Intensive Program – *Coming Together or Coming Apart? Europe and the United States in the Sixties*

Intensive Seminar in Berlin, September 12-24, 2011

Session 2 The Transatlantic Women's Movement: Cultural and Literary Perspectives

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Discussion Groups, Dialogue and Language: when the emotional communal sharing starts a revolution.

Education has always been an issue of primary importance for the Women Movement. Since it is through education that values and ideas are conveyed, and norms very often imposed, its relevance in terms of a possible change is evidently great. It should not surprise, then, that women activists realized - in order to pursue some kind of social change - they needed to call into question the traditional concept of education. In fact, the women's first spontaneous gatherings in discussion groups played an extremely decisive role: there they began to question and undermine the traditional system of values they wanted to oppose.

Aim of this essay is to show the importance which the aggregation in discussion groups assumed within the Women Movement, especially when it came to educational claims. It is to note that the revolutionary women's consciousness raising would probably not have taken place without the emotional support and self-confidence, which women indeed developed thanks to the group itself. In addition, a comparison between feminist pedagogy approaches to the educational field and post-colonial considerations concerning educational issues will be introduced.

1. First discussion groups: the Boston Women's Conference

In order to approach feminist pedagogy theories and the relations between the Feminist Movement and its educational methods, it is worth calling to mind the significant experiences of the discussion groups, which first gathered in Boston in 1969. Back then, within a Boston Women's Conference, for the very first time, a small number of women met in a group called “Women and Their Bodies”. Within the group, those women, at last, managed to open up with the other participants, sharing the inner fears and anxieties they had never got the chance to confess to anyone before, sometimes not even to themselves. It was at once evident that the group environment had made the difference: the women involved neither felt interrogated, nor forced to talk if they did not want to. Spontaneity was respected in the mutual sharing of their private feelings. These first encounters represented such a striking experience for these women that they decided to continue their discussions meeting regularly. The records of these meetings then merged into a book destined to become a worldwide best-selling classic, namely *Our Bodies Ourselves*, first published by the Women's Health Book Collective in 1973 and, afterwards, revised and expanded several times.

It is very interesting, from an educational point of view, to reflect upon the innovative double role that women assumed in the writing of this book: the women in the collective, in fact, presented themselves both as subjects and as inquirers of their research. This

revolutionary approach was clarified on the very first page:

> Some people have asked us why the book is only about women. As women we do not consider ourselves experts on men (as men through the centuries have considered themselves experts on us). We feel that it would be best for men to do what we have done for themselves. (BWC 1989, 11)

Not only were men excluded by the book, both as subjects or inquirers, but they were also recommended to engage themselves in a similar project, instead of keeping on considering "themselves expert on us" (BWC 1989, 11). A bit of a polemical tone can be traced, together with the strong call to men, here invited to 'mind their own business' and stop interfering with matters out of their competence. These women's decision to become experts on themselves and to re-appropriate domains which had traditionally been men's, such as anatomy, psychology, education, can be described as an application of the feminist pedagogy theories that will be discussed later on in this essay.

After centuries of ignorance about the body, its anatomy and its functions, the centrality of the body education also became a peculiar aspect of the Women Collective' s approach:

> For us, body education is core education. Our bodies are the physical bases from which we move out into the world; ignorance, uncertainty - even, at worst, shame – about our physical selves create in us an alienation from ourselves that keeps us from being the whole people that we should be. (BWC 1989, 12)

The powerful idea that the lack of physical self-awareness caused social alienation was one of the great issues prompted within the discussion groups. The main concept was that no self-confidence could ever develop in total absence of a physical sense of one self. It has to be noted that such a deep, and at some stage painful, consciousness raising would have never taken place without the fertile moments of aggregation in discussion groups. That is why, at the beginning of their book, the women in the Collective pointed out the group as the right environment to confront their emotions without feeling alone. As they wrote, they understood that the process of rediscovery of a fragmented self, such as women's identity, was more likely to begin in a communal sharing of emotions:

> Probably the most valuable thing we learned was to speak for ourselves and be ourselves. Many of us feared discussing personal details of our lives and relationships, we feared being ridiculed by others, but we soon learned that we had a lot in common. [...] We discovered four cultural notions

> of femininity which we had in some sense shared: woman as inferior, passive, beautiful object, wife and mother. We realized how severely these notions had constricted us, how humanly limited we felt at being passive dependent creatures with no identities of our own. Gradually, *with each other's support*, we began to *rediscover ourselves*. (BWC 1989, 13)[1]

Thanks to the sharing experience, these women realized how deeply they all had been affected by the social constraints imposed on them: used to thinking of themselves mainly as wives and mothers for such a long time, they did not dare to conceive any other possible vocation. But as they felt the growing need to pose new questions (women as self-inquirers), they also started questioning the kind of society they were perpetrating. In fact, after spending their lives relegated to a tacit inferior position, thanks to the discussion groups, they found the strength to oppose the idea that women were less valuable than men. At last, with growing conviction, they started claiming that women, as well as men, did have some contribution to give.

1.2 Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*

It has to be noted that *Our Bodies Ourselves* was first published in 1973, exactly ten years after the first edition of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a book which, by that time, had already become extremely well-known. It is interesting to see how, ten years later, in 1973, the Boston Women Collective managed, to some extent, to give voice, and partly to answer to what Betty Friedan, had pointed out as "the problem that has no name". (Friedan 2001, 57) This famous expression was coined by the author to refer to the unspoken question that plagued every American housewife in the middle of the twentieth century. "It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered", Friedan argued and continued "Each suburban wife struggled with it alone [...] she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question - 'Is this all?'" (Friedan 2001, 57) It is important to consider the fact that many of the questions raised by Betty Friedan in 1963 happened to be the same ones that greatly animated the first groups of discussion which gathered in 1969. To some extent, it can be said that the questions were already there, urging for the right means to be conveyed: the discussion group happened to be this means. Besides, it is very likely that, back in 1969, some of the women who participated in the groups had read, or were familiar with, Friedan's work.

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[1] Italics is mine.

It is, then, worth quoting here some highly significant excerpts from the first chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan argued that, since their teenage years, women were trained to become perfect American housewives; they were told that "their role was to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers" and "that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity" (Friedan 2001, 57-58). Moreover, Friedan pointed out the significant inversion of tendency the American society was registering after years spent on consolidating the myth of the perfect housewife. "Women who had once wanted careers were now making careers out of having babies [...] they pitied their poor frustrated mothers, who had dreamed of having a career" and further on, "words like -emancipation- and -career- sounded strange and embarrassing; no one had used them for years" (Friedan 2001, 59-62). In opposition to their mothers' claims for independence, this generation of women apparently believed to have found true feminine fulfilment in their husbands, children and houses in nice suburbs. But as Friedan argued, appearances often are deceptive and "the problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women" (Friedan 2001, 57). The writer reported that it was only in 1959 that for the first time, during one of her interviews, she heard a mother "say in a tone of quiet desperation, the 'problem'" (Friedan 2001, 63) It was not by chance that this liberating confession took place in a contest of spontaneous aggregation, such as a coffee break with other women. Here again, the importance of the group, as the environment the most suited to encourage self-confessions, powerfully emerges. Since providing its members with a reassuring sense of mutual acceptance and comprehension is an intrinsic feature of the group, those women "suddenly realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it [...] the women cried, in sheer relief, just to know they were not alone." (Friedan 2001, 63)

As it has just been analysed above, this sense of uneasiness, deeply felt by the American women since the end of the fifties, was finally verbalized ten years later in the first spontaneous discussion groups. There, the women's need to pose their new questions and to interrogate themselves about their inner desires encountered the instances proposed by the feminist pedagogy theories which were meanwhile developing. At this stage, a discussion is needed of what feminist pedagogy is and how the group-based structure characterizes its educational approach.

2. What is Feminist Pedagogy?

Berenice Fisher offered a very articulated answer to the question in her article "What is

Feminist Pedagogy?" (1981), stating that:

> by most accounts, it is a perspective on teaching which is anti-sexist, and anti-hierarchical, and which stresses women's experience, both the suffering our oppression has caused and the strengths we have developed to resist it. (Fisher 1981)

It is crucial to notice that the author put the stress on a fundamental aspect of this new teaching approach, namely the effort to prevent the educational process from using the constraints imposed by traditional bias and sexual stereotypes. In her definition Fisher also hinted at the sufferings women had to endure and at their ability to face those sufferings. In a sense feminist pedagogy theories can thus be interpreted as innovative educational strategies, designed to respond to the need for social change claimed by oppressed categories. In fact, moving from the application of basic feminist principles to the educational field, feminist pedagogy theories succeeded in the development of efficient and alternative teaching models, not only concerned with gender issues. As Carolyn Shrewsbury beautifully argued in 1987:

> not only concerned with gender justice, feminist pedagogy seeks to remove the oppression inherent in the genderedness of all social relations and consequently of all societal institutions and structures. (Shrewsbury 1987 in Sandell 1991)

It can then be said that feminist pedagogy as a discipline intercepts two main problems: the women's inevitable lack of self-confidence and self-awareness of their value and, more generally speaking, the need for social change claimed by oppressed categories. Let us now take into consideration the aims and the strategies fostered by this innovative educational approach.

3. Aims and Proposals

As Shrewsbury argued "feminist pedagogy seeks to remove the oppression [...] of all societal structures" (Shrewsbury 1987 in Sandell 1991). In an attempt to do so, the attention is drawn on four main aspects: empowering the person's self, building community, developing sense of leadership and transforming the classroom, from a domain which has always been men's into something different. Apart from that, the promotion of the student-centred experience, as opposed to the teacher-based one, encourages the students (or participants) to become more self-confident. As a consequence, a sense of community is built and

relationships with other members of the group are established. As Sandell clarified in her article “The Liberating Relevance of Feminist Pedagogy”, published in 1991, the feminist educational approach “attempts to foster a confirmation of self-knowledge for the knower that is not provided by teaching in the traditional academic style” (Sandell 1991). In this sense, the promotion of the student-centred experience was absolutely fundamental in terms of reconsideration of a system which proved to be failing and disrespectful towards women first, and minorities in general.

Moreover, it is worth taking into consideration two more constructive aims on which Frances Maher drew the attention in her article “Toward a Richer Theory of Feminist Pedagogy” (1987). First, the scholar insisted on the importance of putting emphasis on collaboration over competition among the group members; second, on the ability of relating problems to each other without categorizing them as inferior or superior. In fact, emphasising collaboration among the members of a group, indeed, provides the group itself with a more relaxed and cooperative atmosphere. Under such circumstances, people in a class, or in a group, can freely open up without having to fear that their own questions may not be worth listening to because they are inferior in comparison to others'. Thus, neither the teacher, nor the leader, should impose their own vision of the world over a group, but they should rather work with the group members helping them to deliver their own questions and ideas. This approach directly leads to the proposal of the diminishment of the teacher's traditional authority, fostered by feminist pedagogy.

Renee Sandell in her 1991 article “The Liberating Relevance of Feminist Pedagogy”, referring to the teacher's role, quoted as follows: “teachers assist students in delivering their ideas to the world”. (Belenky et al. 1986 in Sandell 1991) The verb “deliver” is not used by chance, but it is rather chosen on purpose because of its reference to the act of giving birth. Sandell intended to suggest a theoretical model in which the teacher assumed the role of a midwife and the students' newly born ideas were compared to babies. This model greatly reminds of the Socratic concept of Maieutics. The Greek philosopher believed that knowledge was not something to pour into the students' minds as if they were empty vases. On the contrary, he showed that every single person owned a personal baggage of innate knowledge which may need someone else's help to be delivered. The teacher's delicate task is to pose intelligent questions to the students who are able to ‘give birth’ to the right answers. Therefore, the art of Maieutics consisted in the ability to lead people towards the delivery of their own truths, the formulation of their own questions and the research of their own answers, without any teachers' imposition. This image of delivering ideas, used by the

contemporary scholars, was, indeed, derived from the term Maieutics itself, an ancient Greek word pertaining to midwifery.

In terms of practical educational proposals, feminist pedagogy theories mainly aimed at a change in the traditional subject-matter pattern and at a reconsideration of the relationship teacher-student, as it has been introduced above. The real involvement of students into democratic processes, in which some power was actually shared, was often successfully achieved. Moreover, encouraging students in class -or women in discussion groups- to construct and assess their own education greatly contributed to empower their selves.

In order to offer an example of a feminist pedagogy proposal, it is worth illustrating Charlotte Bunch's teaching model. Bunch, a prominent American professor in Women's and Gender Studies, as well as an activist in the movement for women's and human rights, articulated in five progressive steps the process to comprehend and respond to reality. At first, the knower is meant to observe what exists around (description), while the second step is dedicated to the analysis of what exists (analysis). Next is the creative stage of the projection of what should exist (vision). In the fourth step suppositions about how to change what it is in what should be are formulated (strategy). The final stage is the changing of reality (action). (Maher in Sandell 1991)

This teaching model aimed at the consolidation of the knower's self. The self both as subject and the self-as-inquirer were promoted to motivate people in the class, or in the group, “to become creators and constructors, as well as learners, of knowledge” (Maher in Sandell 1991). Bunch's approach and the feminist pedagogy in general tried to suggest that in order to achieve some kind of significant social change, a revision of people's role in society in terms of racism, sexism, oppression and domination was due. It is worth noting that the difficult process of reconstruction of women's fragmented selves seemed to share some similarities with the one many colonized people were undergoing to cope with the sense of loss and displacement provoked by decades of oppression. Both women and the colonized, taken as two main categories of people suffering oppression, found the strength to rebel to their inferior conditions thanks to the communal sharing of thoughts and emotions. The importance that discourse, language and group discussion may have in terms of social change will be taken into special consideration here.

4. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The comparison between the colonized and the woman's condition may be articulated along three main common points: intellectual prevarication, physical containment and lack of self-awareness. In both cases the problem-posing concept of education as an instrument of oppression versus education as an instrument of liberation, greatly emerges. This issue has occupied a central place in Paulo Freire's reflections. The well-known philosopher of education (1921-1997) offered a broad discussion on this topic in his pedagogical book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1970.

Taking into consideration the conditions under which a situation of freedom may flourish, Freire pointed out the role of education as a practice of freedom. The philosopher highlighted that the oppressed subjects may only find the strength to claim their own liberation if they underwent an educational process. It is the achievement of self-awareness, stimulated by this process itself, to promote people's desire of independence. Freire clarified that, unfortunately, freedom is not a given state, but rather a precarious condition that must be achieved. The on-going struggle to be free, to overcome the limits of an oppressive situation (be this oppression political, civil, social or physical) is peculiar to the human condition and constitutes in itself a practice of freedom. Freire also argued that the process of contributing to the creation of circumstances under which freedom may arise is equally good to produce culture. The scholar, in fact, strongly believed that education was the instrument par excellence to generate moral and ethical order without which human life would not progress, but only remain at the level of the basic survival needs. In a sense, education seems to be charged with the role of a culture-maker: it is this tension towards the production of history, culture and language that renders the human beings what they are rather than mere animals led by their instinct (Glass 2001).

To some extent, Freire stated that without a serious educational project the whole society would cease to keep on tending towards justice and democracy. It is due to the process of consciousness raising that the oppressed, just like women, can realize that their life could be different. As Ronald David Glass points out in his article “On Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Praxis and the Foundations of Liberation Education” (2001) referring to the oppressed “the more they discern *why* things are as they are and *how* they could be otherwise, the more effective their intervention can be to enable greater self and communication”[2] (Glass 2001). It should be noted that the reflection on why things are as they are immediately calls to the

[2] Italics is mine.

reader's mind the teaching model proposed by Charlotte Bunch. Through the steps of analysis and vision the oppressed can come to be aware of the fact that a change of the reality around them is due: the need to go beyond individualistic experiences is eventually felt and people decide to bind together in order to organize their reactions. This is another point of evidence which proves the fact that developing a communal awareness with other members of a group encourages people to claim their own rights. When a group of oppressed human beings becomes promoter of an act of liberation, this very moment marks the supremacy of the critical consciousness over oppression and dehumanization. While the meaning of dehumanization is to "deny some people the possibility and right of being self-defining, self-realizing and self-determining" (Glass 2001), humanization on the other hand has to do with the making of concrete choices in history. Humanity, thus, is defined by human beings producing culture through their own actions, not only for individual purposes, but rather to pursue social advancement for their whole oppressed social or ethnic group.

While discussing the preparatory conditions that foster the development of critical knowledge, and consequently of freedom, it is worth taking into consideration Freire's reflections on the notions of dialogue and language. The philosopher conferred a primary importance to the notion of dialogue, since it is through the articulation of discourse that the knowers manage to express their hopes and intentions in a communal sharing of experiences. Since a dialogue implies the presence of at least two individuals (if not more), it enables the oppressed to confront and "to speak the problem", using Betty Friedan's words. Once the problem has been spoken about and, thus, objectified, strategies to face it may be promoted by the oppressed. In a way, dialogue can be seen as one of the educational practices that prompt human beings to become creators and to be responsible for their own lives.

Moving away then from the concepts of dialogue and discourse, Freire drew the attention to the importance exerted by language and literacy as instruments of fighting against an oppressive system. During an interview, later published together with Ubitaran D'Ambrosio and Maria Do Carmo Mendonça, under the title "A Conversation with Paulo Freire" the author said:

> I have no doubt that our presence in the world implied the invention of the world. I have been thinking a lot that the decisive step that made us capable of being human, women and men, was exactly the step by which the support in which we found ourselves became the 'world' and life became 'existence', or rather began to become existence. In this passage [...] culture was installed, as well as the invention of language, and a way of thinking that attends not only to the object that is being thought, but which enriches itself with the possibility of communicating and

communicating itself. (Freire et al. 1997)

From the analysis of this excerpt, it emerges that the philosopher attributed a political importance to the acquisition of language. By saying “culture was installed, as well as the invention of language” (Freire et al. 1997), Freire not only underlined the strong connection between culture and language since their rising, but he also argued that their installation signalled the advancement from a state of savagery to a state of consciousness.

Taking language into consideration as the medium that allows human beings to put themselves in relation to each other and to the world, it will not surprise that the most ferocious politics of linguistic deprivation have indeed played a central role within colonial systems. In order to give a measure of such a dreadful violence, two emblematic cases, among many others, will be mentioned. On one hand it is worth reflecting on the abuses that thousands of Irish children had to suffer in their own schools. At a time when every attempt was being made by the British government to eradicate the Irish language, children would be heavily beaten by their own school teachers every time they spoke Irish. Meanwhile, on the other side of the ocean, an even worse treatment was reserved to Native American children. Removed from their families first, brought to far away boarding schools and deprived of their mother-tongues afterwards, those children terribly suffered from depressive crisis that often led them to commit suicide.

In both cases the linguistic deprivation was perpetrated, and unfortunately successfully achieved, through the institutionalized educational system of the school. Education too often became the instrument par excellence used to weaken a peoples' sense of their collective self, beginning with the children. In fact, as it is in one's mother-tongue that the articulation of the thoughts flows spontaneously, the oppressed, forcedly removed from it, suffer an inconceivable sense of displacement. As a consequence, forced to adjust to a system of thought which they perceive as totally alien and unable ‘to speak their own words’, they gradually lose sense of their selves.

The two examples above illustrate the controversial role that education can assume, depending on the social and political circumstances under which the educational project is conducted. This dichotomy is highly disturbing. On one hand, education is the only effective means to promote emancipation and freedom, by developing and consolidating people's sense of their value. On the other hand, the imposition of an oppressive educational system is the most effective practice to keep people under the yoke of someone else's dictatorship, be it of a political, social or emotional nature. The tension of education caught in between being an

instrument of oppression and an instrument of liberation has always occupied Freire's investigation.

Despite this ambiguity, Freire did believe that educational proposals could be transformed into real social change. This clearly emerged in the conversation with D'Ambrosio and Mendonça, when he defined what teaching meant to him:

> "to teach is not to transfer knowledge, to transfer contents. To teach is to struggle, together with the students; is to create conditions for the construction of knowledge, for the reconstruction of knowledge" (Freire et al. 1997)

With these words the philosopher seemed to indicate the same path proposed by feminist pedagogy theories: a positive and constructive vision of education as the only way to reconstruct knowledge and give a voice to the oppressed, be they women, children or colonized.

Mohan Thampi in his 1973 article "The Educational Thought of Paulo Freire", meant to review the newly published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, introduced Freire's concept of conscientization. Although the Brazilian author denied to have coined this term himself, its definition may be very useful to summarize and better understand the processes illustrated above: coscientization

> Is a political-educational process which enables the masses to overcome "false consciousness", to realise their real situation in society and to take part in changing society in the capacity of subjects. [...] a process of gaining awareness of reality in order to transform it consciously. (Thampi 1973)

Freire was hinting at the fact that gaining a sense of reality was the main prerogative to transform this same reality afterwards. This explains why it is in contexts in which people are hindered from pursuing their self-affirmation that conditions of oppression arise. This also explains why the teacher-taught relation is charged with a special importance, when it comes to oppressive contexts: it is the one relationship able to keep the dominated subjects in their inferior status. Through oppressive teaching systems, the imposition of values and norms contribute to despise and, indeed, weaken local cultures, traditions and spontaneous visions of the world.

In conclusion, the comparison between the women's struggles for equality and the one of the colonized may be established in terms of being deprived of the possibility 'to speak

one's own words'. In both cases, in fact, the reconstruction of a fragmented self, be it a woman or a colonized subject, can only begin with the articulation of their own discourse, the speaking of their own words. The experiences provided by the Boston Women Collective and by Betty Friedan and Paulo Freire's personal researches demonstrate the core importance of a communal sharing of emotions. In fact, no consciousness raising can be achieved by an oppressed group if the group members do not posses a language in which they can articulate their own thoughts and their own discourse. It is the practice of consciousness raising that may lead the oppressed to the acknowledgement of those principles of critical democracy and social equality, hitherto denied to them by their oppressors, be they the colonizers or the perpetrators of a sexist social system.

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