

The power-drive and the time of feminine politics

Abstract: This essay argues for feminine politics in a world in which waste has become the paradoxical engine for further ‘development’, feeding the power-drive of a masculine politics obsessed with death. However the essay does not present the feminine as an alternative in positive terms, which would be to posit a definite, particular, and idealized substance or form. Instead, it suggests that we can approach the feminine through a negative dialectic, extracting from history the possibility (and embodying that very possibility) of what has been suppressed, attacked, and violated as feminine. The objective thus is to come to terms with the persistent historical structuration that has made the feminine not only the other, but also extremely vulnerable in economic, political and cultural life. The feminine finds its invisible threads and sources in the history of women and their experience, struggle, and agency, but goes beyond women as a given category to encompass others –already and not yet– engaged in a different way of knowing and living in this world. The feminine constitutes a domain of subjugated knowledge of life that does not accept the binary of body and mind and is connected to being in the world, not based on automatism, control, and life/death as abstract and governable categories. It is time that we join the energies of feminisms by collectively and creatively embracing and re-making forms of knowledge, ethics, and the politics of the feminine.

The task is not to start from scratch, of course. Feminisms already exist in different ways in different parts of the world. For an impressively long time! With intersecting, yet different, conceptualizations and struggles. But the task, in my view, is to join the energies of feminisms now within the given conditions of ‘modernity’ that has in the last decades been stripped of all its promises of futurity except for waste and catastrophe! The waste and wasting fuel a violent power-drive mainly in the form of masculine revenge against, but nonetheless trapped by, the ongoing masculine forms of colonization – colonization in its widest sense, that of humans and non-humans, of culture and nature. This power drive in the end produces a fatal support for new dictators all around the world, a support based on feelings of *ressentiment* and self-preservation. It is within these accelerating conditions of catastrophe that we need to redefine and revitalize feminisms in the light of the feminine.

Feminine is a dangerous word, not only from the vantage point of the dominant masculine modes of knowing and doing in this world, but also for many feminists who criticize the essentialized depiction of the feminine. I suggest not taking the feminine in positive terms that posit a definite, particular, and idealized substance or form. As Ulrika Dahl points out, one needs to recognize that, “jealousy, inadequacy and shame” are among the attributes that condition femininity (2016, p. 5). Instead, we can approach the feminine through a negative dialectic, by extracting from history the possibility (and embodying that very possibility) of what has been suppressed,

attacked, and violated as feminine; by coming to terms with the persistent historical structuration that has made the feminine not only the other, but also extremely vulnerable in economic, political and cultural life. To the extent that we know history, many previous cultures had their particular way of negotiating between the feminine and masculine, while our ‘modern’ culture has been one in which the masculine is forcefully *possessed* by men who entertain the lethal fantasy of reproducing the culture in their own images and interests, and through a phallic system of symbolization. This has been the situation since at least the 16th century when the colonizing drive of primitive accumulation of capital started with witch-hunting and expropriation of women’s labor and knowledge, something that Sylvia Federici clearly shows in her book *Caliban and the Witch* (2004). The suppression, as well as the hijacking, of the histories of the feminine render the future at stake today!

In joining the call of the Argentinian women for an international women’s strike on March 8, 2017, a group of feminists¹ in Turkey issued the following invitation to women: “We go on strike tomorrow, because we take control of our time and we make time for each other, we regard being together as consolation, and the meetings and dialogues among allies as defiance, and the defiance as festival, and we rebuild the festival as our common future”. There appears a very different understanding of time and particularly of the future in this call that diverges from the dominant paradigm of temporality in today’s world. Here, one senses a feeling of suffering

that the word ‘consolation’ connotes, but also a sense of defiance that leads to hope and joy in the possible festive meeting with others. There appears a horizon of expectation and a willingness to engage with the unknown. The future is something unknown but also something that can be built, or rather re-built, by *holding* each other. The building of future calls for the re-vitalization of senses, an activation of the self and desire through encounter with the others. Here, building is both a metaphor for the future, but also a collectivized practice in the present. It is radically different than pointing to buildings as tokens of progress or, in what Simmel has termed, as the *tragedy of culture*, in which the built world overwhelms the subjective capacities of people. In another vein, Christopher Bollas argues that if a building is a testimony of our intelligence cast into the future, “it must be both beyond our immediate vision and yet not so far into the future as to alienate the imaginative idiom of our generation. If a building goes too far into the future—as the Eiffel Tower may have done in its day—the people feel a reverse effect: *the future has invaded the present and cast scorn on that present’s sensibilities*” (2009, p. 32, emphasis added).

In January 2017, the President of Turkey, Tayyip Erdoğan, said in defiance of the ‘Western’ values of freedom that “freedom passes through the Sultan Selim Bridge, Marmaray, Avrasya Tunnel, Osman Gazi Bridge, Çanakkale Bridge, the number 1 airport”². These bridges, transportation systems, tunnels, and airports have all been recently constructed or are still under construction. They are all presented as evidence of freedom in a country where at the same time thousands of Kurdish people have been violently displaced from their homes, their lives and life-spaces destroyed, where many Kurdish and Turkish politicians, journalists, academics, students, public officers are detained in prisons, many purged from their positions, unemployed or living in poverty. He made this statement in a country where women are attacked, harassed, raped and killed in scandalous numbers everyday, everywhere. The monumental projects that feed on national and international big capital rise as images of a supposedly free future, but they are molded in cement, and they stifle almost all the traces of life and life-generating energies for creating the new in the present. This is one example of how the future invades the present.

The future-oriented masculine promises of modernity that dwell on rectilinear progress and development have a particular effect in shaping

subjectivities: on the one hand, the ever-increasing regulation of everyday life brings a feeling of offense that vilifies the present way of life for the sake of future, but also in Bollas’ terms produces an *unconscious welcoming*. Bollas says that an offensive object may be unconsciously welcoming “because it raises an interesting psycho-spiritual question. Is this self of ours, which is deposited upon this earth, nothing more than shit? As our bodies decay, as we see early signs of our wasting away, knowing that one day we shall be wormed to a kind of stinking waste, will anything come of this excretion? Will we ever truly be resurrected? How could anything be made out of our waste?” (2009, p. 43). Waste becomes the paradoxical engine for further ‘development’. It becomes the power-drive for a masculine politics obsessed with death. Adriana Cavarero succinctly discusses how death has figured at the center of the patriarchal order and the Western tradition of metaphysical thinking (1995). According to her, death measures life in the quest of the leading men for immortality, and control and domination, by denying birth and death as reality. “Men generate Man, thus giving birth as they had planned to something eternal and universal, at least in its pretensions. Men are necessarily finite. They die, but their neutral/masculine essence endures, eternalized in Western culture” (1995, p. 107). In the image of the eternal masculinity and the piling up of human and non-human waste, the catastrophic future invades the present.

When the modern progressive ideal of future on this earth is no longer productive or, in other words, when the future invades the present with no convincing promises for human society other than the accumulation of the dead matter of commodities, the dominant image of life on earth becomes waste. When the state, once in the ideological role of representing the illusion of general interest as Marx has argued or, as Mathew Arnold euphemistically noted, ‘our best self’, departs from this role—as in the privatization of the state—the future invades the present in the form of accumulating capital that reaches up for the sky while leaving the earth in devastation and suffering. The future as catastrophe crafts an endless present out of waste through decay faintly disguised as progress. It is symptomatic in this respect that ‘humanity’ is getting increasingly obsessed with its own death as images of various calamities ranging from fiercely bombed towns to the perishing refugees, from desolate urban spaces in poverty

to natural and ecological disasters rapidly circulate around the world, while representations of catastrophe occupy a pervasive space in cultural and artistic production.

This picture significantly departs from the ‘masculine’ promise of modernity around the 19th century that life was perfectible, that nature could be controlled, that communities could be purified and the ‘inferior’ others, be it people of color, women, or lower classes, could be disciplined, educated and transformed, or at least, infused with the desire to be ‘modern’. Under the auspices of democracy, these have been the universal values of liberalism and civilization. In other words, the intimate and public forms of violence of so-called *perfectibility* in the context of colonialism, racism, and Western dominance have been euphemistically transferred to the sphere of development and progress. It is exactly this, the double reality inherent in the regime of modernity, namely that democracy serves the powerful, that the unreasonable violence of colonialism is integral to the reason and law of modernity, which has now irretrievably surfaced and become threateningly visible. And it is this very visibility that captivates and drives the ‘masses’ towards waste and wasting in a perverted desire³.

Can feminist politics stop this? Perhaps. If feminisms can revert the perverted desire for waste into a desire for generating life, finding forms of enjoyable co-habitation in difference. For this, feminists have to part ways with masculine fantasies of omnipotence, which have become even more deadly now in the neo-liberal order, and deploy the feminine in a radically new relationship with the masculine. Existing feminisms have tried to negotiate femininity and masculinity in different ways. The sociological term gender has allowed a variety of constructions and de-constructions. However, similar to what David Scott (2004) designates as the paradox of colonial modernity –that the intellectual revolutionaries in the colonies were conscripts of modernity– there is a danger that women, and even feminist women become the conscripts of modernity; they struggle under the dominance of the phallic sign, and limit their struggles within the tragedy of culture violently brought and exploited by masculine regimes.

Feminism as we know it is indeed a product of ‘modernity’. Women have long aspired and struggled to be modern claiming equal legal rights with men, generating many debates and versions of feminism. Women were never free of the built-in tensions and dilemmas of so-called

modern democracy, such as equality versus difference, which can never be resolved as long as difference predominantly signifies the Other within the phallogocentric system. Today we need to think beyond the phallogocentric symbolic system within which power is deployed, dominant meanings are made and within which women are given a position and named, while their own agency, differences, experiences, desires, and politics never exactly fit in this frame. I would argue that even queering gender (subverting gender as a classificatory category) is not enough on its own. Ways of undoing gender have to be connected to new ways of re-doing gender by working through the oppressive historical repertoire of gender difference and by collectively and creatively embracing and re-making forms of knowledge, ethics, and the politics of the feminine.

Perhaps, we also need to start by remembering some moments in feminist histories, particularly black feminism, when for example Audre Lorde urged feminists to recognize “difference as a crucial strength” (2000, p. 7). The feminine finds its invisible threads and sources in the history of women and their experience, struggle, and agency, but goes beyond women as a given category to encompass others –already and not yet– in a different way of knowing and living in this world. The feminine constitutes a domain of subjugated knowledge of life that does not accept the binary of body and mind and is in connection to being in the world, not based on automatism, control, and life/death as abstract and governable categories. The question is: how to make a different time in the present not only to be able to withdraw from the fatal grip of death that measures life, but also to make life within the existing conditions and materials – whatever we find here– similar to Noah’s pudding (aşure). In other words, how can we create something with others that is nourishing to life on this earth. Women know how to do this very well! What counts is “you who are here” (Cavarero 2005, p. 205).

Endnotes

- 1 The group calls itself Çalıkuşu’nun Z Raporu (the Z Report of the Scrubbird) with many different connotations not only difficult to trace but also impossible to translate. They are actively involved in establishing a women’s radio in Turkey.

- 2 “Erdoğan’dan ‘başkanlık reformu’ açıklaması”, Cumhuriyet, January 19, 2017. (accessed 31/10/2017).
- 3 Deleuze and Guattari write that “the masses wanted fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for” (2000, p. 29).

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