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“GENDER & NATION”: SPLIT REASON & FREEDOM

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Gender is probably an essential organizing principle. It is a truism to say, but still useful to repeat outside academia, that all human institutions are gendered and hierarchical. So is the nation, of course, *and so is even sex/gender itself*. These two constructed and historical differences (nation, sex/gender) intersect and mutually support the hierarchy at the heart of each other. But gender has the peculiarity of being used as an “archetype” for other inequalities and injustices by analogy, through the fact that women’s subordination is generally and globally accepted by most. Also, sex/gender is older than nation. Indeed, it presents itself as apparently *ahistoric* because it was there before language, as “primordial”. The global patriarchal consensus regarding the position of women is interesting because it is universally used for the justification of *other* subjugations, too, through a mechanism of symbolic “analogy”. This *instrumentalising* of a state of affairs (i.e. of the domination of all women by men), through its depiction as natural, and thus its naturalization and essentialisation, *is itself historical*. To introduce, maintain or promote other inequalities and exclusions (class, racial, caste, national, ethnic, ideological, etc.), it is useful to project on them the supposed “naturalness” of the gender inequality, and thus to feminize the weaker term in the dyad. The nation itself, as the term in Western languages shows candidly, draws its language and terminology from the historically much older, though also constructed, sexual and gender difference (*nascere*, Lat. “to be born”). Coming into language and on the historic stage much later (from the 15th to the 19th century), it uses the already existing language and terminology. This slips further into the language of state-building and of adjacent areas too.

This unequal relation is also constantly presented as a symmetrical and non-hierarchical difference. This *blurring* of the two distinct ways of relating of the two terms to each other in a binary plays the trick of the hegemony imposed. On one level, the two (the feminine and the masculine, or any other two terms of a hierarchical binary) are equivalent or equal: this is the case on the level of the particular. To be more precise, on this level, they are *different and/but equal*. Yet on another level, when it comes to a higher authority or to transcendence, at the level of the universal, they stand in a hegemonic relationship, because one of the two terms will be normative, while the other will be marked as different (the exception). The normative element is the one whose experience can be directly universalised (as human, for example), and who has a privileged position in

representation. When the higher office, the “universal” level is taken into account, the term which is normative and directly “universal”¹ appears twice (both as particular/different *and* as universal) where the other appears only once (as only particular & different). That is also how hegemony takes place: far from being one and the same forever, hegemony is itself only an office, where the *particular* interests of one of the participants in the game are successfully *universalised* for some time. The constant blurring between the particular and the “universal” levels is part of the game (Ivekovic, 1981, pp. 5-49; Laclau, 1996).

In the case of the gender-nation relationship, and because the nation uses the language of obstetrics and of parentage, there is also a signifying and purposeful confusion as well as a constant questioning regarding the “origin”. This is where psychoanalysis has introduced the unconscious in its system: it is that which cannot be remembered, thought or said, since it is the origin of thinking itself. Language cannot say totality though it strives to, besides being unable to say, at the other end, that which does not correspond to the norm. The sexual/gender difference is one of the most difficult things to think, and few philosophers will admit it as openly as Jean-François Lyotard, for example (Lyotard, 1988, p. 31; my translation). It is difficult, for two reasons: firstly, because it was there before both language and life, and language cannot say that which is its condition of existence. Secondly, (or perhaps both reasons are one and the same), this difference tends to dualise and gender everything, and may not be neutral in itself.

Thinking (reason), as it arises in language, appears to be already split. Yet the split of reason is prior to any colonialism, prior to any relationship East-West, North-South or man-woman, though we tend to see it so, especially today mainly in the wake of the Cold War divide: but it really marks the beginning of inner colonisation as the condition for all rapport of inequality. Split reason is what should warn us against the philosophical institution itself.

Split reason is also what the Buddhists call *avidyā*, “ignorance”: the ignorance we have about the conditions of our origin, in other words –about the sexual difference and exchange from which we come. Or about the other. To understand this different treatment by different intellectual (and historic) contexts, we need to engage in a bit of inter-contextual or inter-cultural translation. Women have not only been represented as the “other” and identified with other subordinate terms in dichotomies: the domestic sphere and limited access to the external, public-political attributed to women historically shows perfectly that forms of modernity and post-modernity can integrate, build in and even rely upon areas of “pre-modernity” as constitutive for them. Moreover, there are different types of modernity, depending on whether the culture in question is a dominant one or not. But at every important turn, the subordinate relationships (not only those regarding women) are renegotiated in new terms. The “cultural” translation is thus needed *within* the system which is far from monolithic. That “translation” is itself essential for any type or freedom of justice to be claimed. The positions of men and women not being symmetrical, justice has to count with the *différend*, which is really what the French

¹ The access to universality, for women or other subjected groups or individuals is indirect and never clean.

call, more generally, *the political*. And that requires that we assume a constant process of translation, including translation *within* one and the same language, system of signs or meaning: that we put ourselves at risk, i.e. that we put *ourselves* into translation. In other words, there is no permanent guarantee for gender equality, democracy, freedom or justice, but the best guarantee we have for it is –precisely that there is no guarantee (Ivekovic, 2002, pp. 121-145).

The particular origin of a universal idea doesn't prevent it from being universally accepted, though it can't be by all for the same reasons or in the same way (indeed, it can also be enforced). Ideas that stand for the universal (such as the nation, the state) are subject to erosion, especially in our time. If someone wanted to keep them to last through a transformation (a transition), they would have to be credited with new concrete arguments linked to real experience. For hegemony, you need to have support. Those who have abandoned the sinking ship of a previously recognised universal will pass to some other (particular) interest made universal, through a political project, through a war, through elections, etc. It is interesting to analyse what the conditions are, or what it takes for one hegemonic configuration to crumble. I have analysed in my work mainly the "psycho-political" conditions in modernity for this (Ivekovic, 1995; 1999; 2001), and I have done this while keeping in mind that there have been different modes of modernity such as (at least) capitalist, socialist and colonial/post-colonial modernity. This helps in avoiding the Cold War notion that colonial or socialist societies have been something completely different (alterity itself) and that they, or at least some of them, are pre-modern or "traditional" beyond repair. Modernity itself (re)produces "tradition", especially in the third world and in post-colonial and post-socialist countries again. The opposition pre-modern/modern does not hold, but the fiction is nevertheless conceptually quite efficient as an organizing principle of (post-)modernity itself. This may be among other things because it is also highly gendered, tradition being assigned to women, modernity to men. Modernity and "pre-modernity" coexist perfectly, and thrive on, pockets of all sorts of *ancien régime*, of "tradition", of pre-industrial production (and social /re/production), both in the third world, but also within themselves (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Capitalism and the system of nation-states expand outwards as long and as far as possible, but they still have resources for an "internal expansion" and an inner colonisation (Theweleit, 1978/1989). One of the terrains for this is the gender equation –or the subordination of women: the fact that modern societies, and nowadays post-modern ones, still rely completely on women's slavery, bonded labour, women's subordination, their "pre-modern" production of housework and social reproduction incorporated into industrial modern (capitalist) relations as well as into post-modern new "immaterial" informative working conditions. This is also why significant female political agency may still make its appearance in the future.

I could observe in my own life experience how the self-representation of a population was changed and discredited over the years (the former Yugoslavia). When this gap widens so that no confidence can be put any more into the "higher authority" which serves also as that what keeps a community together (a homogenizing principle), it comes to a very dangerous crisis which may, but also

may not, turn into violence. Depending on the historic conditions, a *critical event* (Das, 1995) may or may not occur here. That possible turning point could also be disintegration. In a situation where one or several generations have been spared *the political*, where solutions and answers have been given to them in advance so that they need not even ask the questions, where people or some portions of it have been “spared” responsibility and political agency as citizens, violence is possible, if not probable, at such times. Especially so if institutions have crumbled, too. And here I quote Radomir Konstantinovic from a very important passage: “The smaller the feeling of reality, the bigger the necessity for violence” (Konstantinovic, 1981, pp. 87-88).

We all know of such situations in countries where institutions and value systems have crumbled to pieces while nothing was put together to replace them: that is the ideal situation for new or old, reformed mafias to step into the picture and attempt the hegemonic escalation. Sometimes, as was the case in the Balkans recently, wars are needed for that. And wars are of course more gendered than anything else. They also represent a particular setback for women, for any peaceful options, for democracy in general.

But I would like to come back to my own definition of violence -as being the reaction to the fact that “we” are not self-generated, and being the attempt to compensate for it via the identity principle (i.e. sameness kept at any cost) and the struggle for (maintaining) power. At the level of states, this is also called sovereignty. It enhances a hegemonic mechanism. Historically (but of course, not fatally), the urge for the continuity of the same as being identical to itself has been appropriated by representations of masculinity and by men (on another level, by the West, regarding other continents; or by any dominant agency). There is an expression in Sanskrit that fits very well here, *svayambhû*, “being (generated, produced, or becoming) by oneself”. The nation (also through the name-of-the-father, where it applies) is one such self-foundation, as well as the family, in patriarchal conditions, having an exclusively masculine lineage at its basis (Ivekovic, 1993, pp. 113-126). For that, you need to have split reason.

At the time of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia², the main parties in the conflict, from the time their stakes and they themselves were articulated as “ethnic” or “national”, tried hard to prove that they had been on a given territory not only *before* the others, but even completely *without* the others. No alterity could be tolerated in their constitution. Since, of course, there is neither biology nor culture without the other or without difference, *the nationalistic dream of self-birth is both suicidal and murderous*. Paradoxically, overdone “identity” leads in the long run to its own disintegration.

In such a construction, where the national and the masculine are immediately identified and thought of as universal though in different ways (Theweleit, 1987/1989; Yuval-Davis, 1997), women find themselves in a double-bind situation, which is a situation of non-agency, of forceful immobilisation. They do not correspond to the pattern or to the ideal with which to identify in sameness, since

² Turned also into an international war; it is really a series of wars with both a local, civil, and an international character, as aggression.

they *embody* both the difference and that which is marked as different. In practical political terms, it means that they are practically (but not theoretically) denied access to active citizenship, and their having those rights abstractly doesn't help here, because they find themselves on the side of the exception to the rule, which they guarantee precisely by being the exception (Ivekovic, 1993, pp. 113-126). The same is true of other groups, such as Black Americans, etc. As for patriarchy, it does not concern particularly women, but the general network of hierarchies.

Sex/gender³ may eventually be only this: a first split in/of thinking, a separation before it is reflected (upon). In this case, it would all be about a division of reason, to which corresponds at the same time, in a signifying shift back which makes the levels (dimensions) change, the division between nature and culture. I use the French expression *partage de la raison* because of the ambiguity of the term *partage*. Sex/gender is then the crucial argument and instrument of enforcing and maintaining a form of domination thought to be natural, i.e. the "best". It is normative. It is not sure there is such a thing as sex or gender (beyond the biological) outside its fantasies and its construction which, nevertheless, manages to produce real cleavages. From the biological sex, which is also accessible only as informed by culture (which means that it has no "pure" form), to the social and political gap between men and women, there is indeed a total shift of dimensions. We are interested in sex/gender as the division of reason, and it is as such that it enters into the definition of the nation which it maintains and whose hierarchies it reproduces.

Is there a way of overcoming this cleavage of reason? By overcoming it while not erasing it through any kind of sexual "communalism", but through inclusions, in the manner of a "negativity" that makes the difference, in order to constitute what Etienne Balibar calls a "citizenship without community" (Balibar, 2001, p. 124)? Because, he says, it is the *institutionalised* exclusion that constitutes the founding moment of citizenship. By extension, it is the exclusion (or rather, the subordinate inclusion) of women that founds citizenship as well as the nation. And as he rightly says, in order to overcome compartmentalization, we should have to engage in a *common operation* or a *shared act* (*ibid*, p. 125). This means that men would also have to engage on the side of women in an enterprise of democratising gender relations, in order to inscribe women as equals within the people, into citizenship and into the "nation". This project can only be reciprocity, if we don't mean to render the nation, in its recognition of ("ethnic", "national" and other) differences, paradoxically blind only to the sex/gender difference among all differences. But since women are seen as the stake and the material basis for the nation, a *supplementary* cultural effort is needed for that, in order to brake the "normality" which is just normativity.

Balibar imagines alternating and reciprocity of the dominant and dominated positions, in order to fight against totalitarian hegemonies (*ibid*, p. 213). But such a "rotative" democracy may still seem too rigid since it is still basically binary. On the

³ I am not going into this terminological distinction which I don't follow here, but we can discuss it; see what follows.

other hand, the specificity of the subordinate inclusion of women, exactly, doesn't lend itself to be caught, or be expressed, represented, or for that matter "universalised", in a dichotomy. Or does it? *The dichotomy, which also supposes a hierarchy, is the very form of the articulation as well as of the social and political normalization of the sex and gender relationship. It is the form in which the subordination of women is imposed and made consensual.* The dichotomy (subject-object, male-female, rationality-nature, etc.) is the way of silencing the real relationship that can take place between women and men within a more complex configuration as informed by their real common life which also brings in individual differences. Normalized reality represents this relationship in a necessarily binary and inadequate manner, while violating it. For democracy, one has to *start from sex/gender, but not end in it.* The sex/gender difference passes through each of us, and differences are as numerous, and more, indeed, than individuals (since each one of us can be many). The sex/gender *social* relationship begins not where there are two people, but even before. It is impossible to imagine de-communalising cultural, ethnic, religious, national, racial, class etc., identities, and not do the same with sexual/gender "identities", through which communalism/communitarianism starts also for the other groups.

In the wake of "globalisation", and beyond the general confusion regarding the political subject and who should be considered as such, it is generally accepted that women are or should be subjects, and their political agency, both political and personal, has, at least theoretically, become systemic, even though more on the side of movement, of resistance and of marginality. This can be checked from practically any contemporary philosopher, political or social scientist⁴. Even without claiming political subjectivity for women in the rigid, classical sense (as a "molar" identity, to use a Deleuzeian term), it is clear that women are more than ever involved in the *constituting* people (*peuple*). The problem remains, however, that *le peuple* is also split by the same division. It is on the way from *constituting* (where they take part and often the initiative) to *constituted* (established) power that trace is usually lost of women, even today. In the French meaning of the word, it is then *la politique*, the state, the nation, that generally excludes them (except as exceptions to their gender, of course), while *le politique* bears testimony, on the contrary, to the fundamental stake they represent, not only as a powerful, though "queer", agency, but also as the symbolically, asymmetrically sub-summed, thereby confirming the basic split of reason.

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⁴ See for example Alain Touraine: "[...] l'action des femmes, qui est à la fois politique et personnelle, car elles veulent être actrices de leur vie, de leur histoire et de toutes les activités de leur société. Les femmes représentent le mieux la volonté de réunifier un monde qui, depuis des siècles, a été divisé en deux, entre ceux qui possèdent les instruments du changement et du pouvoir et tous ceux et celles que les puissants représentent comme étant incapables d'assurer ces actions innovatrices et rationnelles". (2002, p. 17)

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