

## Workshop 19 “The sexual economy of growth”

**Paola Melchiori**

**Title:**

**Feminism and degrowth: Parallelisms and Intersections.**

**The contribution of feminism to the economy of degrowth.**

The questions I will propose here are the following: has feminism still something to contribute, in the actual historical conjuncture, to a movement like the degrowth movement?

Will the same characteristics of this movement guarantee that the main contents of feminism are already incorporated ?

The reason for these questions is that this issue is almost invisible in the main literature of degrowth.

To answer these questions :

I will remember here some essential characteristics of the transnational feminist movement of the seventies;

I will contextualize them in the actual scenery that I define “neopatriarchal”;

I will reconsider some of the key words of de-growth and re-read them through a feminist lens (**focus?scope?**);

I will identify some possible intersections between feminism and degrowth that could show us a research path.

*The Identification of the Patriarchal Layer in Society and Culture*

The feminist movement was historically the last one to question the foundations of the Enlightenment project.

The debate between Northern and Southern women gave further evidence to the fact that the main categories at the foundations of our political world and our possibilities of understanding the world are being dismantled. Different voices questioned the tenets of our conceptual world.

These voices, coming from the margins of our world, reminded us that the global Enlightenment project, linked to development, to the Western life style, just one among the others, has succeeded in asserting its distinctiveness in a timeless and spaceless Universalism that has proved to be a bad Universalism. "These voices tell us that the Enlightenment project, with all its good intentions and ideals of universal emancipation, has turned into a project of domination of the whole world" (Genovese, 1995: 34).

Women's political practice, seeking 'full membership' and an extension of the borders of citizenship, led to re-conception. Women asked, in the beginning, to be *included* in development and the 'universal rights project.' What happened instead is that analyzing the reasons for the obstacles that opposed their inclusion, women shed light on some of the main aspects and contradictions of the notions that are the basis of the development and universal rights project. They had to question the fundamental 'critical silences' in its conceptual frame. They had to rethink the 'common-place' that delineates politics, and the 'plurality in common' based on conflictual differences, which is the dream of our politics and our democracy. They had to rethink the notion of economics from a different point of view.

To fully understand what I mean I need to go back to the early 1970s, when most of women's inventions took place. I have to recall here that what nurtured women's presence and thinking in many public spaces, even very institutionalized ones such as the United Nations Conferences, where the transnational movement became visible, was the creative social practice of many small groups, born during the seventies, their particular form of knowledge production, the rules of their democratic game, continuities and ruptures they fostered in relation to political and women's tradition. Many of the practices recalled from the degrowth environment were born there.

Women's practices, their particular form of knowledge and political approach were not a practice coming from civil society. They came directly from the bodies and the private rooms, the dreams and the 'words' that could not be pronounced in any language. They came from the spaces of physical and moral violence against women, within families, spaces where it is difficult to separate love and care from violence, spaces exiled (of exile?) from public space as much as they are essential to its existence. It was a practice whose truths and whose questions lay in that 'liminal' threshold where private and political is still obscurely confused. Its space is the space of "bio-politics". Through "an act of impudence", women proclaimed those spaces "political". They proclaimed the different truths coming out from those spaces, rigorous, "scientific". I am not sure we knew how deep were the implications of that intellectual work. It is at that level that our practices have been more significant, enlightening and questioning the whole organization of life, the threshold from natural life to social life.

Women unveiled patriarchy, reclaiming back their lives and their thoughts. They stepped aside from the system, starting from what of their own experience remained untold, "not fitting". In an act of "desperate" will, they dared to affirm that what was defined crazy, silly, emotional, not productive, had instead a dignity, a reason, a truth, a legitimacy. They self legitimized their lived and life experience and their thoughts despite and against the stated intellectual authorities. In doing so they started to deconstruct the system and another world started to take shape. Another

narrative started to emerge. The feminism of the seventies particularly, marked a new phase and an epistemological rupture. Beyond emancipation and equality, it focused also the “differences”. In doing so, women started to unveil the mechanisms of domination and of internal colonization, they made patriarchy visible and attacked the very core of it.

This movement marked a fracture and at the same time a deepening of the analysis, an anticipation of the movements that are coming to light today.

The separation from the physical presence of men's bodies was, at that time, the condition to avoid the impossibility of women “to think of themselves”. It stemmed from the intuition that patriarchy is so embedded in the hidden prescriptions through which women's bodies and minds are socialized that an “artificial” situation is needed to start a new path. This allowed the freedom to restructure the linkages between minds and body at the origin of every production of knowledge. It allowed a diverse recombination between perceptions, emotions and thoughts. It was the only way to get out from the “hypnotic power” of patriarchal knowledge. In this process it became possible to put “on hold” the male culture, its knowledge processes and contents. Male culture became an object of study, used “wildly”, in bits and pieces, capable to give voice to different subjects, feelings and views. But the “guarantee” for this work were the collective presence, the eye and intelligence of other women. It questioned all dualisms at the origin of our social and intellectual world, including the same notion of “public”, “social”, and “political”. It was a process of birth of another subjectivity together with the invention of the same conditions for its possibility.

Paradoxically, its diffusion was almost spontaneous: it began in underground groups that were not visible in the social structure, and in absolutely anomalous forms. The perception of its strengths, inside and outside, reached its peak in this phase when women, exploring patriarchy, developed, at the same time, a critique of all forms of established power deriving from patriarchy, at all levels, in the social, political and intellectual scene and shed light on their own deep implication within that scene.

In subsequent migrations, autochthonous and autonomous rebirths, ‘feminism’ developed and split up into many ‘feminisms,’ which then transformed and re-invented themselves as they interacted with their different contexts. Women's specificity became recognized in its many forms. In the many regions of the world, women experienced an undeniable change when they addressed the ‘female question’, and re-conceived themselves within it as women acting in the world: as autonomous subjects and not objects. Through local and global women's movements, women and women's issues gained political visibility. There is no place on earth that has not been infected by this force that allows women to take into consideration their lives and their place in history in a different way.

Even if the struggle to overcome dualisms was – initially – not particular to feminism, but part of a socio-political culture concerned with the interplay between theory and practice, the work against dualisms that feminisms carried on was much more radical, starting from the splitting that divides every human being through the imposed destiny of the characteristics of

sexual identities. To challenge dualism meant to start un-doing and de- hierarchyzing the basic dichotomies that, founding patriarchy, categorized the whole universe in oppositional and complementary terms: nature-culture, body-mind, feminine-masculine, public-private. The analysis of sexual identity and of the world were carried on together, with a focus on questioning identity, subjectivity, sexual differences, the forms of culture and of politics. From there women collectively employed and reinterpreted the whole body of knowledge. The process of its production was investigated from a great range of perspectives, in every disciplinary field, joining forces from diverse emotional background, “wanderings” among different disciplines. New notions and forms of intellectual and political action emerged. The “personal is political” was the summary of all that. It was dangerous, daring, and effective.

This research allowed to identify patriarchy as a structured system of domination underlying all the historical systems of domination, transversal to all societies, that was able to become, through a continuous process of adaptation and re-adaptation, an incredibly strong system of self legitimization able to convince everybody that it is the only possible system, expression of the natural order of things.

They described the main mechanisms through which patriarchy works and reproduces itself: the dematerialisation of reality and its substitution with an invented reality. They described the slow process of transformation and substitution, consequence of the expression of men’s desires, projected as a reality: how the real order of events is slightly transformed over time, until those aspects of reality that would call for a different perspective “drop out” from the landscape, while other aspects are just appropriated, and the real authors of some events, when women, just disappear. As a paradigmatic example we can just look at the destiny of all the realities having to do with the reproduction of human beings. All the activities of biological and social reproduction, raising human beings and caring, (caring for children, for the elders, for the bodies, for dying people), disappeared from the landscape, disappeared as work, become invisible or just devalued. An ideal and idealized world of fathers and men substituted and canceled women. The eternal life of minds canceled the materiality of existences, bodies, death, limits.

A system of differences and oppositions, hierarchically and sexually organized, shapes all the symbolic and material world, and this oppositional and hierarchical system “moves along” taking, when needed, new forms. One of its primary effects is the creation of a dualistic representation of reality: matter and mind become oppositional and complementary, as men and women, as body and soul, as public and private, and so on, as all the other opposed and complementary poles in which reality has been categorized. A splitted human being is created: men and women, in whom individual differences become sexually defined, fixed and stereotyped. Moreover, as this system calls for a “credo quia absurdum”, far away as it is from how things really function, a certain dosage of violence is needed to keep the system stable.

As an example we can just quote the analysis of the relationship between productive and reproductive work, and of development, which transformed studies which would have been confined to the academic debates in tools for political transformation.

The work on differences and similarities among women from the North and the South, the

de-invisibilization of women's work in the North and in the South, showed the entity of its cancelation both as domestic and reproductive work.

The same happened on the interpretation of the notion of “development”. As Vandana Shiva summarized in one of her first books: “while at the beginning of the decade everybody was convinced that development would have improved women's conditions, at the end of the decade it became clear that the problem was development itself”

Another important result was the re-analysis of the outputs of development projects on women, its dynamics, its results. It became clear that developing projects without taking into consideration sexual division of labour in villages and societies could totally mislead projects from their objectives.

Women's issues and women's presence have now achieved a visibility that enables comparisons and evaluations of the quality of this political presence.

Women's specificity, known under many forms, with different degrees and at different times during the 1970s and '80s had to combine the conceptual challenges regarding women's issues with this emerging framework, which has imposed an accelerated assessment of consistency and autonomy.

### *Backlash : Patriarchy and Neo-Patriarchy*

Where are we now? And where is patriarchy now, given the fact that one of its characteristics is resilience, capacity to change so nothing could really substantially change?

We are going through one of those times in history when the normal course of events discloses the hidden structures of society. This crisis is characterized by the collapse and by the reinforcement of patriarchy at the same time. And by a new form of patriarchal restructuring. A global restructuring in the organization of patriarchy, which we could call “neo patriarchy”, is going on. Its visible main characteristic is the combination of ancestral phenomena with post modern ones. Fundamentalisms and neoliberalism are allied (only) against women's freedom; women found a mixture of segregation and co-optation, nonetheless in contraposition between public achievements and intangible private patriarchal attitudes. Their challenge to ‘the rules of the games’ has encountered unforeseen resistance in men. While women move forward, in many fields and situations, the silence of men sounds greater. However, everywhere, women are today more aware of the cruciality of their position, of the importance of their contribution to economy, of their roles in society, of their work, both material and social. They got out from the self-perpetuating acceptance of patriarchal values. They have reached in many countries, emancipation and many forms of self liberation. This “secret current” whose extension and impact is still difficult to evaluate, works at different levels and in different forms, everywhere, at the level of private lives, as of social behaviours. It is, I guess, impossible to stop. Unfortunately this is hardly recognized even within progressive social movements where the social work that

puts women at the head of the main social movements today, be it the ecological movements or the resistances against multinational's robbery of land and resources, tends to be perceived as "domestic" work in society, while they still have to struggle for power positions when these social movements have to be politically represented.

This awareness occurs in the same time when women in their traditional roles, as flexible variables, in economy and society, are most needed. A non-hidden war of sexes is going on, where modernity and the old traditions are allied, where the need to exploit women as "a last resource" is combined with the ancestral resistance against their recognition as equal partners. The global restructuring of capitalism calls for the need of complete women's availability and flexibility. Male desperation in a universe without a future asks them for the same. Women are asked, now explicitly and collectively, not only privately, both by rulers of the economic world and by its victims, for quite opposite reasons, the same thing: to be available as rescuers of the private, the social and the economic fabric: to increase their availability, their material and mental work as well as their 'shock absorption' function at social and symbolic levels. In a world that is perceived as futureless they are asked to 'confirm' a staggering order: an ever more violent "new order" and an even more threatened ancient order. Hence, their stepping out by their own autonomous initiative from the role, which has been apportioned to them, is seen as an unacceptable attempt to shirk their duty, thus disrupting society's traditional shock-absorbing mechanisms, both from rulers and from their victims. War is therefore waged against even those simple movements that advocate a change in position, which is likely to disrupt the social structure, and mostly men's personal balances. It is a reaction against a slight movement in what women have always represented, even by their mere presence: namely, that their 'flexibility,' their imaginary and social use value is "given" by nature. The slightest move in this "security system" is perceived as extremely dangerous. This "deep need of security" is common to very traditional societies as well as to modern societies. It keeps together fundamentalist crusades against women with the new roles apportioned to women in postmodern society. As ethnic wars have shown, women's bodies have to be tokens, "carriers", not subjects in themselves. Whatever the content could be, the important is that their function as concealed basis of the social bond is maintained. So yes, they can step out from the private realm if they keep their function. This imagery works outside the control of intelligence, rationality and will. And it crosses all borders. Women become again, in the social imaginary, as they have always been, symbols of a deeper order, whose disorder is perceived as threatening the very basis of civilization. The present 'normal' degree of social violence is so nourished by *this* violence, which further exacerbates the opposition against women's freedom and autonomy, whatever meaning is attached to this word.

However and contradictory, the new phase is characterized also by the effects of what we can call the secularization of patriarchy. The public sphere, and neoliberal forces are now calling for the added value of feminine values, praising all the feminine capacities of ... "flexibility, complexity, emotional intelligence", and so, an added value today for managers as well as for public officers. If before patriarchy "worked" mainly through religion and idealism, today it works through a certain way of perpetuating a mode of thinking which adopts modern values in order to better hide the same misogyny. This form of neopatriarchy is active under the consideration that equality has been achieved so "feminism is now over" and out of fashion. No defensive structures, or separate instances of and for women are needed anymore. As in the



fundamentalist version women's freedom is just to be repressed, in this new form of reaction, feminist struggles become unnecessary. We face in some way, again and again, the tricky nature of patriarchy. A good patriarchal glue holds together very contradictory spaces whose main aim is to keep women in their place. In patriarchy everything can change if nothing really changes, argues Pierre Bourdieu. What Virginia Woolf has called the "magic lines" which divide men and women, move elsewhere in order to be maintained, using also the new awareness of women so as not to touch old and ancestral balances. So we live in a time of confusion and paradoxes. Young women especially, find themselves in a difficult transitional time, caught between a more solid ground because of the changes that have taken place but also caught in the fact that these changes are not sufficiently integrated and can easily be used against them. They have to face at the same time complete contradictory messages where even equality, sometimes, can work against liberation and dignity.

In spite of this situation, women's consciousness advanced. It is impossible to go back .

In this restructuring of fields, Public and Private, perhaps the most important of the cultural dichotomies restructure themselves differently. We face today the feminization of public spaces. Neoliberal institutions applaud the added value of feminine presence in work, governments, management, etc.

Here we can see the intersection with the degrowth theory, which is totally imbued by feminine values and metaphors. All the key words of degrowth call for a society, an "imaginary", opposed to growth, whose characteristics mirror a male, war oriented and production oriented society. Also, the degrowth movement is formed by young women who already practice different values and relationships. I have not heard so far of gender conflicts or claims of internally patriarchal oppressions as in the Social Forums and in the classic political movements.

### *Intersections*

Intersections are possible in this space, both in a critical and in a positive direction.

In the "economy of happiness" pertaining to degrowth, I feel the absence of a critical eye able to keep in mind how the best utopias can become the worst nightmares. And not only because history shows that utopias become nightmares as much as they present themselves as "absolute alternatives" but because women's thinking has gone deeper, moving its analysis to the deeper aspects of society, aspects hidden in the spaces of families, aspects that should change not only paradigms of human rights, of the economy, of research in various fields but also some definitions of many historical events.

They could change for example how we define "war and peace". I owe this example to some women from Bosnia that were describing their perception of war and peace after the war. At the end of the war women who, during the war, had occupied key positions within all levels of society, were all sent back home. Here they had to endure, absorb, all the consequences of the transition for themselves and found themselves having to deal with traumatized, desperate,

violent, traditional men often out of control. So these women were telling themselves “ This is another war : what is war, what is peace, in our own terms?”

Some of the key words of degrowth cannot avoid to test their validity or their gender neutrality with this particular perspective .

It is having this in mind that I want to re read some of these key words whose common denominator is the attempt to imagine a different life, a different social organization based on different values. The praising of communitarian life, the notion of common goods, the need for a decolonization of the imaginary , the appreciation of non productive work versus the productive obsession, of human relationships against work etc., the gift economy, etc.

To go back to the initial question: why are these issues so invisible in the imaginary of degrowth ?

How can we not speak of patriarchy as an agent of colonization of the imaginary within which we all live?

How can we speak of community without asking what really is the position of women as individuals in the communitarian societies or even within the matriarchal ones which many are looking for nowadays?

How can we speak of common goods without mentioning the whole range of reproductive care among human beings? How can we overlook what care means, what sufferings, exhaustions, fatigues it implies, and which powers, privileges, conflicts and violences are hidden within it?

I am surprised that in these spaces of “good life” the issues of power, conflicts, hierarchy, are not mentioned, as if their absence or solution was guaranteed by the new paradigms, still gender neutral, of degrowth.

I think therefore that, not only to rethink, but also to make operational all these values leading towards the “non homo oeconomicus”, we need a more complex way of thinking. How *do we* deconstruct not *One* element of the polarity, but the polarity itself? To reverse the polarity just with a new appreciation of the values traditionally confined to the feminine, (and not even mentioning them as feminine!), is not enough. To decolonize the imaginary is not so easy.

Moreover the imaginary of those who have a power to lose is very astute. When the polarities that are at the basis of social and systems and identities are deconstructed, they hinder material and symbolic balances.

In the “good life” therefore, how can we overlook transitions, or not question for example the institution of family? Those movements that question today the issue of masculinity are very important. Where are they in the degrowth ? Would not be also important to question the hyper-used mother -nature association, which is a key concept in the degrowth “environment”?

In this neo patriarchal phase where gender /sex roles are more confused, in this universe



apparently more prone to the feminine, I wonder if a new form of cancellation goes on, operated through a more invisible technique, not by domination but by absorption, by cancellation of the conflictual aspects of masculine and feminine. Where have gone the powers, the hierarchies, the materialities of ungrateful jobs in degrowth?

Why in this meeting was it so difficult to give representation to this world of women?

What feminism can do perhaps, beyond re-vindication of its presence and quest for recognition is an operation of suspiciousness, of watching, of supervising *how the new paradigms come to life*, how the decolonization of imaginary and its transformation operate in reality, how powers and hierarchies are redistributed : the new sexual economy of degrowth!

Cynthia Enloe, an American feminist who has studied “together” the most “far from each other” fields, as militarism and sexual policies, advises us to look always where “women are”, after successes, after wars, after apparent changes: which space they occupy before and after apparent changes. From these spaces only, she argues, we can understand what has really changed.

Decolonizing the imaginary has to be a non ending conscious “suspicion” on our own dreams, utopias, best hopes.

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