism, and the dawn of the image society followed in quick succession. The plot centres upon a patriarchal father-husband-master, surrounded by an unhappy wife, three restless and rebellious daughters, and a son who is as inadequate as he was wished for; in the end, by committing suicide, he destroys the narcissistic investment his father made in him at his sisters' expense. Seventies' Feminism –small groups gathering at home, demonstrations for abortion rights, self-awareness about sexuality– is the turning point of the story: it underlines the difference between the previous world of silent female suffering, and the later world inhabited by young women who gain speech and self-awareness,

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1. *Di padre in figlia*, by Cristina Comencini, screenplay by Francesca Marciano, Giulia Calenda, Valia Santella, RAI, 2017.

discover female solidarity, and have a contagious effect on their mothers and daughters. This turning point, however, lasts just a moment: it modernizes customs, seeps into the mentality, but quickly disappears from the social scene without entering the political one. And it radiates these women's lives with different effects, all tameable and tamed: the emancipation of the firstborn, who challenges her father for years but eventually saves his company from bankruptcy; the transgression of the second, who ventures into the glittered world of the cover girl but then returns redeemed to her husband; the punk disenchantment of the third, who moves to another continent searching for a future but ends up finding only the traces of her mother's hidden past. The final image –the name of the family's brand, "Franza and Son", which becomes "Franza Sisters"– renders the fairy tale moral: kissed by the feminist revolution, the three daughters put the scraps of their hard-won freedom at the service of their family's restoration. As if that were not enough, this moral is multiplied and reinforced by the images flowing beneath the end-credits, depicting the pantheon of outstanding women who since the post-war period have put their emancipation at the service of the Republic. The fleeting moment of the revolution which wanted to break down barriers between the personal and the political is thus entirely absorbed into an edifying female *bildungsroman*, coinciding with the building of the Nation.

Second clue. A few months ago again, and not by chance coinciding with the rise of the worldwide feminist movement "NiUnaMenos", a "not easily identifiable strange media object"<sup>2</sup> appears on the web: the Facebook page of "Freeda", a name obtained by the crisis between the name of Frida Kahlo, the artist-symbol of female autonomy, and the word dearest to feminism, freedom. Presenting itself as "the first Italian new generation medium targeting millennial women," and operating only with instant articles and short videos posted on Facebook and Instagram, this start-up reaches nearly a million followers in just six months. As for its contents, a quick scroll is sufficient: they range from the story of the first date of two young lesbians, to the coming out of boys and girls; from teenagers interviewed on their dreams, to Kate Winslet urging us to believe in ourselves; from beauty icons with a talent for selling their own image, to every woman's right to have sex as she likes. Among this phantasmagoria, however, there is one sole message: "You can do it and you must do it, you are free to wish anything and to fulfill every wish". We are in the midst of the neoliberal seizure of female desire and freedom; and the boundary between an autonomous and a trapped subjectivity,

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2. Arya Stark, *Ecco cosa c'è dietro Freeda*, 2017, available at: <https://www.dinamopress.it/news/ecco-cosa-c-e-dietro-freeda/>.

between the desire of being and the consumption of the object, between freedom and self-entrepreneurship is really very subtle, if not indistinguishable. However, the Freeda operation becomes more decipherable when it turns out that the start-up is run not by a group of millennial girls, but a company with 31 employees, funded by a corporation whose top management includes descendants of the two most powerful families of Italian capitalism, Berlusconi and Agnelli, who have clearly sniffed out the deal<sup>3</sup>. As the editor herself explains, Freeda is nothing but a device designed to gather millennials' data to sell on to the brands which are interested in this huge market; feminist content is needed simply to feed the "conversations" of the millennials, which will be processed for commercial purposes.<sup>4</sup> This goes to show, once again, that women and feminism are the chosen object of investment of a capitalism that sucks value directly from life, language, intimacy, bending the lexicon of women's freedom to the language of the market and to the ethics of self-improvement.

Feminist theory has nothing to lose and much to gain from close interaction with the languages of pop culture and the new media. Not just for the obvious reason –which cannot be stressed enough– that without an insight into these powerful agencies of discursive production, any theorizing on the construction of gender and on the processes of subjectivation is incomplete. But also, in our case, for the specific reason that precisely the media and popular culture are the main arena where the *dispositifs* for the domestication of feminism which we would like to investigate in this issue of *Soft Power* are deployed: the arena, more properly, where women are called upon not so much to endure those *dispositifs*, but to *perform* them, becoming at once actresses –strictly speaking– of their own domestication.<sup>5</sup> In fact the two clues I have just described clearly exemplify the contradiction, or double bind even, in which both women and feminism seem to be caught in contemporary Western societies: for women, the contradiction between their increased leading role in the public life and the increasing commands to perform the system's imperatives; for feminism, the contradiction between its inclusion and its blurring in public discourse. While feminism never ceases to show a vital and creative charge that is renewed, with different questions and languages, from generation to generation –as proved by recent events like the aforementioned NiUnaMenos, the Women's March on Washington after the election of Trump, the long wave of female rebellion against sexual harassment that sparked the Weinstein scandal–, it is surrounded

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3. Ibid.

4. Daria Bernardoni, speech at the 47° Conference of Young Entrepreneurs of Confindustria "That's the New Economy, baby!", Rapallo, June 2017.

5. See Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007.

by both a mannered recognition and a complacent disavowal, where mentions of “the only successful revolution of the Twentieth century” mingle with constant attempts to trim its political insurgency and to reduce it to a quiet process for the betterment of society (as in our first clue), or to a bold testimonial of the magnificent destiny of the market and of female self-empowerment (as in the second clue).

I have recently spoken, facing this double bind, of a sort of spectralization of feminism, through which it is constantly evoked and haunted by the public discourse.<sup>6</sup> A spectralization, nevertheless, which finds fertile ground in what we might see as the spectral quality of feminism itself: namely, in its elusiveness, its resistance to representation, its irreducibility to the traditional political lexicon, its recurring temporality, so “out of joint” compared to the supposed straight line of the modern political one. A “movement” –strictly speaking– of subjectivity, which shows up where it occurs and occurs where it is not foreseen; an affirmation of difference that fractures identities; a political construction of an unfounded, contingent, unstable, plural “we”: feminism is a recurring event that appears and disappears, does not respond to calls, renews itself without crystallizing; an opening that cannot be confined to a definition; a gamble for freedom with no programmatic platforms and no certain results; a common name always open to resignification and always subject to its own internal controversies. It is precisely those fundamental and unassailable traits of feminism that expose it to undue appropriations, disfigured duplications (neoconservative, neoliberal, moralist, legalist feminisms, and so on), instrumental references. Herein lies the political problem: how to relaunch this original, insurrectional nucleus, while detecting and dodging the strategies for its domestication.

## Footprints

This is –it must be said– an age-old matter. Although it has become central to the theoretical debate about the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism, the risk of domestication has been threatening the feminist revolution since the beginning, as a tireless *doppelgänger* aimed at dismissing it as a physiological factor of modernization or at bringing it back to the frameworks of the liberal and the Marxist revolutions, annexing women to them “as an aggregate or a consequence” –to quote Carla Lonzi who

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6. See mine “Spettri del femminismo”, in *Diotima, Femminismo fuori sesto. Un movimento che non può fermarsi*, Liguori, Napoli, 2017, pp. 23-31. I would like to thank Marianna Esposito for her generous reading of that essay (cfr. her “Espectralización del feminismo y el nuevo espíritu del capitalismo”, pp. 29-44).

immediately saw the danger.<sup>7</sup> This attempted assimilation of women –let us remember it on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1968 movement, which will undoubtedly raise the issue again– starts therefore also and primarily within that antagonistic field which women, by separating themselves publicly from men’s politics, had torn open with a *cut* that would never heal.<sup>8</sup> And it is precisely that anxious need to reduce the deep asymmetry between feminism and the 1968 movement which formed the template for the subsequent moves to domesticate women’s insurgency. Not a cut but a contribution, not an affirmation of difference but a claim for parity: looking back half a century later, such a reiterated misunderstanding rather appears as a persistent and defensive, conscious and unconscious attempt to contain the *unheimlich* profile of the feminist event, by bringing it back to the realm of the already seen and the foreseeable. In Hannah Arendt’s terms, a classic way to extinguish a revolution driven by freedom, on the paths of a progress pre-determined and pre-written by necessity.<sup>9</sup> Which implies in turn –according to Arendt as well as Lonzi– the reduction of a political insurgency to a social issue, and the institutionalization of the experience of freedom into the legal syntax of rights: namely, the two drifts to which Arendt ascribes the decline of the modern revolutions, and which reappear when feminism is assimilated to the Marxist frame or to the liberal one, with the result of labelling women as just one of several exploited social groups in the former case, or as halved citizens waiting for a definitive recognition of legal equality in the latter.

Both of the twentieth century’s revolutionary main traditions thus appear unable to take up the ontological and political challenge launched by the feminist “unpredictable subject”<sup>10</sup>. So that its “differential” profile –anti-identitarian, relational, non-sovereign, desiring, irreducible to Oedipal subjectivation<sup>11</sup>– is entrapped in an alleged gender identity, struggling for the recognition of equality and rights; its *political* essence –the appearance in the public space of the contingent and ungrounded “we”, the symbolic meaning of the feminist cut, the innovative value of relational practices– is dissolved into the traditional representation of the “female question” as a social question; finally, its demand to expand the political space to traditionally non-political matters –sexuality,

7. Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel*, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, Roma 1973, p. 23 (new edition ed. by Maria Luisa Boccia et al., Milano, 2013).

8. By the term “cut” the Italian lexicon of sexual difference means the separation of women from men at the origin of feminism and its consequences on the configuration of the public sphere. But it means also the symbolic exodus from the political and theoretical “main tradition”, an exodus that continues over time beyond the inaugural –and soon given up– practice of female “separatism”.

9. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, The Viking Press, New York, 1963.

10. Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel*, p. 60.

11. See mine “Soggetto dell’inconscio, inconscio della politica. Una traccia”, in *Filosofia politica*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2012, 1, pp. 25-37.

reproduction, the mental structures of the social bond, the link between socio-political order and symbolic order— is left unanswered.

In other words, the domestication of feminism consists initially of an attempt to bring the “unpredictable subject” back into the ranks of modern political anthropology, whereas that subject moves beyond the modern order, without coinciding with its postmodernist dissolution and fragmentation.<sup>12</sup> It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in this kind of domestication both the liberal and the Marxist frame have played their part, as two different articulations of modern politics which share the same anthropological structure. Nevertheless, there are some substantial differences between the two frames, concerning the way that each of them considers sexual difference, female desire and female freedom. Within the liberal vocabulary, sexual difference disappears into the status of the neutral individual, unless it reappears as a gendered particularity to be counted in the distribution of powers, resources and rights; desire is out of the picture, except as a desire for institutional and legal recognition. Within the (neo)Marxist lexicon, which over time has been enriched with considerable Foucaultian and Deleuzian inputs, differences are de-sexualized and aligned as components of the revolutionary multitude and its desire for subversion, while gender is treated as a reason of discrimination alongside class and race—so that women are again considered from the perspective of social oppression rather than that of the exercise of political freedom.<sup>13</sup>

## Overturnings

Paradoxically, it is in fact the neoliberal lexicon that has proven most capable of approaching the feminist discourse: not to uphold it, of course, but to nullify its subversive potential by overturning its sense. Unlike the Marxist and the liberal traditions, neo-liberal rationality does not attempt to bring the sexed subject back to the pre-existing political anthropology, but plays on the same ontological-political ground of feminism the trump card of a new order, centered on a revolution of subjectivity and a redefined notion of freedom: and it is precisely this common ground, or rather, tangent plane, that makes the game closer and more insidious. As in the case of feminism,

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12. On this position of the subject of sexual difference between—and beyond—the modern logic of identity and the post-modern logic of fragmentation, see mine *Libertà precaria*, in Tristana Dini and Stefania Tarantino (eds.), *Femminismo e neoliberalismo*, Natan edizioni, Benevento, 2014, pp. 50-65; Marianna Esposito, “Espectralización del feminismo y el nuevo espíritu del capitalismo”.

13. I am referring here mainly, but not only, to M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitudine*, The Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2004.

a “new subject”<sup>14</sup> emerges as the basis of a new form of governmentality whose maxim is “economics is the method, the objective is to change souls”<sup>15</sup> and in which subjectivity must be mobilized as a whole, body and mind, rationality and unconscious, will and desire: not, as in feminism, to transform the system, but to strengthen it. Unlike the feminist “unpredictable subject”, which comes to light collectively and driven by an explosive desire for existential and political freedom, the neoliberal creature is a hyper-individualistic subject, molded to conform with the dominant imperatives and disciplined to perform them through the exercise of a freedom reframed as the ruling social norm. And yet this subject shares with the former, crucially, the landscape of ruins in which both are born.

Neoliberal rationality establishes itself on a *crisis* of the social, political, and symbolic order—the crisis of the social compromise between the national State, Fordist capitalism and the class conflict; the crisis of the patriarchal authority, of Oedipal subjectivation, of the law-desire dialectic—already influenced by feminist *critique*, which late twentieth-century politics is unable to grasp and which “the new way of the world” tries to instrumentalize for the construction of the new order. The recruitment of both women and feminism becomes a crucial pawn for an acephalous “government of self-government” which rules not against but through liberties, adopts the proliferation of differences as its own logic, aims at the subject of desire and no longer at the rational subject of the modern social contract.

It truly resembles the scenario, dreaded by Nancy Fraser, of some perverse and subterranean elective affinities between feminism and neo-liberalism<sup>16</sup>. Instead, it is a new *dispositif* of domesticating. One that overturns the political freedom gained by feminism into women’s freedom of choice among the opportunities available on the market; directs desire towards production and consumption; monetizes and exploits the female qualities of care, relationality, flexibility and multitasking without abandoning the old forms of discrimination against them on the labor market; bends the feminist values of self-determination and self-awareness to the performative ethics of the ‘choice biography’, self-entrepreneurship and a self-worth which considers the body as capital. Last but not least, this *dispositif* orients post-Oedipal subjectivations towards a new, post-patriarchal phallogocentrism, where the master-signifier is the economic code and the performance-pleasure imperative replaces the law-desire

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14. See P. Dardot and C. Laval, *The New Way of the World: on Neoliberal Society*, Verso, London, 2017, pp. 255-299.

15. According to Margaret Thatcher’s famous definition, in her Interview for *Sunday Times*, June 1, 1981.

16. Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, Verso, London, 2013.



dialectic<sup>17</sup>. Within this framework, according to the neoliberal rationale, women become the addressees of a new sexual contract, no longer based, like the modern one, on their exclusion and oppression, but rather on their inclusion and their “free” adherence to the imperatives of self-improvement and competition, often sealed by the masquerade of a hyper-femininity that is as artificially constructed as it is naturalized in the public discourse<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, in feminism neoliberalism finds neither an accomplice nor a handmaiden, as Nancy Fraser fears, but rather a privileged target, a sort of antagonistic twin whose political potential has to be quenched by translating –and betraying– it into the economic code. However, the distinction (at least conceptual, as in fact there is often an overlap, as we shall see right away) between the modern domestication *dispositif*–based on the exclusion and the oppression of women (as an entire gender)– and the neoliberal one, based on their inclusion (as individuals) and their even partial liberty –is crucial, for it explains the seductive hold that the “new sexual contract” has on women, as well as the undeniable increase of their presence and centrality in contemporary societies. The difference between the two *dispositifs*, moreover, radically changes the topography and strategies of feminist conflicts, compared to the times of earlier feminism. If back then the point was how to leverage women’s historical extraneousness from the social contract, today the point is rather to become aware of their inclusion in it, leveraging surpluses, frictions, resistances and potential rebellions of female freedom *versus* the apparatus that tries to capture it.

Most of the contributions to this issue of *Soft Power* highlight this subtle, but decisive boundary between capture and surplus of female freedom, between neoliberal saturation and feminist cut, between women’s subjugation and subjectivation. On the ontological level, Marianna Esposito goes back to the asymmetry between the relational logic of the subject of sexual difference and the Deleuzian logic of the multiple, before focusing on the gap between the feminist critique of the universal and the proliferation of social and gender differences which can be captured by neoliberal governmentality. On the matter of production and reproduction, Andrea Righi discloses the gendered structure that lies behind neoliberal digitality, and refers to the categories of relationality and maternal authority conceived by Italian feminism as a key-insight for defying

17. For the definition of a post-patriarchal fallologocentrism cfr. mine *Il Trucco. Sessualità e biopolitica nella fine di Berlusconi*, Ediesse, Roma, 2014. For the economic code as a new kind of master-signifier see Laura Bazzicalupo, “Neoliberalismo e soggettivazioni femminili”, in Tristana Dini and Stefania Tarantino, *Femminismo e neoliberalismo*, pp. 35-48. For the performance-pleasure imperative see P. Dardot and C. Laval, *New Wave of the World. On Neoliberal Society*, Verso, London, 2017

18. See A. McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism, Gender, Culture and Social Change*, Sage, London, 2009, pp. 54 ff..

the individualistic fetishism of communicative capitalism. Tristana Dini focuses on the gap between neoliberal exploitation and the feminist resignification of care, while Carla Faralli, Valeria Giordano, Stefania Tarantino, Carlotta Cossutta, Clelia Castellano write in turn about the rift between the juridical/biopolitical/biotechnological capture and the feminist resignification of maternity. Other contributions show how the neoliberal apparatus of women's inclusion –in keeping with a governmentality that mixes different strategies, tools and temporalities– reclassifies the liberal-democratic language of equality and rights, combining it with a neo-traditionalist rhetoric. This happens in the Italian Parliament, where the political sign of sexual difference is eclipsed by the increase in the number of women elected, and where the latter adopt moralistic and victimizing gender politics for the “other” women while using self-empowering strategies for themselves (Maria Luisa Boccia). And this happens on the geopolitical scene too (Debora Spini), where women's rights and gender equality become instrumental slogans used to defend Western civilization against the Islamic threat, dividing Western women, who are considered free by definition, from Muslim ones, by definition weak, victims and incapable of any agency. One more reason to relaunch the feminist critique of law and rights to meet today's challenges, as suggested by Lucia Re's essay.

## Theories

We, therefore, propose an approach to the problem of the domestication of feminism which is partially but significantly different from Nancy Fraser's, not only in how it considers the “elective affinities” between feminism and neoliberalism, but also in how it looks at the past and the future of feminism, as well as at its theoretical maps. As it is well-known, Fraser divides the story of feminism into three “acts”, corresponding to three different phases of capitalism. In the first phase (Sixties and Seventies: State-regulated Fordist capitalism), Fraser claims that feminism contributed successfully to the radical left-wing struggle against the system, contesting capitalism's androcentric and statist traits with a view to achieving a radical social change. In the second phase (from the 1980s on: deregulated, neoliberal and post-Fordist capitalism), feminism –crucially, both gender-centered feminism and sexual difference-centered feminism– would have instead given up that anti-system ambition. It would have abandoned the previous struggles for redistribution in favor of struggles for recognition, and adopted a “culturalist” politics of identity compatible with neo-liberal directives, which willingly tolerate cultural differences (or pluralism of identities,

which is in my mind the same thing) in order to have a free hand on economic inequalities: hence Fraser's suspicion of an affinity, and even some "complicity", between feminism and neoliberalism. Thus, the aim of the feminism of the third phase (henceforth: post-Westphalian capitalism) should be, Fraser argues, to rediscover its original anti-system vocation, recombining the struggles for redistribution, recognition and representation, breaking the "spurious links" between the feminist criticism of Fordist androcentrism and the post-Fordist use of female labor, and cooperating toward the growth of a post-national form of democracy<sup>19</sup>.

While undoubtedly commendable for touching upon some blind spots of (especially Anglophone) feminist theory, to which I will return shortly, Fraser's scheme sounds not convincing, because of its premises even before its conclusions. First, her historicist reading of feminism's parabola does not suit a movement characterized by a discontinuous and recurring trajectory, made of jumps, latencies and overlaps rather than consistent, sequential phases. It seems rather indebted to the gradual timeline underlying the Marxist and leftist account of social emancipation, to which Fraser, in fact, *naturaliter* ascribes the women's movement. Once again we're presented here with a vision of feminism as a contribution to, rather than a cut into the antagonistic front; and again, such a vision is unable to fathom that cut as an opening, a generative matrix of a theoretical-political field which is more –and differently– multifaceted than the strictly anti-capitalist one. However understandable and appreciable the auspices that feminism regain its critique of capitalism might be today (see also, in this direction, Silvia Niccolai's essay, which outlines a disputable anti-capitalistic convergence between 1970s Marxist feminism and Italian feminism of sexual difference vs. gender-centered feminism), it should not be forgotten that feminism's main reason is the struggle against patriarchy and phallogocentrism, and that patriarchy and phallogocentrism *do not* coincide with capitalism, despite the fact that they are historically intertwined, as are the struggles against them. It is precisely this non-coincidence that has required feminism to widen its field of critique and transformation to the personal sphere, the microphysics of power, the subjectivation processes, a redefined materiality, the relation between socio-political order and the symbolic order: a set of issues that constitutes the political surplus of the feminist position compared to the strictly anti-capitalist one.

On the other hand, neoliberalism *does not* coincide with capitalism either: rather, it re-shapes the latter according to its own *political* reasoning, which models not only

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19. See Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*.

production, markets and economic policies, but also the government and the governed, democratic institutions and forms of life, the social bond and the individual psyche, within a legislative framework paradoxically centered on freedom, self-government, self-empowerment<sup>20</sup>. It is therefore at the level of this double political surplus, as we have already seen, that similarities and distances, affinities and conflicts between feminism and neoliberalism must be considered. And it is at the level of this political surplus, which revolves around the sense of freedom, and not only at the level of the social justice claimed by Fraser, that we can evaluate the fifty-year-long parabola of feminism, the fate of its insurrectional nucleus, its theoretical and political impasses –maybe departing from the maps of feminist theory outlined by the Anglophone international mainstream.

In this perspective, the role-played in this issue of *Soft Power* by Linda Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*<sup>21</sup> –which is discussed by Fuster, Guaraldo, and Possenti, and also largely inspires Fina Birulès's enlightening essay– is hardly surprising. Zerilli too speaks of a “lost treasure” of the feminist revolution: but referring precisely, as we have done so far, to the political surplus of a revolution that has been able to lean over the “abyss” of a freedom with no foundations nor guarantees. And she too, like Fraser, traces within the various “waves” of feminist theory the risks of a loss of that insurrectional thrust: but following a very different track.

Starting from the political stalemate in which the flourishing theoretical Anglophone debate has been mired since the 1990s (the so-called feminist “third wave”), Zerilli questions the centrality of the two frames –the social frame and the subject frame– underlying the two main dilemmas which have continued to trouble feminist theory: that is, how to conceive the constitution of the feminist “we”, on one hand with respect to the problem of women's heterogeneity, and on the other to the problem of the subject's formation. As for the first dilemma, the repeated claim of the differences among women *versus* the alleged –and largely fantasized– homogeneity of second-wave feminism has led, as is well-known, to even the term “women” being questioned as a unifying category, without however reaching a convincing political articulation of such heterogeneity. As for the second dilemma, the deep Foucauldian investigations of the processes of subjectivation failed to resolve the drama which traps the agency of the subject into repeating the very norms by which the latter is constituted. In both cases, a political paralysis ensues, which Zerilli traces back to the lack, both in the social and the subject frame, of

20. See Laura Bazzicalupo, *Neoliberalismo e soggettivazioni femminili*.

21. Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005.

a political concept of freedom. The first frame in fact implies the reduction of feminism to a social issue, of women to a social group –no matter if culturally constructed instead of naturally given–, of freedom as subordinate to social justice, as already discussed in this work. The subject frame, in turn, conceives freedom as the liberation of the subject from its normative constraints, rather than –in Arendtian terms– as a world-building relational practice, based on the opening and creative power of speech and action in the plurality of the public space. Both frames, finally, remain indebted to the notion of identity, despite challenging it, as well as to the notion of agency as an attribute of a sovereign subject, therefore conceiving politics as a matter of “the what” and the “I will”, rather than the Arendtian “who” and “I can”, of a non-sovereign subject.<sup>22</sup>

Crucially, Zerilli thus evades the “redistribution-recognition” dilemma, which is notoriously central to Fraser’s work, accusing both the struggles for redistribution (ascribable to the social frame) and the struggles for recognition (ascribable to the subject frame) of the same political deficit. Finally, to support her reasoning, she introduces as a “disturbing example” for the US debate the Italian feminism of sexual difference, freeing it from the suspicions of essentialism that envelop it, and restating it for what it is: a feminism centred on women’s political freedom and not on the claim for rights and social justice, in which the “we” takes shape contingently through free and public relationships among women; sexual difference is not the name of a given identity but an open signifier; differences among women are politicized through appropriate practices; female authorization matters more than institutional recognition, and the gamble for freedom –never guaranteed, and as such “abyssal”– is played out both on the table of subjective modification and on the table of the world construction and the exercise of judgment.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond its tribute to the Italian feminism of sexual difference within an academic milieu that has often misunderstood it, Zerilli’s reasoning offers some strategic suggestions of method for both the Anglophone and the Italian debate –which too often borrows the former’s controversies, tics and impasses, along with its frames. Adopting a political –in the sense that we have tried to clarify– and freedom-centred criterion for feminism firstly entails keeping the conflict between feminism and neoliberalism on its own ground, which concerns, as we have seen, the sense of (female) freedom, as well as the attempt to preserve the autonomy of the Political from the pervasiveness of the

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22. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-30.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-91.

Social.<sup>24</sup> But it also entails –and contributes to– a new approach to reconsider several theoretical-political controversies based on a chain of (often bogus) oppositions –redistribution/recognition, differences/identity, sexual difference/gender(s), essentialism/constructivism, and so on–, by ordering them according to their political intentions and outcomes as well as to the epistemic coherence of their premises. Examples of this are the above-mentioned contribution by Fina Birulés, who questions the political implications of the current reconfiguration of sex and gender conflicts in the generation that is approaching feminism from a polemically “post-feminist” position; and the essay by Lorenzo Bernini, who retraces a controversy about the politics of recognition within queer theory showing the risks of de-sexualization of politics and de-politicization of sexuality that the latter faces, and warning against the outcome of a schizophrenic split between the subject of politics and the subject of sexuality.

## Knowledge

The conflict on the sense of freedom also pervades –last but not least– the sites of production of feminist thought. The proliferation of women/gender/queer studies acknowledged by universities and courted by editorial catalogues is another symptom of the aforementioned passage from a regime of annihilating exclusion to a regime of conditional inclusion of women and feminism –in this case, a disciplined and disciplinary inclusion into the academic circuits and the mainstream cultural industry. In the essay that closes the first section of this issue, Chiara Zamboni explains how feminist theory –which for decades has transformed the humanities by keeping the link between thought and experience alive, opening channels between academia and feminist autonomous cultural centres, bringing the practice of relationships into research and teaching– is now put to the test by a governance that reinforces disciplinary boundaries, blocks exchanges between universities and the outside world, dissolves elective relationships into competition, efficiency, and evaluation. This is not without consequences for the contents of feminist theory: it risks falling prey to an apparatus which, in exchange for curricular recognition, requires it to adapt to standardized criteria of evaluation, or to go back to disciplinary borders, or to become itself a conventional academic canon. Whereas feminist theory’s force of impact, its capacity to protrude on the unthought

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24. On the pervasiveness of the Social in the neoliberal governmentality see Laura Bazzicalupo, *Neoliberalismo e soggettivazioni femminili* and Chiara Zamboni, *Un movimento che si scrive passo passo*, in Diotima, *Femminismo fuori sesto*, pp. 5-21.

and the unsaid, is necessarily linked to its autonomy, its ability –again– to make a cut –the *tabula rasa* suggested by Carla Lonzi<sup>25</sup>– in the knowledge, authors, and canons inherited from the mainstream tradition, to its desire to build female genealogies oriented more by female authorization than by academic authority.

The political cut from which feminism originates is the same cut that sharpens its thought; the generation of words that it produces is also a generation of ideas; the unpredictable subject of sexual difference is also the unforeseen element of its theory. The same gamble for freedom moves and renews them both. To this generation, this opening onto the unpredictable, this gamble we hope to give with this issue of *Soft Power* one more boost.

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25. Carla Lonzi, *Primati dell'intuizione nella tabula rasa della cultura*, in M. Grazia Chinese et al., *È già politica*, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, Milano, 1977, pp. 65-66.

\*In this volume some quotes show the names of the authors for extended request of Diotima group.

\*It is communicated that for a mere full material error the number 7 of *Soft Power* has been improperly defined Volumen 5 n. 1, instead of Volumen 4 n. 1 and the number 6 of *Soft Power* has been improperly defined Volumen 4 n.2 instead of Volumen 3 n.2 (Editor's note).