

Men-Women Relationship Ecology Gender Identity and Equal Opportunity Culture Cinzia Mion

The topic we are about to discuss is not easy and it does not appear to have much appeal. Indeed, as is often the case, the number of people attending debates on these issues is small. The interest for gender identity appears in the mid twentieth century. Simone de Beauvoir stated that “*One is born male or female, one becomes a man or a woman*”. This implies that the passage from one state to the other consists of a long and often difficult cultural and educational process accompanying subjects from one’s birth onwards.

At that time sexist stereotypes had not been eliminated, indeed they had not yet been damaged and they denoted characteristics which were out-of-date and anachronistic and in most cases males prevailed over females on the basis of the so-called patriarchy. In truth, it must be said that when women began to work outside the home, thus redeeming themselves from subjection, they had already slowly conquered through a new autonomy, a new identity, enriched by the capacity to take upon themselves responsibilities, take decisions, assert themselves on the workplace, prerogatives which in the past had belonged solely to men.

In the meantime the feminist movement had given a strong impulse to the emancipation of women bearing in mind, in particular, the assimilation to the male characteristics, i.e. the “privileged gender”. In other words, this movement sought to achieve equality in terms of rights, setting aside those peculiarities which made females a different subject. The *difference in thought* was concentrated on the *different subjectivity*.

The Difference in Thought

The epistemological resolution carried out by the philosophy of the *difference in thought* considers the gap between men and women not as a *deficit*, as has been the case traditionally, but as the difference which creates two different modalities of thought to try and transform into a resource some aspects of which had been considered minor owing to the fact that they were feminine.

The *difference in thought* emerges as a criticism to the male homologation of feminism and as a suffering for a much too costly equality which requires that one give up part of oneself.

Differentialism as E. Badinter defined this thought has become buried in an excessive, albeit suggestive emphasis of a biodeterministic view of the essence of femininity which stems from the possibility of “conceiving, feeding a living being with one’s own body” (L. Irigaray, *Democracy Begins between Two*, p. 132, Bollati Boringhieri).

From this statement there is a return to the maternal sublime, an exaltation which does not seek to segregate women in the home, indeed it exhorts them to privilege the relationships between themselves. The difference must be a reason of pride, a privilege, a thrust to assert one’s will to be at the centre of attention in a male-dominated world, considered neutral, in which the “one order” has been built on an amnesia, an amnesia which has led to the cancellation or leaving behind of the gender difference, particularly the female gender.

The difference in thought has clashed strongly with the concept of equality asserted by feminism but through the *difference pedagogy*, i.e. the educational application at school of such thought, has privileged the female world with great attention being paid to the separation of the genders, theorizing insurmountable differences since they were linked to biological determinism and calling for privileged relationships between the female teachers and their female students, through a practice called *fostering* or *affiliation*.

This practice (which has now been abandoned, to a great extent, for obvious reasons of different treatment in the classroom and also because, as we shall see, the male gender has lost part of its arrogance and claims) was useful to the female teachers to help open up to their female students the knowledge and recognition based on esteem and fondness. In this way one sought to legitimate the girls' hidden wish being at the center of attention.

Differentialism asserted itself as a philosophical thought and not as a pedagogical thought because in this field it has highlighted some radicalism, which has been rejected by the schools. It was impossible to set aside the young boys, who needed just as much attention, to privilege the young girls. At a certain point those who supported such position realized that it was unsustainable and they began to make the same recommendations in the male form but it was quite clear to all that this inclusion was simply a linguistic expression used to avoid criticism and that their thought remained unchanged also because otherwise it would have lost all its originality and foundation. Luce Ingaray, the most famous representative of this movement was the first to disagree with the transposition of the difference in thought in a pedagogy which was so active and slavish attained by her followers.

Both feminism and differentialism were the result of the linearity cultural paradigm based solely on the binary logic: "either" equality "or" difference.

To try and bring these two concepts together, the complexity paradigm appeared in the scientific community in the 1980s. (See. Bocchi G. Ceruti M by ...Challenge in Complexity, Feltrineli, 1985).

Complexity with its **multilogic and multidimensional** aspects has enabled us to combine "equality" and "difference" from which the thought of *Equal Opportunity* emerged. It marked a true cultural revolution which led to appropriate dynamic processes capable of improving the situation and the view of the world useful for both genders.

Difference is to be acknowledged, respected as a limitation, partiality, for both genders, since it is what ensures a true intersubjectivity: the equal relationship which must avoid fusionality, possession and the exercise of power with the transformation of the other into a mere object.

Violence against women stems from the non-acceptance of equality in a relationship.

Equal Opportunities

The attempt to combine the two should be carried out to enable both genders, which are different but equal, the opportunity of both emotional and affective growth (consequently also in terms of relationship) of being at the center of attention, assertion and autonomy (self-fulfilling). Without the previous schools of thought it would have been impossible to achieve such a clear conclusion.

Only within Equal Opportunities is it possible to start the change process ensuring the **co-responsibility** of genders in one's plan for the future. Otherwise women shall always be

condemned to a double presence, frustration and repressed rage and men shall escape their role of fatherhood by sheltering themselves in their work, outside the home...

The true revolution of Equal Opportunities is not that of establishing within each organism a special protection committee to defend women in society and in the workplace, the Equal Opportunity culture is carried out through an educational project starting in early childhood capable of transforming the sexist stereotypes – which do not allow the realization of renewed gender identities – through the taking up of new social roles, new relationships between men and women, based on an **ecologic** dimension.

Ecology can be defined as the scientific study of the interaction between organisms and their environment. In the widest sense of the term, by detecting the favorable and/or unfavorable aspects for the harmonious development and/or maintenance of such interactions one can use the term *relationship ecology* and also **man-woman relationship ecology**.

The first educational agency is no doubt the family. However, it is characterized by conservation and therefore one runs the risk of seeing some stereotypes being passed down unknowingly owing to one's cultural environment

It appears that in the parent's imagination the following question still arises when a boy is born: "What shall he become?" Whereas when a girl is born the question which arises is "Who shall she wed"? Of course in order to marry well and dedicate oneself with competence to a family one needs a good capacity in terms of relations with others and the capacity "to put oneself in someone else's shoes". Historically the male sexist stereotypes were represented by: **logos**, rationality, initiative, being at the centre of attention, strength, decision-taking, competitiveness, **machismo** etc. Female sexist stereotypes were characterized by: **eros**, feelings, temperament, sweetness, sheepishness, fondness, acceptance, adaptation, sensitivity submissiveness,, etc.

As we stated at the outset, women began to contaminate this stereotype among themselves very early and they began to legitimate their male part in their wish of self-assertion.

A problem remains within the family since in the past the males were guided towards self-fulfillment and the women towards relationship building (since historically they were in charge of the caring activities) and luckily today the two dimensions have come together (the risks, if any, can be found in another regression which shall be mentioned later), there are still doubts on the fact that this also occurs for males, i.e. the attention to emotional literacy and relational valence are adopted in the educational project.

This implies that as far as the identity theme is concerned, the feminine identity may be less problematic and more solid. The problem arises in handling a double presence: at home and at the workplace and therefore in the difficulties faced in one's daily activities.

In any case the new "reconciled" identities as they have been defined by E. Badinter must continuously undertake difficult and challenging paths.

For men there is the challenge of adopting a certain reflexivity since once the machismo has been overcome they must be able to undertake a new path, accepting their feminine and sweet part without losing authority to help build a direction for the young pre-adolescent and adolescent generations that look at young males as a model to try and understand and find a reply to the fundamental question "Am I a true male?" We shall see that the path towards a new virility shall pass through a new fatherhood.

Equal Opportunities at School

In the 1990s, more precisely in 1989, a Man-Woman Equal Opportunities Committee was established within the Study and Planning Department by the Educational Ministry. The group comprised representatives from the school professional association including the ANDIS (National Association of School Heads) and the different trade unions which had envisaged it in their contract.

The specificity of such committee was that of examining in depth the gender identity issue, bearing in mind the fact that schools offer a privileged situation of co-education of both genders to put forward proposals capable of helping teachers understand whether they themselves had sexist stereotypes, so as to avoid transmitting them to their students and promote the birth of new identities through analysis and precise and accurate reflexivity.

The undersigned author, in her capacity as a representative of the ANDIS, was a member of such committee set training objectives starting from the age of three (nursery school). Several ministerial newsletters were published taking into account the suggestions and indications of the committee, followed by projects, conferences and seminars. The Ministry requested the creation at the local education level of *Provincial Equal Opportunities Committees*.

The problem, once again, is based on a basic ambiguity. When the headmasters received the material and saw the words "Equal Opportunity", many of them thought that it had to do with the trade union activity linked to the protection of women on the workplace at school, that there were already too many women in the school and they would simply set throw the material into the waste bin metaphorically.

It implied that those receiving the material would simply read the title and nothing else.

This was not however the only difficulty. Notwithstanding the fact that the school is in the hands of women, we discover that it is an institution which is still too chauvinist. We realize that too often our male colleagues, indeed even some female colleagues consider the proposals put forward by the committee "trifles" with which some women like to dawdle with.

In 1999 the new contract changes the profile of the committee into a "joint" committee with four members appointed by the trade unions and four appointed by the Ministry. The reasons for such a change remain unclear. The appointments were simply a way to obtain further posts... The passion and the study characterizing the previous committee disappeared in a few months and at the end of the year 2000 it was not reconvened. One wonders if the trade unions have ever analyzed such flop to try and understand the underlying reasons...

Male Identity

In recent decades the present considerations on male social distress have been proven by studies on modern embryology showing that all mammals, including the human being, have an intrinsic trend towards a female development. In other words femininity is the basic program and something extra has to be done in order for the masculinity to take shape.

At the time of conception the male embryo “fights” not to be feminine. The role of the “Y” chromosome is to deviate the spontaneous trend of the undifferentiated embryo gonad to organize an ovary, obliging it to produce a testicle instead. Its specialized function is that of producing the testosterone hormone (A. Jost *Le développement sex. Prenatal*). It is the high level of testosterone which leads to the change into masculinity. In the first few months after birth, the child, independently from his biological sex is full of femininity. His mother’s *gestalt* penetrates into him. The male child has been born from a woman, cradled by a female womb and differently from female infants he is condemned to differentiation during most of his life.

Ever since the difficulties of male identity have been highlighted one can no longer state that men represent the stronger sex, indeed numerous physical and psychic weaknesses have been identified.

Today male distress is even greater owing to women’s awareness of their rights including self-fulfillment and being at the centre of attention. Men feel that the defense of the sexist stereotype is no longer valid and they thus look for a more authentic difference. This also emerges from the many studies underway and the novelties in daily life and the messages on the web even if there is still plenty of ambivalence. The contribution of the male-plural groups which are being established and which were initially born to counter violence against women by other men and which are now paying attention to the problem of the “reconciled” male identity, as suggested by Elisabeth Badinter in her interesting book published some time ago but which remains valid, “XY the Male Identity”.

New fathers

The same difficulties and uncertainties which appear to characterize the assumption of the virile role also appear to denote the assumption of the paternal role.

Indeed, today together with a paternal behavior which dodges the family and the relationship with one’s children thus delegating this role totally to the mother there is a growing need to give a new meaning to fatherhood, a need felt by young fathers in particular.

Ever since the first industrial revolution, fathers have gradually lost the main function exerted previously within the patriarchal family, that of socializing one’s children to employment. Since then fathers are no longer able to show their children their work and consequently they are unable to make them part of his work.

The father’s work which is de facto the most important activity for a man has become invisible to his children.

There are some fathers who try to satisfy their need of parenthood by looking after their infants and taking care of the basic education of their children.

Such a father who has never had a paternal model from which to learn – since in many cases he is the child of a father who was absent – and has not been able to develop skills and experiences becomes a “mammo”, i.e. an “overly protective father”. He is capable of looking after his child and this enables him to come into contact with his sweet part and legitimate it and it is the reason why it is stated that the new fatherhood is the way forward towards a new virility and vice-versa.

The new father is often capable of caring for but unable to act as a secure guide through mutual trust, appropriate protection (not overprotection) and approval, including

disapproval (which must never be a de-valuation) vis-à-vis the children. In other words the approach to the rules and the management of the “no” must be made in a loving albeit authoritative manner, without fearing a conflict with two-year-olds.

This may be the reason why there is a so-called educational emergency.

Over the years the European Community has published recommendations in which it hoped to “promote and encourage, in full compliance and autonomy of the individuals, a greater participation of men in the care and education of children so as to ensure a more equal sharing of parental responsibilities between men and women”.

Conclusions

The only possibility to help make this change easier is based on political decisions. In order to build a strong and consistent **identity** two processes are necessary as stated by Erikson: the **identification** with a representative of the same sex and that of **differentiation** with the parent of an opposite sex, processes which are also true for significant figures such as teachers.

If there is no differentiation we only have identification and there is thus the risk of a lack of autonomy, “cloning”, mirror formation. This is why it is so important to make the caring and teaching professions interesting for the future male generations. Of course there must be adequate training for all. We must debunk the idea that women are already naturally 50% teachers.

One must debunk the myth that a women, aware of the damage which Italian “mammismo” (overprotective mothers) may create, is capable of managing the relationship with her male son in a different manner. However, there is a new front which appears and which we shall not tackle owing to a lack of space.

Other measures such as a change in the times and timetables of a city – but this is already underway – greater information and the introduction of training programs for Equal Opportunities, making sure that they are not misunderstood: a greater attention to television programs or greater competence of the teachers to analytically criticize together with the youngsters the TV role models, their dissemination without any filter of any kind and at the end of the day, why not, the reintroduction of a new Equal Opportunities Committee, having the same objectives, to be implemented and supported strongly by all the institutions in charge of looking after an interpersonal ecological relationship between men and women: an absolute necessity to ensure the wellbeing of citizens at large.

It may be that through “renunciation” (which is linked to what one “has” – which differs from “loss” which in turn is linked to “being”) if we are able to mutually support each other together, men and women, it shall be possible not only to embody a happy or serene degrowth, but also to start laying the foundation for a “public ethic” which the country desperately needs.

It is only if through the renunciation of everyone that it is possible to create a truly “common good”. Such “common good” is not simply the sum of the individual goods. Only in this way is it possible to find those essential values of a true interpersonal relationship which consumism, conformism and indifference embodied in neoliberalism, have destroyed.