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About Genders.

Lgbti, Queer, Masculinities, Feminisms and Other Boundaries

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Editorial

About gender. Or, more exactly, about genders.

Gender as a gaze on the world. Gender as social construction. Gender as a device of power, positioning, hierarchies, otherness. Gender as a producer of identities, cages, boundaries and opportunities. Genders with more or less blurred boundaries. Genders in a dialogue.

Michael Kimmel, in the opening essay of this presentation issue of AboutGender (from now on AG), recounts with acumen and irony his first *encounter* with *Women's studies*. It was in the early eighties, and the photo shows a young Kimmel, the only man in a small group of women discussing sisterhood and identity in a biographical way, starting from the self: what do I see when I look at myself in the mirror? What do you see? Do you see a woman? Do you see a coloured woman? Does gender or race weigh more? And what does a (white) man see? Simply a person?

In these few exchanges, some of the themes can be perceived that were to characterize the debate in the ensuing forty years – the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) for instance, but also the neutrality of the masculine (Bourdieu 1998). But perhaps one of the aspects that most struck our imagination is a sentence in which the author stresses that “forty years ago, there were no women’s studies courses in colleges or universities, no women’s studies lists at university presses across the country.” Forty years ago. How can one not think, by contrast, of the vacuums in Italian academy? How can one not reflect on our delay?

The delay certainly does not concern scientific production, includable in the plenums both for the quantity of papers and for the quality and level of reflections, but rather the visibility of the debate – poorly institutionalized and hardly accessible to young scholars not inserted in the appropriate networks – as well as the fields of knowledge. Very briefly, and therefore not exhaustively, the vacuums can be connected particularly to three dimensions: a widespread sense of uneasiness, especially among the new generations, in relation to feminisms, which people tend to distance themselves from pre-emptively; the fact that *Men’s studies* have only recently been introduced; a timid and late opening of LGBTQTI’s, perceived however as social, conceptual and narrative outskirts.

The distance from feminisms very often seems to concern more an unreasoned position in relation to what the concept – feminism – evokes in our imagination, rather than critical reflection on the positions expressed by a given line of thought. The very word “feminism” produces uneasiness in the new generations, as a positive outcome of a skilled operation of *back lash* (Falaudi 1991), to be seen as the “affirmation of a popular culture that is deeply ‘antifeminist’, hostile to female autonomy in choices for life and professional ones, manifested in the representations of women and the relationships between the sexes communicated by the media – press, television and films – and in political speeches and journalistic campaigns on themes regarding women” (Campani 2009: 17). In Italy, the *back lash* is also affirmed thanks to vulgar and strident use of women’s bodies in the media (Zanardo 2010) – bodies exhibited, humiliated, violated, cut up into pieces – accompanied by a silent but systematic process

of repression of memory and demonization of feminist movements, which explains the uneasiness mentioned. On the other side, it is not clear how young women/men can take up a critical stance towards feminist thought, when access to the *thinkers that matter* – borrowing the title of an essay by Guaraldo present in this issue – is not contemplated by the mainstreaming processes of formation.

Thus there are many differences compared to the North American experience (and others). Nevertheless, a point of contact in relation to that seminar distant in time described by Kimmel perhaps exists: the women-men proportion. Gender studies in Italy have long been reductively read as synonymous with studies on women, and historically it is women that have dealt with gender. After all, the masculine, in the prevailing symbolic dominion, has no gender, it is neutral (Bourdieu 1998), since, being dominant, it needs no explanation (Jacose 1996). So why should genderless subjects ever have dealt with gender?

In the course of time, as Bimbi stresses, together with Kimmel, also in this issue of AG, *Women's studies* have allowed the masculine to recognize itself and name itself, and some men, in Italy too, have approached *Gender studies*. Gender studies, however, remain a female-dominated field – which would explain their scarce institutional importance – in which, besides, the men are few but very visible ... and not necessarily because they are rare.

Then in the case of LGBTQI studies, the delays are even more evident, as academic resistances are strong and explicit. Throughout the nineties, Italian sociology, for instance, never dealt with homosexuality (Abbatecola 2002 and 2008) and, as Silvia Antosa denounces in an unequivocal way, still today “penetrating into queer critical territory means first of all arming oneself with patience and starting abroad” (2011, p. 25).

Feminisms not frequented very much; *Men's studies* still in a minority, though welcomed and appreciated; *LGBTQI studies* as social, conceptual and narrative outskirts.

We therefore decided to set out along this pathway thinking about these vacuums and imagining AG as a space to be made available, in which there could converge the

reflections and the many forms of knowledge that are produced on genders, for the purpose of recognizing and valorising their cultural specificities. The multidisciplinary nature and the scope given to different interpretative perspectives will be modalities constantly pursued; besides, and for the same reasons, a “round table” space has been imagined where debates on a specific theme can be constructed and moderated with experts on different disciplines and with different theoretical perspectives.

The AG project has produced enthusiasm exceeding all expectation and, around this initiative, strengths and wills have coagulated that are also creating collaborations regarding other important objectives.

When we began to talk about how we imagined this journal, we discussed at length the formulation that we would like to give it, as well as the form and the structure. To understand what we wanted and what we didn't want, we discussed things and thought about the styles and contents of the numerous international periodicals that deal with gender. The discussions always led us to converge particularly on one point: going beyond boundaries, regarding discipline, theory and also category as tools for constructing forms of knowledge and reflections.

In this connection, of great interest is the work of *Gender & Society*, particularly a symposium and a subsequent monographic issue (issue 23 of 2009), where an endeavour is made to reason on the relationship between hetero-normativity and regulation of bodies and desires, and also to reconstruct the ways in which sexual normative hierarchies structure global processes like migrations, forms of tourism, sex work, and the forms of work and welfare. We found very stimulating the introduction in which Jane Ward and Beth Scheneider render explicit that these reflections derive from the need to measure oneself still and again with the thought of Gayle Rubin (1975 and 1993), amply taken up by Bimbi in this issue, with the tension between her old papers – primarily focusing on underlining the way hetero-normativity worked in the service of the patriarchal binary gender – and her more recent papers, in which attention has been addressed more to tracking down the mobility, the adaptability and the long-range effects of “normal sexuality.”

The last decade has seen a wealth of feminist research informed by both approaches, as well as by the developments of the latter within intersectional feminist theory. Female feminist sociologists have examined the co-construction of gender and heterosexuality through cultural, institutional and political-economic domains, working to show the multiplicative effects of ethnic origin and social class on heterosexual subjectivity (for instance Andersen 2008; Bettie 2003). Bringing the heterosexual paradigm into the analysis, these researches have shown that heterosexual subjectivity, despite moments of brittleness, variability or “queerness”, still succeeds in reinscribing biological and social femininity and masculinity (for instance Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1994). Moreover, attention to the social construction of heterosexuality has modified the conception of the effects of the triad formed by “race, gender and class”, showing that the realm of sexuality includes a lot more than marginalized identities, essentially gay and lesbian ones (Stein 2008, Valocchi, 2005).

Examining production of heterosexual identities and cultures – and their effects on gender – an important step is taken towards the mapping of profiles of heteronormativity. It is still necessary to stress that “heterosexuality” and “hetero-normativity” are not synonymous, but to understand this, analyses are required on the ways in which subjects, bodies, norms and heterosexual practices are worked out and naturalized in relation to “non-normative” genders and sexuality and “queer” lifestyles (Ward and Scheneider, 2009).

Garlick (2003) suggests that it would be very interesting to try to use the intuitions emerging from Queer theory, particularly in reflection on masculinity and in *Men's studies*. Generally, in fact, these studies refer to gay men, or to women, as they constitute the most significant “others” in relation to the concept of hegemonic masculinity; but, according to this author, who also recognizes the importance of using these territories to contest and deconstruct hegemonic masculinity, the fundamental role of the heterosexual paradigm, though implicitly recognized, is often not brought into focus explicitly as the basis of the modern construction of masculinity. Instead, attempting to measure oneself against theories deconstructing the duality and opposition

of genders could prove very useful for overcoming the stickiness of certain analytical categories.

In this first issue, the essays that deal with the themes of masculinity and *Men's studies* have precisely as their common denominator the intention of facing up to the heterosexual paradigm as the implicit space of definition of the norm. Nevertheless, before facing this theme, we feel it is important not to forget the debate about the concept of hegemonic masculinity, both because it is functional in relation to the contents that it develops, which will be discussed afterwards, and because it proposes a modality of construction of knowledge that we would like to pursue and to develop in this journal.

Another aspect of the debate on the theme of hegemonic masculinity that has inspired us is the theme of the relationship between local dimension and global dimension. It was precisely this question, introduced by the essay of Connell and Messerschmidt in 2005 and taken up by Christine Beasley in 2008, that unleashed the debate and the subsequent responses by Richard Howson (2008) and Messerschmidt (2008). Connell and Messerschmidt, in order to answer criticisms about this concept, in this well-known essay endeavour to broaden and work out the concept of hegemonic masculinity according to different perspectives, but above all introduce an important reflection on the relationship between local, regional and global levels that for us has been enlightening. Beasley develops this intuition, maintaining the importance of the contextualization of some categories with respect to the local and national dimension, but above all courageously faces slippery themes like difference in class and social capital and sub-hegemonic masculinities. According to this perspective, the “supposed crisis of masculinity” too, produced and reproduced in public discourses, has impacts and very different consequences according to the cultural, social and economic context it comes up against. Without going into Messerschmidt's specific and sophisticated answer to Beasley on the difference between domination and hegemony or the one already proposed by Hearn (2004) between masculine hegemony and hegemony of men, we feel it is nevertheless interesting to notice how the debate often breaks down over terminological matters that reflect some conceptual critical aspects that are still

unresolved. Returning, instead, to the central question of the relationship between local and global, the most remarkable contribution to the debate seemed to us to be that of Richard Howson (2008), which introduces the dimension of transnationality as a synthesis of the opposition between local and global. Precisely this perspective inspired us with the idea of maintaining specificities at several local levels that will have a dialogue with and face up to a transnational dimension.

As was stressed by Nardi (2005), with some important exceptions coming from Australia and England, the attention of *Men's studies* focuses above all on the experience of the United States, where this type of study is supported by academic departments, movements and specialized journals (one thinks of the importance of a journal like *Men and Masculinities*). Research in these fields has at times perhaps neglected the difference that exists within specific cultural contexts and, in any case, has rarely kept in mind the structural dimensions that may exist in other societies and may be a territory of important reflection and comparison. The issue on LGBTQTI studies, which we are already constructing, will explicitly have this formulation: looking at international scenarios, and giving value to specificities and differences.

Returning to this first issue, another line of continuity between Ciccone's essay and Ruspini's is the theme of paternity, which recently has seemed to be connoted as one of the most functional territories for discussing and revisiting the boundaries and symbolic representations of masculinities; it is not by chance that in the last few years several films have dealt with this theme at different levels: to mention just a few among the best-known, we have *The Pursuit of Happyness* by Muccino, Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, or the more recent *Beautiful* by Iñárritu or *This Must Be the Place* by Sorrentino. It is not by chance, either, that in the seventies, precisely after the appearance of the film *Kramer vs. Kramer*, the figure of the "new fathers" was created and that almost at the same time studies on family models started to delineate the *Fatherless Society*, relating destructuring of family nucleuses, absence of fathers and juvenile malaise (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). In literature, the polarization of models and rhetorics delineating the figure of the "new father" alternate with those that try to spread a "feeling" in relation to the authoritarian father as breadwinner and guarantor of order (Ruspini, 2005), as both

Ciccione and Ruspini stress in their essays. Several variables can intervene in the relationship between models of paternity and masculinity, though it would appear to be particularly interesting to undertake trajectories of reflection on the conditioning exerted by social power or on the way a precarious work situation can simultaneously influence definitions of masculine identity and the statute of “fathers” (for example Jamouille 2008). Recent studies (Ruspini and Zajczyk 2008) show that “the new fathers” manifest the desire to be able to have a more intimate and committed relationship with their children, but often feel the limit of social judgment, and, as Ciccione succeeds very well in expressing in his essay, the physical limits to the free expression of emotionality and affectivity. It is important, in this connection, to remember the reflections that Ciccione again suggests on the relationship between gender and body, a theme which we deem important and that we hope to succeed in exploring and working out in various monographic issues. The body is an experience, not a given entity; in all societies there are distinctions between male and female regarding corporeity, but these differences are constructed according to different values and ramified trajectories in which the female and the male are structured, in bodily expressions too, in distinct ways. Indeed, we cannot set aside the incorporation of gender, since “our belonging to a sexual category and the gender connotations associated with it are not a mask that we can put on and take off as we like, and are not a role from which we can easily distance ourselves, but an ‘incorporated’ identity that we continually enact” (Sassatelli 2006, 11). Gender cannot simply be reduced to an act of volition, since it doesn’t only concern the symbolic order, but also material aspects that contribute to “making gender” and, in a way, incorporating it; as Linda Nicholson effectively stresses, “it is not a clothes-hanger” on which to hang the different pieces of culture (1996, 41), that is to say it doesn’t overlap, a posteriori, as a cultural form that welcomes in itself the physical and pre-existing differences between men and women, but is the way in which historically and socially, in a determined context, (variable) meanings to those physical differences and importance for the purposes of social differentiation are attributed (Piccone Stella and Saraceno 1996, 19).

The decision to start, from the very construction of the index of this opening issue of AG, from a comparison between *Men's studies* and *Women's studies* obviously is not a chance one, but is intended to contribute to reorganizing the idea, widespread in our cultural and academic context, that gender studies coincide, as was previously mentioned, with women's studies on women.

Besides, we share with Bimbi a certain distrust towards the use of the expression *Women's studies*, which, though it affords *Men's studies* the possibility of defining their own field of investigation, can prove misleading and reductive in relation to the vast, and inside it notoriously very composite, panorama of gender studies of feminist origin.

In relation to this rich tradition of studies too, in which gender relations are interpreted first of all as relations of male domination, the tension between local dimension and global dimension, previously evoked, though in other terms with reference to the concept of hegemonic masculinity, once again furnishes an important interpretive key, of which there is a trace in various essays published here.

Behind this tension there is first of all the issue of the differences (cultural, ethnic, class, sexual orientation, legal status, etc.) between women: an issue more recently thematized within the debate on intersectionality mentioned, but one which the feminist movement, has shown at bottom, it is aware of since it started (Morondo Taramundi 2011). Besides, feminist epistemology itself, not being able to disregard the datum of the historical-social experience of the female condition in the world, has to reckon, as Bimbi reminds us, with recognition of the partiality and relativity of the point of view taken up. Otherwise one risks falling into that anthropological fallacy – known as ethnocentrism – which feminists themselves, though with different tones, critically attribute to the definitional monism expressed by the patriarchal discourse.

Let it be clear: taking the differences between women seriously does not, in our opinion, legitimize exasperated defence of cultural specificities (which risk turning from specificities into identity “traps”), or recourse to stereotyped representations like, for instance, that which opposes, on one side, the image of the “oriental” woman, veiled, subjugated and deprived of rights and, on the other, that of the emancipated “western” woman, free to choose between a career and a family or to submit herself to demanding

aesthetical standards. The fact is that extolment of cultural specificities tends to overshadow the common device that, both in the west and in the east, informs the different mechanisms of oppression and control of the bodies of female children and adults (Vassallo 2011) – although, as is obvious, this society cannot be confused with a purported female “nature” or “essence” that, in accrediting a metaphysics of the differences between genders, ends up hiding its socio-cultural origin, relegating women to traditional roles and functions.

It is also in terms of tension between the local (or particular) dimension and the global (or universal) dimension that we can read the important contribution made by feminist and gender reflection, in its various expressions, to the elaboration, in a critical key, of some pivotal concepts of the political and legal tradition of liberal origin. A case in point is the proposal made by Janet Newman in her contribution to this first issue of AG. Beginning from a re-examination of the classical notion of citizenship as a status ascribed by national governments, from which there derives enjoyment of a package of rights (typically the rights of the Marshallian analysis), in a gender framework the author seeks to work out a model including participation in public politics able to valorise the role of women.

In addition to the traditional concept of citizenship, the anthropological model implied by liberal individualism is also the object of criticisms and re-examinations, as is shown by the comparative analysis conducted by Olivia Guaraldo in relation to two well-known names in contemporary philosophical feminism: Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero. The idea put forward by Guaraldo is that, though with different approaches and outcomes, the two thinkers converge in believing that the cipher of humanity is not autonomy of the agent (rational and disinterested) that is the protagonist of liberal theories of justice, but on the contrary her or his vulnerability and dependence on the other: not a generic “other”, but, at least in Cavarero’s view, a specific “other” that is a bearer of concrete needs that emerge in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships (Cavarero 1999; Benhabib 1987). The idea of relationality and dependence is also taken up by Alisa Del Re, against the background of an analysis devoted to the relationship between production of goods and reproduction of individuals, reconsidered in the light

of the transformations of the relationships between the sexes and of the process of feminization of paid work, especially care work.

Lastly, demonstrating the interest of AG not only in approaches of a multidisciplinary type, but also in in-depth examination of gender issues conducted in specific spheres, the essay by Alessandra Facchi considers law as a controversial field of investigation on which there come together various feminist orientations that look to it, now as an instrument remedying gender disparities, now as the greatest expression of the male cultural model only apparently neutral. In this framework there is no lack of recourse to direct criticism of a bearing axis of the liberal conceptual repertory: this time it has to do with the language of rights, which the feminist emancipationists (the “first wave”) demanded should be extended to women in a logic of parity and formal equality before the law, but which more recently has been seen as a typical expression of the dominant culture that doesn’t escape the androcentric logic. Once more, then, the most interesting contributions to the legal-feminist discussion come from far off (United States and Scandinavian countries), with few exceptions in the Italian panorama (among them Pitch 1998; Gianformaggio 2005; Gianformaggio-Ripoli 1997; Marella 2008).

As is well known, the results which feminist criticism arrives at, in its various forms and expressions, are not univocal: talking about gender – to paraphrase the title of this editorial – the most disruptive effect is produced nevertheless by the process of fragmentation and weakening of the subject typical of philosophical postmodernism in its deconstructionist expression. Very often, in fact, this process is accompanied by an attitude of “scepticism with regard to gender” – as Susan Bordo (Bordo 1989) puts it – in which gender is accused of operating as a “totalizing fiction” (Butler 1990).

The discussion remains open. Awareness of the differences between women and the differences between men, as well as the discovery and thematization of the plurality of genders as evoked at the beginning, certainly render more complex the processes of socially and culturally constructed codification of the male and the female (Nicholson 1996). We feel, however, that the category of gender, though expressed by an ambiguous term that is extended to take on different meanings within the social sciences, preserves utility as an analytical tool able to bring out the partiality of

institutions, norms, forms of knowledge, mechanisms of disciplining and social marginalization. The outlook that the editorial committee of AG intends to promote through this new journal is therefore that of comparison and dialogue, of deconstruction and recomposition, also in a critical key, “so as not to stop at gender” (Butler, J. *et al.* 2007).

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