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Women: Absent from the Political?

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To speak of those of women as those absent from the political, is not precisely to speak of the relationship between women and politics in general, nor is it simply to speak of the relationship between women and power. I would like in fact to formulate the following hypothesis: in order for these absent women to be a little less absent, perhaps we need to begin by asking ourselves about the strange collective subject which this absence seems negatively to trace; this subject which is generically designated as ‘women’ and which is sometimes considered – whether for comfort’s sake, because of laziness or due to a lack of problematisation – as a self-evident subject, which does not need to be problematised, and whose consistency, which is perceived as immediate, imperceptibly slides towards a metahistorical ‘naturalness’. Now, all of this, which is at play in our everyday ways of thinking and acting, often stops us from reflecting on the way in which this collective subject has effectively been constructed – or on the contrary how it has constructed itself through a political decision – in a more or less homogeneous manner, a more or less active manner, at a given moment in history.

In this sense, to pose the question of the ‘how’ of this collective ‘we’ which is called women is to choose to interrogate the space of thinking – that is to say also a certain cartography of the apparatuses of power, the sites of subjectivation and the strategies of resistance – which has permitted its historical emergence in the forms that we still know today; but it is also to ask oneself indirectly about the systematic identification of power with politics which has generally led one to think that, precisely because women were very often perceived as dominated, their exclusion from a certain type of exercise of power, or practice of power, *immediately also* signified their exclusion from the field of the political.

Now, I believe that it is paradoxically because we rarely question these points that women have been condemned to absence: a kind of effective and concrete absence which is doubled by this other absence, perhaps even more insidious, which is the lack of a genuine reflection on this difficult object that we call ‘women’. Whence the need to problematise the emergence of this surprising ‘we’ which seems all the stronger the more it has been condemned to the margins of public speech, to ask once again the question of the relationship between relation of power and the sphere of the political, and finally that of the possibility of a common space which simultaneously makes possible the absolute freedom of differences and the intransigent equality of radical democracy, the multitude of singularities and the political construction of their community.

I would like to begin with two brief citations.

Some years ago, in an Italian symposium, Michelle Perrot chose to devote her contribution to Michel Foucault and the history of women.¹ She recalled that though Foucault is today one of the key reference of gender studies, it was nevertheless important to register that he never took any great interest in Pierre Rivière’s mother. The remark was charged with irony; it is also very true. But Foucault did interrogate himself at considerable length on the conditions of possibility and modalities of construction of collective subjects *in general*: that is to say (1) on the manner in which the analytic of powers needs to produce massive and de-singularised entities to facilitate disciplinary management, putting to work and the control of humans (what Foucault will then call the government of ‘populations’) and (2) on the manner in which these same humans can nevertheless attempt, from within the power-relations that de-singularise them and produce their objective representation, to reappropriate their own subjectivity, to produce themselves as subjects of their own existence, both singularly and together. The question then becomes the following: is it so important to say of women that they are *women*, or should we see in their ‘absence’ and in their struggles, in their subjection and their slow emancipation, in their claims and their conquests the paradigm of every resistance, that is to say the production of a new and powerful political subjectivity?

A few months before his death, Foucault explained: ‘I have the impression that in the political thought of the nineteenth century – and perhaps one should go back even farther, to Rousseau and Hobbes – the political subject was conceived of essentially as

the subject of law, whether natural or positive'.² He returns to this point a little later, adding: 'if you try to analyze power ... on the basis of the political institution, you can only conceive of the subject as a subject of law. One then has a subject who has or does not have rights, who has had these rights either granted or removed by the institution of political society; and all this brings us back to a juridical concept of the subject'.³

Let us reflect for a moment on these two remarks, and on what in his own way Foucault is telling us about these absent ones which we are trying to discuss today.

When it is affirmed that women have been absent from the political – and sometimes even from history such as it has been written a posteriori by the victors – one is simply stating the obvious. But this obviousness only envisages women from the perspective of positive law, that is of the rights that one receives from the political institution by virtue of a juridical conception of power. Of course, the demand for equality of rights for all, men and women – whether we are dealing with individual or collective subjects – is irreproachable; and, from this point of view, the women's movement is today both necessary and exemplary. Having said that, it is perhaps more dangerous than it seems to limit oneself to the terrain of rights alone, in a kind of focus or reduction whose limitations some recent American developments have made patent. That is because reducing the terms of the problem of the absence of women at the heart of the sphere of the political to a simple lack of positive rights is to limit oneself to demanding for women the status of juridical subjects: this actually comes down to carrying out an operation which, albeit perfectly legitimate, is nevertheless heavy with consequences when it is considered as an end in itself.

The first of these consequences is accepting that the terrain of rights or law is the only possible space for claims and demands, which comes down to admitting that a certain apparatus of power – that of the production of modern positive law – becomes the necessary site for the resolution of all conflicts. Briefly, to put in a manner that is probably both too quick and too harsh, not to claim rights is to accept the position of subjection and invisibility to which one has been assigned; but to claim *only* rights is to accept that law is the only space of possible recognition; accordingly, it is to demand to exist precisely in the way to which power has sought to reduce singularity, difference and the wealth of existence: under the form of quantitative equality which assigns each and every one the same lot to the very extent that they have been first asked to

renounce that which is qualitatively the mark of their subjectivity. To place oneself on the terrain of positive law is to reduce women to a juridical status which is very seldom questioned within historical and philosophical reflection, whilst it is precisely there that a new economy of power-relations, a new political rationality, is articulated.

But there is a second consequences. In the short citations from Foucault that I recalled at the start of my presentation, what was at stake was marking the limit both of positive law, or more precisely of a strictly juridical definition of subjects, and of a conception of the subject of law, or of rights, ‘in natural terms’; as if it was necessary to register a second way of existing in the political field – strangely akin to the first – and which would play less on the reference to a contractual right than on the evocation of the consistent identity of certain collective subjects ‘by nature’ – by the same token legitimating their aspiration to recognition and to obtaining an egalitarian juridical status. Now the question that poses itself here is really the following: to what extent can one speak of a community, an identity or a collective subject which one would call – without ever interrogating its historical, political and social conditions of emergence – ‘women’, and which would be effectively and historically marked by absence? To speak of this community that exists by contrast, by its absence, without ever questioning the way in which it has constructed itself or has been constructed – is this not automatically to ground it in nature? And this recourse to a putative naturalness of women’s ‘common identity’ – is it not precisely what Foucault described as one of the most powerful and most perverted instruments of what he calls biopowers?

We are confronted here with something like a paradoxical pincer: on the one hand, to accept the positive dimension of law as the only terrain of possible political claims – and in so doing to take one’s place in the space of modern political rationality, playing one’s own conflictuality in the very terms of power; or, on the other hand, to refuse this dangerous juridicisation, opposing to it a naturalness of collective subjects which, since it never interrogates this ‘nature’ that it opposes to the thinking of contract, forgets that it is an invention of power-relations at the very moment when the management of life becomes necessary to the production of value, and when biopowers become instruments of control necessary to the development of economic liberalism and industrial production.

All too often the opposition between natural law and positive law, between natural foundation and juridical status, has been used to the detriment of women: they were relegated to the sphere of naturalness because they were excluded from the sphere

of the political. Inversely, and this is not the least surprising aspect of this whole affair, this opposition was sometimes used by women themselves when it seemed strategically useful – I am thinking in particular of a certain usage of gender separatism which was in effect extremely successful in obtaining a singular space of speech and in the affirmation of a non-subjected subjectivity. I think that all this represented a way of resisting the systematic privation of juridical rights of which women were – and today sometimes continue to be – the object. To be able to exist, women have been forced to say: ‘We are not like men. We need to be separate, to be different, to invent ourselves on the basis of this difference that we posit and which makes us exist as women’. To have access to the sphere of the political, women’s only possible resort has often been the foregrounding of a natural terrain that would both found their difference with men and their political consistency *as women*. Their only way of existing by themselves, their only way to reappropriate a subjectivity for far too long reduced to silence and kept at the margins of the political was this recourse to naturalness.

But this reference to nature deserves to be interrogated. This reference to nature is not natural. It is historical, constructed, ideological. This reference is inscribed in a periodisation of the history of the apparatuses of power which Foucault reads in terms of what he calls the biopolitical reformulation of modern power, between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. It corresponds to a certain number of factors which are demographic, economic and social, and which make necessary a new instrument for the management of individuals: what Foucault calls the ‘emergence of the norm’. The norm is the emergence of a rule that is no longer simply juridical – that is produced by sovereignty such as it has been defined in the modern epoch – precisely because sovereignty is no longer capable of governing on the basis of juridical rules alone. Something else is necessary. A new type of rules is necessary, rules which do not contradict the previous ones but which add themselves to them, completing them, reinforcing them by extending them and making them more efficacious: these new rules, these ‘norms’, present themselves as natural rules.

What we are dealing with is thus a historically datable invention of power-relations – nature as a production of power, as a new instrument of domination; the recourse to naturalness as a strategy of control – with the aim of governing ‘populations’ with greater efficacy and lesser cost. The word ‘populations’ calls for a short pause. Where disciplinary power only interested itself in the bodies of de-

singularised individuals, normative biopowers will resort to a strategy of management that doubles this individualisation of subjects with a massification on the basis of a (pseudo-)naturalness. What will be called ‘populations’ are thus massified and homogeneous subjects produced in order to become collective ‘objects’ of power, and which will be defined on the basis of a ‘natural’ co-belonging, that is to say on the basis of the foregrounding of a natural trait (age, sex, mores, etc.) which will make possible their classification and their subjection. ‘Women’ exist, of course; but ‘women’ is also the name for a homogeneous population invented by a technology of power of a normative type by virtue of a natural pseudo-identity. Women are called ‘women’ by virtue of the common characteristics that are ascribed to them: to have a uterus, to give birth to children, to work in the home, to serve their father and then their husbands, to have more sensibility than reason, to be more intuitive than they are abstract, and so on. It is in the name of this pseudo-naturalness of the community of women that their difference is recognised. But this difference is never the one that women themselves have chosen: this difference is the mark of their ultimate subjection, the one which will make it possible both to infantilise them (gender identity then becomes an age identity: being-woman and being-irresponsible, being-*infans*, come to overlap) and to govern them. It is therefore that norm which above all must be interrogated in order to try to produce the critique of the absence of women from the sphere of the political.

Allow me one last digression. I knew before coming here that you are very interested in post-gender perspectives and in the critique of natural identities. I also knew – because it is the subject of the presentation that you asked me to make – that you intended similarly to construct a critical discourse against those nationalism whose resurgence the current international political scene appears to signal. In truth, the two critiques are two faces of the same attempt at a deconstruction. When we think of the historical emergence of nationalisms, we cannot do it without referring to the epistemological, philosophical and political framework in which it takes place – that is to say to the system of references, the conceptual grid, the type of political organisation of the living and the space of their community which all this implies. For us Europeans, this framework is that of modern political thought starting from the seventeenth century, that of nation-states: it is that of the exclusive definition of the political community of men by the borders which define a veritable imposition of a grid upon space, blocking flows, fixing positions, materially delineating the great separation between the inside

and the outside, inclusion and exclusion in the great body of the nation; this is the definition through the unity of the sovereign under which men are placed (or, in the democratic variant, which *represents* men); it is the definition through the attribution of rights, that is to say also through the exclusion of others – the men and women of non-right, the non-citizens, the non-guaranteed, the non-recognised.

Three quick remarks, in order to set off our discussion.

First point. We must recall that modern political thought is the product of a historical configuration at a given place: it is the result of multiple determinations (economic, social, demographic, political), that is to say of a specific history – and for us, who look at it from a distance, of a periodisation. The problem is therefore not that of posing the problem of the emergence of nation-states – or of the phenomenon of nationalisms – in terms of good or evil, trying to produce a moral judgment, but to understand both the historical conditions that have made possible this emergence and the historical effects to which this emergence has in turn given rise. Now the idea of the necessary historicisation (and localisation) of the political concepts of modernity implies an immediate consequence: in effect, if we speak of the historical emergence of a system of thought (and of the reality-effects that this immediately presupposes) we also presuppose the moment in which all of this will disappear. It is a little, if you want, like what Foucault says at the end of *The Order of Things*, with the wonderful image (so misunderstood, even today) of the death of men as the barycentre of the human, economic and social sciences. When there is emergence, there cannot not be disappearance. With the only difference that while it is relatively easy – in a retrospective, or ‘archaeological’ movement, as Foucault would say – to date an emergence, it is far harder to identify the moment in which one episteme tips into another, one system of thought into another: this implies a critical work of another kind, essentially focussed on our own present – what Foucault, once again, calls ‘a critical ontology of the present’. Something like a diagnostic activity simultaneously concerned with what we are and with what we might stop being, a recognition of the ‘possible differences’, to borrow a nice expression that Foucault employs at the end of his life in a commentary on Kant. Let us then ask ourselves if there exist indices that make it possible today to say that the political categories of modernity and the political structuration of the real, such as we’ve known them for more than three centuries, are about to tip over into another conceptual and practical system, into another grammar of politics. This is for example what Hardt and Negri do when they choose to speak of

‘Empire’ and to analyse its new functioning. The tipping point is of course not mechanical, we’re not dealing with the Titanic going down in three minutes, and we must instead imagine that some forms of modernity may for a time cohabit with the new forms – which not only makes the situation a difficult one to live but also a particularly complex one to analyse. I think this is a fruitful path to attempt to produce this diagnostic work which Foucault enjoined us to undertake, and which I believe, though it is clearly political, it is also equally philosophical.

Second point, even more succinctly. I am extremely struck by the general (and often violent) de-historicisation of the discourse of the human, political and social sciences. This consists in acting as if all this (‘all this’ could be a political rationality, a type of government, a political subject, a modality of action or expression, etc.) *had no history*, that is to say really existed *in nature*. This is true, as I have tried to show, for the collective subjects that were constructed both by power and by resistance against it – this is of course the case of women. But this is also true for the very idea of nation, and for the immediate corollary of that concept: that of *people*. The re-naturalisation of the reference to the idea of people in the last fifteen years seems to me rather evident, as though it were a matter of buttressing the last vestiges of a modernity which does not cease surviving, by radicalising it. In brief, the men of the seventeenth century, just like the later thinkers of the Enlightenment, never thought that the political was natural: whether the state of nature is deemed to be the source of all evils, as in Hobbes, or considered as an irrevocably lost Eden, as in Rousseau, it was precisely that against which (or lacking which) the thinking of the political contract was constructed. The contract was the renunciation of naturalness. It is therefore extremely striking to see today an infinite spectrum of neo-contractualisms justifying their consistency – which is to say the governmentality that they exert and the people to which they are applied or which they claim to represent – by referring to the naturalness of their foundation. In a jumble: people defined by common origins that are sometimes dated back twenty-five centuries, Christian roots of Europe, ethnicisation of the social bond, communitarianisms of all stripes, racialisation of discourse included when it is a question of letting the oppressed speak (think of the politics of quotas in the US and more and more in Europe; or of the devastating effects of ‘identity politics’)... All of this is terribly dangerous. Nationalisms killed more people in the twentieth century than pandemics in the eighteenth.

Third and final point. We still need to know on what terrain – of critical activity,

analysis, struggles, ‘possible differences’ – we choose to place ourselves. Once again, the false choice between natural right and positive right, between nature and modern citizenship – denounced by Foucault in the short passages that I read in the first part of my presentation – should be denounced as such: it is a trap. Having said that, there are subjects without rights, blocked on the borders or in the nets of social discrimination, in those zones of non-right which more and more the democracies of the permanent state of exception represent. It is to them that we owe our reflections, for them that it is urgent to think and act in order to define new terrain of practices and struggles, but also, and inseparably, a terrain of experimentation of a new living-together, a new common of the multitudes.

Thank you.

Translated by Alberto Toscano

¹ Michelle Perrot, ‘De Madame Jourdain à Herculine Barbin: Michel Foucault et l’histoire des femmes’, in *Au risque de Foucault* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997).

² Michel Foucault, ‘The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom’ (20 January 1984), in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One* (New York: The New Press, 1997), p 294.

³ *Ibid*, p. 300 (modified).