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A GUINEA FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF CULTURED WOMEN'S DAUGHTERS

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Abstract

Starting from the peculiarity of feminist theory, which consists in keeping the link between thought and material life, which cannot be identified with *Gender Studies*, the text analyzes the contradictory position it finds itself in within a University that has been profoundly transformed by neoliberal governance. It then goes on to comment on possible practices of change in University life in relation to the new practices of power based on assessment and competition.

Keywords

University, women, feminism, governance.

Resumen

El texto pretende, en primer lugar, considerar las teorías feministas como las teorías que mantienen el vínculo entre el pensamiento y la vida material a partir de la diferencia sexual. En segundo lugar, se propone valorar la posición contradictoria en la que se

encuentra dentro de una universidad que ha sido transformada en el sentido neoliberal. Por último, pone en discusión la cuestión sobre cuáles son las posiciones políticas feministas en relación con la vida universitaria.

Palabras clave

Universidad, mujeres, feminismo, gobernanza.

Feminist theories

In 1937 –when there were several colleges for women in England but a University such as Cambridge refused to admit women as fully-fledged members with total rights– in *Three Guineas* Virginia Woolf formulated her desire for a good University culture for women referring to a culture that did not simply integrate women into University in order to offer them the same culture as men. Moreover, she wanted university teachers to be chosen from among those who are good at living as well as thinking¹, and she referred to the daughters not so much of cultured women –as in the title– but rather of cultured men. Almost a century later, I will try to look at the University where I work through the eyes of Virginia Woolf. Would she approve of it? I think that she would be pleased about some things and not so pleased about others. She would probably be really happy that, these days, women who are the daughters of cultured women now study at European universities. These mothers are not cultured in the specialist or professional sense, but they are in a wider sense of the word since they are part of a symbolic horizon that, for several decades now, women have been drawing, thanks to the influence of feminism. Nowadays, female University students primarily ask their mothers to listen and give an opinion of the work that they need to present at University and usually only hand it to the teachers after doing so. It is a female genealogy by which daughters trust in their mothers' judgment for texts on history, philosophy, literature and so on. My students have actually confided in me about it. Not all of them, but most. Really a lot of them. An entire procession.

Nevertheless, the University culture that the daughters of cultured women participate in is not what Virginia Woolf would have wanted. She had very clear ideas: “The old education taught in old colleges does not generate particular respect for freedom nor particular hate for war”². She, therefore, imagined a new culture for colleges attended by women. She listed various disciplines, medicine, mathematics, music, art, literature and so on, and after compiling this list that she added that ways needed to be invented to keep the mind and body together and that teachers should be selected from among those that are good at living as well as thinking. I look around our universities where women have been integrated into traditional subjects and I ask myself: have things turned out how Virginia Woolf would have wanted? They have and they have

1. Virginia Woolf, *Three guineas*, Mariner Books, New York, 1961; Italian translation by A. Bottini: V. Woolf, *Le tre ghinee*, La Tartaruga, Milano, 1975, p. 58.

2. Ibid.

not. The disciplines are those she listed but it is rather more difficult and uncertain that they keep the mind and body, life and thought, together. I will come to the point that I want to focus on. In reality, there has been a serious attempt to keep material life and thought together within the university and it is linked to practices of women who are committed to giving space to feminist theories. This attempt has occurred mainly in the humanities area and has had, and still has, a history behind it in fields like the historical study of women, female philosophy, political theory, some areas of sociological, artistic and economical research. Here I will refer to the experience that I have at the Italian University and in humanities. However, I know of similar experiences in other European countries, and in North and South America from texts and testimonies. The roots are wherever the feminist movement was, in its various forms, and which has continued to spread as of the 1970s.

Feminist theories, therefore, represent an attempt to keep life and thought together in the University. This meant involving University subjects, transforming them from the inside. It is a forty-year-old attempt with ups and downs. The aim of my argument is to see what is currently happening between the practices, which express these feminist theories, and the *governance* methods applied to European universities, and to the Italian university in particular.

Before doing so, however, I would bring into focus what feminist theory actually means and how within it, life in its materiality enters into the circle with thought. Feminist theories, in terms of a series of texts, essays, articles and books based on the political context of the women's movement, are the expression of a thought that is profoundly linked to life form modification, to the drives of material life and to existential political practices. It is true that each individual scholar and every research group involved in such thought has brought the canon of their own discipline up for discussion again to show that there is much more that cannot be compared to traditional canons and to put the statute back into play, but it is also true that, what united them, is a mutual impulse. I refer to the desire to operate a "speaking" rather than "spoken" subjectivity. The construction of a discourse in which each person is personally implicated and stops feeling alien to what has already been said.

For all these reasons, a feminist theory is decidedly different to any scientific theory which does not need to refer to material life and to a collective transformation movement. The practices of feminist thought are, by lifestyle and political root, on another incommensurable plane compared to *Gender Studies* and *Gender Mainstreaming*, which are classed as specialized studies for which professional training is available and which are,

consequently, recognized by the academic world with the consequence that they are included alongside other specialist studies.³

However, it is exactly for this reason that feminist-rooted thought is so demanding since it involves everything in life, and yet this very fact of it including everything in life is what makes it so fascinating. In this respect, I remember that passage by Hannah Arendt found in the transcription of an interview given to the German television in 1964: "I don't believe that any thought process can exist without personal experiences. All thought is meditation (*Nachdenken*), thinking as a consequence of an experience"⁴. Well, personal experiences relate to what happens in the world. Subjective experience provides the necessary access to thought and therefore allows us to say something real in the world without having to rely on what has already been said and codified. In Arendt's opinion, there are many practices of thought and it is no coincidence that she includes, among the very important ones, literature, poetry, and storytelling in general, which she does not consider as a specialist practice but as a language that knows how to restore the complexity and ambiguity of experience.

The same goes for feminist thought. If it were recognized as specific, sectorial, a discipline among other disciplines, it would lose its impulse to opening up to something unexpected within the discipline itself. An impulse generated by the complex relationship with material life, betting on the fact of acting as leverage for new hermeneutics.

This situation creates a contradiction that structures feminist theories. I will go back to the terms of the question. On the one hand, the feminist thought does not want to become a specific discipline like *Gender Studies* because it would only be a branch of knowledge from other branches and would then lose its transformative power in our form of life. On the other, however, it has contaminated disciplinary contexts. In fact, it was female historians, philosophers, anthropologists, literary women, and so on, who showed that in the core of their own disciplines, there is something essential that the traditional canon is not able to express. In this way, the feminist thought is contemporarily inside and outside a structured discipline. Inside in that these university women have shown love for the discipline and excess in relation to its traditional form, sure of being able to convince women and men they come into contact with of the truth in their

3. On the difference between feminist theories, and "Gender Studies" and "Gender Mainstreaming", see: Michael Hirsh, "Rivalutazione di tutti i valori. La prassi futura della teoria femminista", in S. Tarantino (eds.), *La teoria non è un ombrello. Dieci anni di AdATeoriaFemminista 2006-2016*, Orthotes, Salerno, 2016, pp. 229-231. On feminist theories, see also: "Una teoria non è un ombrello", pp. 17-26.

4. Hannah Arendt, "Was Bleibt? Es bleibt die Muttersprache", in A. Reif (Hrsg.), *Gespräche mit Hannah Arendt*, München, 1964, pp. 13-32.

discourse and therefore transforming historical, philosophical, literary studies, and so on. Outside too, however, because in no way do they want to reduce this excess to a mere learning alongside another learning. This is a contradiction that creates a constantly uneasy situation, given the impossibility of structurally stabilizing it into a learning. For this reason, it is very often interpreted as a crisis of feminism rather than as a contradiction. But it is actually quite the opposite of a crisis. Let's say that it is exactly this specific contribution that feminist thought can offer the University, that is, by putting theory and material life into contact through its learnings. At the end of the day, that is exactly what Virginia Woolf wanted –a university culture where women could be in sympathy with themselves: where teachers are good at living as well as thinking.

It is not an easy situation, however. It implies convincing even those who have not had any practice of this type of the truth gained from women's thinking. This is done through discourses and by interlacing relations.

Relations as a constituent element of a feminist theory

When it is said that feminism is mainly a question of relations, this is very often interpreted as something that is certainly important but not essential. In fact, it is common knowledge that women have more talent for relations. They are able to keep going even in difficult contexts through their capacity to mediate, speak, create friendly situations, play things down, and take care of others. It is not immediately clear that there is a necessary link between developing theories, that are related to material life, and the intertwinement of relations.

A theory originates from a question that we find ourselves faced with and which we did not invent. We cannot go around it and it makes us feel uneasy. It needs to be a good question, that is, a question that is really worth facing. In other words, one that regards something experienced, something we and others have suffered personally and which does not have words to express it. What we can do is understand well what surrounds this question, where it springs from and which figures of discourse we can offer so that we are not blocked by it and left constantly going painfully around it. Consequently, new roads must be taken in order to overcome the block and illuminate the experience so that it can be directed towards a certain transformative direction.

To explain better, I will give the example of the theory of female-based authority. The female community of Diotima philosophers, with whom I collaborate, wrote about

it in two books. The first *Oltre l'uguaglianza. Le radici femminili dell'autorità* (Beyond equality. The female roots of authority) and the second, *Potere e politica non sono la stessa cosa* (Power and politics are not the same thing). Luisa Muraro wrote more recently about it in *L'autorità*⁵. This thought on authority links so many apparently dissimilar and disconnected aspects: the profound disorder in relationships between women when governed by patriarchy; the need for an employable linguistic figure between women and between women and men; the feeling of non-freedom that the figure of power brings with it; dependence on the mother, and so on. These elements, together with others, draw a picture in which the feeling of suffering, unease for certain conditions of existence and satisfying experiences all intertwine, but do not have a recognizable linguistic expression. In this context, the figure of female authority nominates a precise experience and, by formulating it into a language where none previously existed, transforms the language together with all the elements connected to the question. What was not available as a possibility earlier, can now be experimented.

One thinks about starting from oneself –making implicit reference to one's own experience– and at the same time acknowledging a common feeling earned through precise relationships and by listening to the others. Those who work at the university like me not only have other women to refer to, such as other university teachers, but also many other women outside the university who contribute to providing the framework to important questions to be pondered together, each in their own way. The symbolic weave of relationships inside and out of the university is therefore vital and necessary. One characteristic of Italian feminism seems to be precious in this sense, if compared, for example, to French feminism. In Italy, that thought processing is not limited to universities but also takes place in other important places, such as women's bookshops, journal editorial staff, associations, and so on. This has created a livelier, freer and more complex connection modality.

The dark lens of governance

A real turning point was imposed on European universities initially by the Bologna Declaration (1999), which aimed at standardizing university studies in the various nations, and then by the Lisbon Agenda (2000), which suggested that universities should

5. Diotima (eds.), *Oltre l'uguaglianza. Le radici femminili dell'autorità*, Liguori, Napoli, 1995; Diotima (eds.), *Potere e politica non sono la stessa cosa*, Liguori, Napoli, 2009; Luisa Muraro, *Autorità*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, 2013.

become authentic businesses and managed as such, needs to be dealt with. This transformed the basic organization of universities directing them towards the principle of managerial efficiency instead of the principle of legitimacy that had sustained them up until that moment. This European reform was taken on board in Italy following the government guidelines published in 2008 and then more substantially with the Gelmini reform in 2010.

It should be said immediately that the feminist movement has never been particularly keen on the traditional university based on the principle of legitimacy. It is the principle by which the legitimacy of internal hierarchical power is guaranteed as indisputable from the power of the state⁶. Moreover, the feminist movement saw these hierarchies as an expression of patriarchy: all the re-examination work by feminist theories concerning the internal canon of University disciplines has gone hand in hand with, and made use of, criticism towards hierarchies seen as an expression of patriarchy.

However, for some years now, that is, since the Gelmini reform was first put into action, certain points of reference in feminist thought within the University have come profoundly under discussion. Doubts have emerged in terms of disciplinary overlapping and the idea of a thinking beyond that of the discipline, in the in-out movement between the University and outside the University, only allowed for exchanges with companies or organizations that behave according to the principle of economic productivity, and in relationships seen as a driving force for material, symbolic and affective thinking. Relationships, based on exchange, comparison, respect, and even conflict, have been replaced by relationships governed within a set plan that intentionally generates structural competition between teachers and professors, who are all subject to the same efficiency assessment regime. All this has created an impasse in women with a feminist background. We are surrounded by fog. We need to clear the fog a little in order to continue a political practice with awareness.

A few texts have helped me to understand the fundamental lines of what is happening and these include: *Governance senza governo: un paradigma della crisi* by Massimo De Carolis⁷; *Governabilità* by Sandro Chignola (even though the end of essay cynically suggests exodus)⁸; and a text by Laura Bazzicalupo which can be found in *Femminismo e Neoliberalismo*, edited by Tristana Dini and Stefania Tarantino, although the entire

6. On going from a University founded on legitimacy to a University founded on managerial efficiency, see Laura Maran, *Economia e management dell'Università. La governance interna tra efficienza e legittimazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2010.

7. Cfr. Massimo De Carolis, "Governance senza governo. Un paradigma della crisi", in *Aut Aut*, 363, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 2014.

8. Cfr. Sandro Chignola, "Governabilità", in F. Zappino, L. Coccoli, M. Tabacchini (eds.), *Genealogie del presente. Lessico politico per tempi interessanti*, Mimesis, Milano, 2014, pp. 113-123.

book is actually on this topic⁹. In particular, Laura Bazzicalupo insists on differentiating neoliberalism from capitalism and describes neoliberalism as a political strategy that has its own rationality that implies “an anthropology, a way of thinking about time and subject, even an ontology: and it subordinates these conceptual coordinates to a government objective” of reality¹⁰. This differentiation between a political plan and an economic one places the accent on political gesture, that is, the historical transformation of forms of participation in the *polis*, imposed by neoliberalism, that conceals the political meaning of its strategy, as if it were a natural reality to be obeyed. This underlining of the political character of neocapitalism incites us to pay equally political attention to the moves that we can make on the university chessboard. We can, in fact, see University as a chessboard on which new forms of post-patriarchal power make extremely precise chess moves, while we are playing draughts on the same chessboard¹¹. The feminist movement has taught that, in the political exchange, everything depends on the nominations and practices put into play. We are, thus, very careful of the nomination moves and practice activations of those in power as well as our own.

For this reason, I will pause on some strategic nominations of those who are moving the chess pieces. A small but highly significant move is: the teaching and non-teaching university staff office has been re-named as the human resources office. We, both men and women, have become a resource alongside other company resources. We are a variable of the complexity of resources available to the company managed as a business. In line with the fact that, in the biotechnological market, human life has become a variable of the rest of biological life¹². It is, therefore, one of the many aspects of biological life just as culture workers are one of the many aspects of the company. It is two steps of the same alienation of the human to a thing. This trend towards the impersonal, which has guided feminism in recent years, should in any case be earned through the human¹³. And so, by playing with draught pieces on the university chessboard, the move to criticize alienating nominations should surely be used by bringing the reality in which we live to authentic nominations. Not always, of course, but at the right moment and when the others are listening.

9. Cfr. Laura Bazzicalupo, “Neoliberalismo e soggettivazioni femminili”, in T. Dini, S. Tarantino (eds.), *Femminismo e Neoliberalismo. Libertà femminile versus imprenditoria di sé e precarietà*, Natan edizioni, Benevento, 2014.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

11. I spoke about University in C. Zamboni, “Il gioco delle dame e degli scacchi”, in A. M. Piussi, R. Arnaus (eds.), *L'Università fertile*, Rosenberg&Sellier, Torino, 2011, pp. 57-62.

12. On this point, read Alessandra Allegrini, “Vita senza esseri umani, tecnoscienza senza differenza”, in Diotima (eds.), *Femminismo fuori sesto. Un movimento che non può fermarsi*, Liguori, Napoli, 2017.

13. On gaining the impersonal going through all the implications of human existence, read Gloria Zanardo, *Un'apertura di infinito nel finito. Lettura dell'impersonale di Simone Weil*, Mimesis, Milano, 2017.

A second move is in the word participation. *Governance* is the strategy by which sovereign power is replaced by a fluid, more local and apparently more democratic decentralization of decisions where everyone is obliged to become part of a structure made up of a large variety of commissions, in which decisions are to be made on many managerial aspects of the university, even though these decisions never actually affect the general framework established by the ministry. This creates a mechanism of involvement in decisions to be taken within restricted grids, which causes us to lose sight of the fact that, in this way, we are involved in a general framework about which we cannot decide anything. Participation is strongly requested and, in some departments, is even obligatory. In some limited fields of competence, unjust actions have sometimes been compulsory. It happened to me regarding the distribution of incentive funds in 2014 at my university where it was decided to give incentives to 50% of teachers rather than all the teaching body. Establishing in advance a statistical selection factor on a whole group that, *a priori*, draws a line between those who are above that line and those beneath it, is deeply unfair. It is as if a decision was made to fail 50% of the class before even seeing the results, whatever the effective progress of the class might be. Several of us wrote a letter of protest. A small move, which was answered with a very significant move on the symbolic level: the workers suffer from this situation, ways need to be found so that they suffer less. In other words, the letter was translated into a psychological problem of personal suffering and a lack of adaptation rather than keeping to obvious injustice. The new psychology of work asks for ways to reduce the suffering of company workers. This is how the new ambiguous and anonymous power makes its nomination and re-nomination move on the chessboard. And in fact, the protest letter move was very fragile.

Obviously, we need to go back to what just and unjust mean, in the understanding that each of us needs a judgment about our own research and didactic work in order to transform, grow and compare within a research community. But instead, the assessment practice was proposed in the terms that I have described. Assessment of the quality of company products and the subsequent certifications and accreditations are what the neoliberalist methods entrust to the state. All this is done through agencies. The agencies are separate bodies where assessments and made and accreditations given.

This is exactly the area of maximum dispute between those moving the chess pieces and those moving the draughts, or rather, between the strategy of anonymous *governance* and all the feminist culture that considers living relationships as the foundation of human civilization. Because it is exactly on relationships that the entire game is played, and in assessment, relationships are deleted due to the fact that the assessors

are anonymous and anonymity is generally the criteria for an entire series of decisions regarding the quality rather than the culture of a cultural product. Anonymity has been welcomed by some as the recourse against the ropes of power within the university, as authentic democracy, but in reality, it is the key point of a new symbolic mechanism of human resource management. Research work must be made visible to the eyes of the assessors who are, however, invisible. Their names are literally not known. It is almost like the Panopticon, the circular prison designed by Bentham in which the prisoner is observed by a single watchman in the centre of the building without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched¹⁴.

In the strategy of *governance* all teachers can become assessors, they only have to accept the application that the ministry regularly sends them. This means that there is no statutory difference between assessors and the assessed. Everyone can even be an assessor at the same time. We are sometimes obliged to do this. It would appear that hierarchy has disappeared and that everyone has been given the power, but instead, an insuperable bridge has been created between the managerial regulations wanted by the ministry and the “culture workers”¹⁵. Relationships between workers then become wary and competitive, which increases the strength of the move on the chessboard. But in regard to this, I can see that the draught piece moves are becoming very cautious. It seems that there is a widespread need, especially, but not only, in the women, to be very careful about relationships and make them as direct and intelligent as possible. In this way the draught move is not so much a direct counterattack against the chess move, but rather move indirect, thus making relationships strong and authentic. Giving them time, intuition, and trust.

It seems to me that male teachers are finding it more difficult from some viewpoints and less so from others. In these last decades, the end of the patriarchal university –after the 1968 movement– had left room for what we could call a university of brothers, allowing greater play to democratic men who offered their sisters equality with them¹⁶. The new University wanted by the European ruling class, which had decided on and imposed the business model, the manager, human capital and objective assessment of product quality for certification purposes, has created a model of ambiguous, fluid, and

14. The analysis that Foucault made of the Panopticon, placing it alongside the concept of discipline in Michael Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Gallimard, Paris, 1975.

15. One can read about University teachers reduced to talking beings and about desire for objects to be assessed and on the subjection produced by assessment in the interesting essay by Lacanian psychoanalyst: Jean Cleaud Milner, *Cours traité politique: Tome I, La politique des choses*, Editions Verdier, Paris, 2014. Milner, like Bazzicalupo, also observes that these mechanisms do not belong to the inclined plane of things but are instead the result of political choices.

16. On the democracy of brothers that have replaced the father, see Antoinette Fouque, *Les sexes sont deux*, Gallimard, Paris, 1995.

anonymous power, deleting the democratic space in which male teachers had a reasonably happy representation of themselves. From another viewpoint, male teachers would seem to be less in difficulty because they are more used to looking for cracks in even the most unfavourable rules, like the current ones, in order to adopt them since the male position in terms of rules is to keep a competent distance, a trait that most women, who either refuse the rules or identify themselves with them, do not have. When, however, men only try to find ways to adopt rules that would seem unfavourable at a first glance, they lose sight of the meaning of the overall picture in which they are operating.

It is well to remember that judgment has never been denied in the feminist movement. In fact, there has been much debate around the theme of judgment and the idea that the right judgment is necessary within the university, and not only there, has been greatly defended¹⁷. Let's rather say that one of the biggest questions in women's politics is the risk of slipping from the desire for judgement on what we do, to the desire of self-recognition as a person. The line between one aspect and the other is extremely thin but politically important. A symbolically unprocessed dependence on the maternal is certainly at work in the painful desire for recognition¹⁸. Instead, the request for a judgment goes hand in hand with the circulation of female authority. But the two aspects are extremely close.

In the heart of the present

Any real change happens in the heart of the present when we understand that its possibilities are different, broader and rather more unexpected than we believed. Reality brings with it a multitude of visions that we make happen with our words and actions. The reality of the dominant symbolic is one of the possible visions with the advantage of the power of regulations that produce behaviors. In a feminist perspective, a university is a place of organic relationships that extends much further than the limits surrounded by the dominant symbolic and is also much more unpredictable. As I have tried to explain, relationships are those ties that feed the creation of political practices

17. On the political and theoretical value of the request for recognition by women and other women –and the complexity of this experience–, read Luisa Muraro, “La domanda di riconoscimento”, in Marisa Forcina (eds.), *Nelle controriforme del potere. Generazioni al lavoro*, Milella editrice, Lecce, 2012.

18. For this position, see: Luisa Muraro and Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Lettere dall'Università*, Filema, Napoli, 1996; L. Muraro, *Al mercato della felicità. La forza irrinunciabile del desiderio*, Mondadori, Milano, 2009, pp. 70-72; Anna Maria Piussi, Remei Arnaud (eds.), *L'Università fertile*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, 2011.

and theories. Relationships are the formation, the cradle of thought and politics. This is true for everyone, men and women alike. What characterizes feminist thought is having explicitly recognized it. No feminist theory can be conceived independently without a vital exchange with other women, and, as we have seen, this makes it essential to take into account the thought of women both inside and outside the university.

So, at this moment in time, this exchange both inside and outside the University, needs to grow. While there is considerable confusion in the university due to the managerial imprint that it has been given, outside the University, on the other hand, new experiences, linked directly and indirectly to feminism, are getting into motion. I am referring, in Italy, to the conscious presence of young women involved in politics concerning communal assets and ecology and to movements connected to the protest against violence suffered by women at the hands of men. It is for this reason that teachers with a feminist foundation know that this exchange needs to be well taken care of. It is, in fact, essential to remember that women's thought does not identify itself with University but rather passes transversally through it.

Overturning this perspective, one might say that University is one of several places of feminist thought. Moreover, it is a place that, at this moment, requires particular political attention. Because, while we women are committed to a culture that includes material existence and the desire that intertwines with it, we also need to continue to create this culture in the universities, in our way, but still bearing in mind what the University is and trying not to imagine "how it should be". Only in this way can we remain faithful to Virginia Woolf's desire to generate a University that keeps mind and body together with teachers that are good at living as well as thinking.

The text that I have written so far has a certain imprint: a precise angle of thought. But there are other angles. What positions are emerging about the university on the part of women with a feminist background? Rather than emerging, a European and Italian position of equal opportunities in the university is slipping back on the symbolic plane. This trend is in syntony with the democracy that brothers offer sisters: they offer equal working opportunities, which needs help from particular state laws. The more the university shifts towards a business organization, the more the concept itself of opportunities for women, which must be the same as those for men and must be guaranteed by the state, seems to be more marginal in this new symbolic order that implies competition rather than guarantees. At the moment, the two regimes –that of the democracy of brothers and that of governance– still cohabit, but, in the University in particular, the company-managerial regime, founded on

cultural product competition, definitely has the edge. This leads to the sensation of a decline in equal opportunity politics.

Some feminist women now affirm that University can no longer be renewed in the way that Virginia Woolf wanted and that, therefore, it should be left to drift like a boat from which it would be better to disembark. At the basis of this position is the idea that women are able to establish other institutions where culture circulates freely and where thought is alive. It is an extreme position that invites women not to offer their energy to an alienating, apparently neutral, organization that is, however, marked by a masculine style of objectifying relationships between people. The road to take is the one towards a free female initiative for knowledge and culture, but outside of the University, thus creating autonomous cultural centres.

Another possible position would be to use the University for other purposes than those inside the institution. Adopt it, that is, in order to have funding and participation in projects generated outside the University. I am thinking, for example, of the idea of involving the University in integration programmes with migrant women. This is a project that requires research work on narrations, on the relationship between maternal language and other languages, on affective links between women and men, and implicates reflection on the incidence of myth, religion and so on. The University would become a partner in a women's initiative that regards other women. In this sense, a different contest from that of University would be placed at the centre.

I could describe a further position, such as that which, by authoritatively putting itself at the centre of University life, invites elaborating an indifference towards power without translating it into indifference towards politics. *The advantage* is that this feeling of indifference towards power creates a shift in energy, which otherwise would be entrapped by impositions. The more women inside the University free themselves of the imaginary of power, the more they can turn their attention to experimenting measures of university life following criteria that they feel and have experienced. One could refer to the fable of *The King's New Clothes* by Hans Christian Andersen: the King is naked, but only one young boy in the crowd reveals the truth. In other words, the King is not covered by the imaginary that power gives. The King is still the king of course, but his power at this point is restricted merely to the effective field of action without the extra power that comes from the imaginary¹⁹.

This position is not to be confused with the practice of "interior emigration" that Hannah Arendt criticized in *L'umanità in tempi bui* and which consisted of withdrawing

19. Simone Weil spotlighted the question of the relationship between imaginary and power in the terms expressed in "L'illade ou le poème de la force", in S. Weil, *La source grecque*, Gallimard, Paris, 1953.

into a private space during particularly difficult moments. “Interior emigration” is not only restricting oneself to the field of very few private relationships, allowing the public dimension to carry on, come what may, but also refusing the nominations that are given, as well as living not so much there, where one is, but fantastically in the world “as it was” or “how it should be”.²⁰ This is a very strong temptation in the University which creates a defensive indifference towards regulations that are perceived as very distant from the effective experience of one’s own profession.

Removing oneself from the imaginary of power that this position proposes leads to releasing political thought of reality in unprecedented forms. It goes hand in hand with entering into public debate and identifying figures of authority in context.

I will conclude with a note on the above-mentioned position of thought, which I largely agree with except for some points. I am convinced, as a part of feminists sustain, that criticizing power leads to being drawn into it.²¹ But there is a plaintive way and a clear way of looking at a reality. I believe that understanding the symbolic strategies of the regulations imposed upon the University does not lead so much to a power-dependent and drawn in criticism but to a vision of things as they are and not as they should be. It is an attention exercise that reduces and restricts the imaginary of power. In this direction, it is fundamental to listen to personal feelings because they mark the imprint given by reality. Not only must we interpret how things are arranged due to the dominant symbolic effect, but also the feelings of the soul.

The effects of this practice of paying clear attention are always unexpected and transformative. In the case of what is now happening, the clear awareness of the tendency of University regulations to replace relationships with formal relationships, to induce competition, to anonymous assessment, leads to the desire to make conscious relationships and to ask oneself about what creating thought with students and teachers is and which innovative practices we can promote to give body to the desire to think together. And all this as a political and public fact. Françoise Dolto expresses it very clearly: a creative and unexpected desire can only be generated by telling the truth about what one is experiencing. Otherwise, the desire becomes a prisoner of plaintive suffering for reality as it is²². Telling the truth about what we are experiencing is the first step to discovering what visions emerge from the heart of the present.

20. See Hannah Arendt, *On Humanity in Dark Times. Thoughts about Lessing*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1968.

21. See Assumpta Bassas Vila and Laura Mercader, “Dalla critica alla creatività: indizi di un’Università nuova”, in A. M. Piussi, R. Arnaus (eds.), *L’Università fertile*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, 2011, pp. 75-80.

22. In this sense, refer to: Françoise Dolto, *Tout est langage*, Vertiges du Nord/Carrere, Paris, 1987, pp. 117-118, as well as other texts by her on this theme, and Françoise Dolto, *Le cas Dominique*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1985, pp. 189-220.