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Contemporary Net-Activism: beyond Gender Dichotomies?

Changes, fluidity, movements

This essay aims to briefly illustrate some aspects of the complex relationship between new technologies and gender-oriented activism. In particular, we will try to offer some ideas for reflection to analyse the connection between globalisation, contemporary modernity and movements aimed at reaching gender equality. The era we now live in has set forth the overcoming of dichotomies and standardisations that have connoted the modern historical moment increasing individual freedom, diversifying personal life courses and allowing new interchanges among cultures, generations and gender. Today interdependence affects individual and collective identities. Such trends have expanded by the development of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). On the one hand, the technological outbreak has favoured the growth of new ways to communicate that are more rapid, participatory, pluri-directional and freed from the 'limits of the physical world'. While on the other hand, it has promoted cultural exchange, and has supported the emergence of new identities, thus influencing the perception of equality (which has now acquired several broader meanings), the modalities of civil and political engagement aimed at constructing an inclusive society, as well as the practice of demanding civil rights. This has brought about significant consequences – not to be underestimated – also on the women's movement. Briefly put, claims centred on the recognition of the particular identities of 'both' male and female are now strengthening, after a historical phase (second wave)

¹ The essay is the outcome of a joint research. In the final writing, section 1 is by Elisabetta Ruspini and section 2 by Sveva Magaraggia.

characterised by egalitarian claims centred on the female subject and on the difference of the female with respect to the male. The fourth wave (also defined 'post-feminism', starting at the beginning of the twentieth century) is growing out of the web and social networks, and it includes the newest generation of women (see for example Cacace, 2004; Turri, 2013; Magaraggia, 2015). Such a wave represents a synthesis of the new needs, the expressive and narrative modes employed by the last generations of women, the growing cultural interdependence and the crucial role played by communication technologies. Today the main objective of such claims is to give space to the infinite number of female individualities and make the movement more and more accessible, inclusive and open; also towards men. In point of fact, the alliance with men has become crucial, since men are as much a victim of patriarchy as women (Ciccone, 2009). As argued by Magaraggia (2015: 31), such alliances have become possible also because some 'certainties' regarding the stability of relationships and of gender roles are strongly challenged by social change which is triggering a significant process of the reformulation of male identity. The late or postmodern women's movement is therefore quite different from that which characterized the second (and also the third) generation of feminism (Perra and Ruspini, 2015): the models of activism have changed, the collective actions have changed and are now entering the social system through different communication channels: social media, blogs, forums (Cacace, 2004; Del Greco, 2013). Concurrently, people are becoming more and more aware that fighting against gender discrimination cannot be solely concern with the exclusion of women from the public domain. Other subjects, spaces, realms are to be taken more and more into account (cfr. Antonelli and Ruspini, 2016). Starting from such reflections, the essay will try to shed light on the relationship between contemporary feminisms and new technologies, focusing both on the positive aspects and on the potential risks that such an encounter may generate.

Feminism of the fourth wave: prospects and some contradictions

The great social transformation that marks a phase of historical discontinuity in our lives is mainly performed through social media. Thanks to the diffusion of smartphones and of social media the

so-called #activism has developed. The global echo of feminist action such as ‘One Billion Rising’² shows the potential of digital practices of participation and organisation. The web is the perfect translator of individual practices into global action. Thanks to such a translation, daily life seems to have fully become a source of ideas capable of activating political participation (Del Greco, 2013; Rossi, 2013).

Such a ‘development from within’ easily achieves a global dimension thanks to the web and it implies the co-presence of several objectives; an extreme cacophony of voices that have only one element in common: trust in the web. The employment of virtual space has changed a lot with respect to the way it was employed by third wave feminisms; the boundaries between on-line and off-line have become hybrid and, being no more distinct, they melt into one and create a continuous stream of comparisons and action (Hinsey, 2013). The transformative effectiveness of these forms of activism is highly debated, while there is an agreement on the web’s refreshing effect on feminisms.

The fourth wave seems to be a kind of feminism that wants the refoundation of gender identity: no more satisfied with definitions by negation – masculine is everything that is not feminine – but searching for libertarian, positive definitions. Such an operation means the transformation of male and female from their very roots, so from the way they are defined, i.e. from only focusing on the opposition such defining process aims at becoming inclusive.

In such a libertarian redefinition of our gender identity, men are also called on to play a significant role (surely a stronger one than in the past). The fourth wave is making into a political practice what has been scholarly affirmed by Men’s Studies from the end of the 90s, namely that also masculinity is suffering from the patriarchal order (Ciccone, 2009; Magaraggia and Cherubini, 2013).

Male supremacy is finally considered, also by these feminist movements, as a mere exercise of power, mere narcissistic display and repetition of strict identity-making devices. The construction of a new symbolic order, capable of focussing on the relationship with alterity can happen only through an aware alliance of genders.

These alliances can only strengthen in such a historical moment when certainties are being dismissed at an increasingly fast rate. The

² One Billion Rising is the biggest mass action to end violence against women in human history <www.onebillionrising.org> (last access 31.03.2017).

attempt to make differences coexist and co-work is revealed, for instance, by the slogan ‘check your privilege’, which is extremely popular online³. The fourth wave has translated into a political practice the awareness (often, so far, only theoretical) that any form of social privilege is not visible to those who hold it. To defeat this invisibility, we have to question our privileges, which exactly because of such invisibility are an exercise of power.

A parallel that can be seen between the contents produced by this new feminism and those of the third wave (the feminism that was born with the protests at the G8 in Genoa, 2001) resides in the reflections on the transformations of the working modalities (Magaraggia *et al.*, 2005). The third wave thought over on the precariousness, its transformation from the mere contractual level to an existential condition. Today the same logic is applied to pornography. Women and men of the fourth wave seem to have come out of the sterile dichotomy ‘yes/no’ in accepting pornography. They have greatly enlightened the moralist nature of such debates and have transformed their paradigms, reasoning on the meanings that a ‘pornification’ of daily relationships involves. These relationships are being experimented on a slippery surface, painful and at times funny, one that thinks of «pornography as a particular kind of job or rather as a paradigmatic way to work» (Power, 2009: 43). In a society such as the current one, where no one can become a subject without being first transformed into a good product, where «no one can hold their subjectivity in a safe place without constantly bringing back to life, resuscitating and re-integrating the capacities that are attributed to and requested by a saleable product» (Bauman, 2007: 17), to speak about pornification seems necessary. It is necessary because such a commercialisation combines with a transformation of the boundary between public and private: every element of our identities is exposed to the commercialisation process, which then becomes pornification. How to become an active subject in this process and not just to give in passively is high on the agenda of the fourth wave.

To conclude this brief reflection, we would like to think over the potential risks, on the foreseeable tricks that contemporary feminism may have to face.

³ ‘Check Your Privilege’ is an online expression used to remind others that the body and life we are born into comes with specific privileges. That we have to be situated <www.checkmyprivilege.com> (last access 31.03.2017).

A characteristic of consumer society is the capacity it has developed to «absorb every kind of dissent that (like in other types of society) it inevitably generates, transforming itself into a fundamental resource to reproduce, strengthen and expand» (Bauman, 2007: 61).

Also the feminisms of the fourth wave risk being integrated into the prevailing order so as to continue to serve dominant interests (Mathiesen, 2004). A pop version of feminism, unable (or not interested) to offer some criticism of the oppressive structures of neoliberal patriarchy is more and more present, both online and offline. Feminism is thus translated into a very fashionable accessory for emancipated women. It is a kind of feminism⁴ that is not able (or it does not want) to shed light on the contradictions of media messages, of imposed models, while, in an incoherent and critical way, it chooses some of those models and makes them its own.

As underlined by Nina Power (2007), such a lively passivity is functional to feminised capitalism, since it does not produce resistance, ruptures, counter thought, but rather a turnover increase for the market and a sense of frustration for female consumers. Today, this is one of the main dangers that fourth wave feminism faces.

⁴ The argument can be found, for instance, in what Jessica Valenti (journalist for *The Guardian*) writes.

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