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"SOCIAL EQUALITY IS NOT ENOUGH, WE WANT PLEASURE!": ITALIAN FEMINISTS IN BELGRADE FOR THE 1978 "COMRADE WOMAN" CONFERENCE

Introduction

The international conference entitled "Drugarica zena. Zensko pitanje: novi pristup?" ("Comrade Woman: The Woman's Question: A New Approach?) was organized from 27th to 29th October 1978 at the Belgrade Student Cultural Center (SKC). The organizers – scholars and artists from Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo such as Dunja Blazevic, Rada Ivekovic, Jasmina Tesanovic, Nada Ler Sofronic – had the aim to explore the issue of inequality between men and women in the Yugoslav context, countering the claim that the socialist authorities had "solved" the woman's question. Inspired by the feminist movements of Western Europe, the organizers invited a number of foreign guests from France, Italy, Britain, West Germany, Poland, Hungary, among which well-known women such as Christine Delphy, Alice Schwarzer, Jill Lewis, Parveen Adams, Dacia Maraini. It was the first initiative of the "new" feminism, or second wave, not only in Yugoslavia, but throughout Eastern Europe.

The event is still remembered today in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo through meetings, publications, conferences, and has become a founding myth for the feminist movements in the post-Yugoslav region. The conference was an important moment for Yugoslav feminists, who then began to meet and establish networks between different cities, networks that would become very important for the anti-nationalist peace movement in the 1990s. Beside its importance for local feminist groups, however, the conference was the theatre of significant discussions between Yugoslav and Western European feminists on women's lives under socialism and under capitalism, and represents a very significant memory site to investigate the transnational circulation of feminist ideas in Europe after 1968. In this short essay, I would like to reconstruct these debates and the atmosphere of the conference through the gaze of the Italian guests, relying mainly on the Italian press, but also on the Yugoslav press and on archival sources collected in 2008 for my master thesis (Bonfiglioli 2008).

Different political contexts

Italian and French feminist movements were the main inspiration of the organizers, along with the Anglo-American socialist feminism. Some of the organizers, like Rada Ivekovic and Jasmina Tesanovic, had lived in Italy and had established connections with feminist groups. When transposing the feminist questionings in the Yugoslav context, the organizers had to challenge the relatively benign but still rigid socialist authorities, according to which women's equality had been achieved with the socialist revolution and with the laws approved through the 1946 Constitution and in the post-war period. Yugoslav women were accorded equal access to education and employment, as well as equality within the family. Contraception, abortion, and divorce were permitted since the 1950s. In short, the woman's question had allegedly been "solved", and the word "feminism" was associated with the "bourgeois" interwar feminist movements, and thus discredited as "antisocialist" by state authorities and by the official organization in charge of women's rights – the Conference for the Social Activities of Women (Sklevicky 1989). Yet, despite this rhetoric, many forms of discrimination and oppression remained, in the public as well as in the private sphere.

The organizers, thus, had to walk a delicate terrain when trying to gain legitimacy for "a new approach to women's issues" in the eyes of the authorities. They tried to show that the issue of women's liberation was not anti-socialist, but was part of the universalist socialist ideal, and of the struggle against bourgeois and conservative tendencies. Or, to quote an article by Rada Ivekovic, they claimed that "*feminist consciousness, the need to transform our "private" together with society, are necessary even to the continuation of the revolution, which would not be complete without this fundamental aspect: to sum up, we believe that women's consciousness raising is also a necessity for the humanist and socialist development of our society.*"¹ The organizers were placed at the center of dissident and artistic avant-gardes circulating across Yugoslavia, and could access the space of the Student Cultural Center, a self-managed institution founded in 1968, of which Dunja Blazevic was the director. At the same time, the issue of sexism and gender discrimination was not openly addressed by male dissidents (Funk et al. 1990; Zikic 2010). The women wishing to challenge these dynamics were meeting for the first time at the Belgrade conference, and thus had not yet developed any autonomous political practice or any campaign about women's rights, differently than feminist groups in Western Europe.

The conference, thus, was partly a dissident enterprise – since it voiced the failures of gender equality politics under socialism – but partly also an attempt to open spaces for feminist analysis and demands, by pointing to the contradictions between public discourse and reality. The presence of foreign guests was supposed to give first hand information about feminist movements abroad, and to enhance the visibility of the conference for the local public. The local context, however, was almost unknown to

1 Rada Ivekovic, "Il femminismo che viene dall'Est", *Noi Donne*, n.42, 20.10.1978.

Western feminists who went to Belgrade. This lack of knowledge about the specificities of Yugoslav socialism and about the dissident character of the meeting, not sponsored by any official state feminist organization, greatly contributed to the misunderstandings that characterized the encounter, since in many occasions they foreign guests mistook the references to socialism and self-management as a kind of "official discourse".

The Italianfeminist delegation, including Dacia Maraini, Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, Adele Cambria, Manuela Fraire, Chiara Saraceno, Carla Ravaioli, Letizia Paolozzi, Annabella Miscuglio, Francesca Ponza, Anne Marie Boetti, Luciana Castellina, Michela De Giorgio, was composed of socialist and radical feminists accustomed to the experience of "double militancy" in mixed New Left groups and women-only groups. They were very critical of old Marxist forces and of the trade unions, both for the way in which they had formulated the "woman's question" and for macho attitudes of the leaders. While the Union of Italian Women close to the PCI campaigned since 1945 for women's "emancipation", second wave feminists contested emancipatory demands, which they interpreted as a request of integration in a male world. They proposed instead a strategy of "liberation", emphasizing women's autonomy from male-centered institutions (Birnbaum 1986; Hellman 1987). Consciousness raising groups and militant collectives had formed in different cities since the early 1970s, and the issue of the patriarchal family and of unequal sexual relations had taken central stage, notably during the long campaigns for divorce (1974) and abortion rights (1978). While negotiating with Marxist forces and articulating class-based demands, Italian feminists generally mistrusted state institutions, focusing instead on the changes brought by personal experiences and interpersonal relations with other women. Psychoanalysis and the French theory of sexual difference were also very influential at the time among Italian feminists (Bertilotti et al. 2005).

Even during the "Comrade Woman" conference, however, the connections established within the old internationalist left had some significance. Some Western guests were members of their respective communist parties. Moreover, some communist activists belonging to the Union of Italian Women participated to the conference. While Italian antifascist women affiliated to the Union of Italian Women (UDI) had created linkages with the Antifascist Women's Front of Yugoslavia (AFZ) after 1945, the Cominform Resolution of 1948 and the expulsion of AFZ from the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) had severed those linkages for almost a decade. Due to the progressive bureaucratization of the UDI and of the Conference for the Social Activity of Women (KDAZ), which replaced the AFZ, the bilateral meetings in the 1960s and early 1970s were somehow limited to the female leaders. Differently than the Conference for the Social Activity of Women, who remained very distant from new feminist groups, the Union of Italian Women became involved in the feminist movements and was considerably transformed by the end of the 1970s (see Hellman 1987). Some UDI members therefore decided to join the conference. While Ester Pacor and Annamaria Guadagni were representatives of the new generation within UDI, Luciana Viviani was

part of the antifascist generation who had fought in the Resistance. Communist MP and UDI member since its foundation, she had taken part in the first and second congresses of AFZ in 1945 and 1948, and had attended KDAZ seminars in the 1960s. As I will try to show, the women who belonged to UDI had a different perception of the conference in comparison to women who belonged to radical feminism and the new left.

Displacement and estrangement: “we are not interested in equality”

Due to the differences between local and foreign feminists mentioned above, the 1978 Belgrade conference gave rise to a number of misunderstandings and polemics. The articles of the Italian feminist press generally express a moment of disappointment or displacement. Arriving on the first day of the conference, in the middle of the afternoon because of an airline strike, the Italian guests realize that men are admitted to the meeting, and that a male sociologist (Slobodan Drakulic) is even allowed to talk of women’s oppression, something they perceive as “grotesque”.² Some of the Italian and French guests shout against the male speaker, and are reproached by the organizers of “doing racism” against men. They claim: “autonomy doesn’t mean to do racism. It should not be seen in a negative sense, against men, but rather as positively, in favour of women, so that they can become political subjects, without giving anybody a proxy.”³ Manuela Fraire writes that when arriving, during the protest against the sociologists, she felt a certain “homely atmosphere”. But soon afterwards, she realized that “there was no homely atmosphere since, as I realized later, the Yugoslav women were really different from us, but I wouldn’t be able to explain why”.⁴

After this episode, a discussion started on the issue of the autonomy of the women’s movements. And here, according to UDI reporter Anna Maria Guadagni, “a crossed fire of provincialisms” ensued.⁵ According to the Italian guests, the Yugoslav organizers appeared defensive about the juridical results of socialist self-management, and read every question about the autonomy of the women’s movement as an attack against their system. On the other hand, Western feminists insisted on the patriarchal character of male – female relations, targeting in particular the ‘socialist males’: “An oblivious Yugoslav male met on the plane, who confessed of being served by his wife like all the other males in the world, becomes a casus belli: ‘Is this socialist?’”⁶ Similarly, as Vesna Kesic reports, the foreign guests appear to be surprised and offended by male behaviour in the streets and restaurants of Belgrade, which they found overtly sexist: “They shouted at us in the streets! The eyes of your men were on us!” – This was the first thing we heard from the international participants – ‘Come on, please...’ – reacted many Yugoslav women – ‘You must be joking, we strive for the equality in the workplace, in government and

2 Dacia Maraini, “Quando il femminismo va a Est”, Paese Sera, 4.11.1978
 3 Dacia Maraini, Ibidem.
 4 Manuela Fraire, *belgrado un congresso che si farà “dopo”*, Effe, n.12 (Dec 1978)
 5 Anna Maria Guadagni, “Belgrado: Tre giorni al femminile”, Noi Donne n.46 17.11.1978
 6 Anna Maria Guadagni, Ibidem.

self-managed bodies, and not on the street. And then, what’s gonna happen if someone stares at you in the street. We know that in reality you were longing for it.”⁷

The polarization between the local and the foreign guests on the themes of public and private continued on the second day of the conference. Carla Ravaioli wrote that all the Yugoslav analyses were “based on the old emancipationist line: work, laws, services, social integration, political participation, construction of socialism”. The interventions of the women coming from abroad dealt instead with “oppressing machismo, expropriated sexuality, symbolical elaboration, unconscious, daily life, autonomy, materialist theory that has to be constructed starting from the body”. These interventions from abroad, thus, sounded like “voices from another planet, or even as provocations” in the Yugoslav context.⁸ This profound difference in political languages led to a deep tension at the end of the day. Allegedly this tension was spurred by an intervention by Jacqueline from the French group of *edition des femmes*⁹, who stated that conflicts between men and women are “not only economic, but psychic. Capitalism is not only economic but also symbolic, and implies the appropriation of feelings, the fortification of the ego against the weaker, the imposition of one’s own vision of the world. This form of capitalism also exists in socialist countries (...)”.¹⁰ To this intervention about the psychic dimension of male power, Rada Ivekovic replied: “Sure, that is quite interesting, but I only wonder why the colleagues think what they think, why many seem to think that they have to teach us, (...) that we cannot reach these things by ourselves.”¹¹

This heated exchange between Western and local participants is simplified by Carla Ravaioli as follows: “Don’t come here to give us lessons, what do you know of our reality?” – was the harsh Yugoslav reaction – ‘If you continue talking of economic development and self-management, you will get nowhere’ – rebuked the feminists. And they wondered why they had been invited.”¹² Against Yugoslav formulations of equality,

7 Vesna Kesic, *Zene o Zeni*, Start n.15, 29.11.1978. See also Slavenka Drakulic (1993) on this point: “We thought they were too radical when they told us they were harassed by men on our streets. We don’t even notice it, we said. Or when they talked about wearing high-heeled shoes as a sign of women’s subordination. We didn’t see it quite like that; we wore such shoes and even loved them”; Vesna Kesic hoped, however, that three days of feminist conference had taught the local public to take these issues more seriously: “Ne vjerujem da bi se, nakon trodnevnog trajanja medunarodnog dijela seminara, itko vise usudio tako reagirati. Svakom slusaocu, ne benevolentnom nego iole inteligentnom, moralo je postati jasno koliko su takvi primjeri, naoko nevažni i površni (dobacivanje na ulici), indikator gradanskog morala, patrijarhalnog mentaliteta, tradicionalne svijesti i ‘androcentrizma’, koji su se održali u našem društvu unatoc progresivnim društvenim promjenama.”

8 Carla Ravaioli, “Ufficiale ma non troppo”, Il Messaggero di Roma, 5.11.1978
 9 The publishing house *Des femmes* was founded in Paris in 1973 by the group *Psychanalise et Politique*, led by psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque. This group, influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference, had a great impact on radical feminism in Italy. Feminist groups from Milan, notably, took part in the international meetings held in June 1972 in Vandée (La Tranche-sur-mer) and in October-November 1972 near Rouen (Vieux Villé). See Melandri, 2000.
 10 Dacia Maraini, “Quando il femminismo va a Est”, Paese Sera, 4.11.1978
 11 Rada Ivekovic, Original Transcript, SKC Drugarica Zena Archive, Belgrade.
 12 Carla Ravaioli, “Ufficiale ma non troppo”, Il Messaggero di Roma, 5.11.1978

Italian and French feminists proposed a radical conception of women's autonomy based on the re-evaluation of women's sexual difference. After another intervention by Rada Ivekovic on the need to fully apply already existing socialist laws in order to achieve equality, Francesca Ponza stated: "we are not interested in equality, or at least we considered it only as a moment of transition. The aim is not to be equal, but to fully live our differences in order not to feel inferior". Soon afterwards, Jacqueline from *edition des femmes* added: "even in your country girls are educated to kill the mother to marry the father".¹³ During this "explosion of symbolic language" that stunned the public, someone else appropriated the microphone to declare: "Social equality is not enough, we want pleasure!"¹⁴

Commonalities: men's privileges and women's consciousness-raising

After the heated discussions of the first two days, on the third day "the ice melts" according to the Italian participants, just when they are about to leave Belgrade. The atmosphere is more relaxed and the Italian feminists have again the impression of finding themselves in women's meetings "at home", with discussions about "sexuality, orgasm, masturbation, male resistance to the equal laws, internalization of patriarchal norms, male chauvinism of the press", etc.¹⁵ Dacia Maraini writes that the very advanced socialist laws – including one about marital rape – are not used by women because of fear, mistrust and guilt. The issue of women's autonomy from patriarchy, that is – "the discovery that the woman is the one who reproduces her oppression, and transmits it to her sons, because she doesn't express her needs but the needs of those who oppress her"¹⁶ – comes back in the discussion. In the end, the Italian guests realize that despite initial divisions "there are many more things that unite us".¹⁷ A common line could be found in the reluctance of all males – even in a socialist country – to give up their privileges, although this, Maraini writes, "is not recognized at the official level".¹⁸

Assuming their path to feminism to be universal, Italian participants expected the feminist demands formulated in Belgrade to be similar to their own, and felt estranged and disoriented when this was not the case. The reports oscillate therefore between familiarity and estrangement, proximity and distance. If Manuela Fraire had written that the Yugoslav women were "really different", a few lines later she wrote that these cosmopolitan and educated women were in fact "very much like us, except for a marginal difference: they live in a country that calls itself socialist". And since there it was more difficult to articulate a critique of the left, "where can women start in order to define

13 Dacia Maraini, "Quando il femminismo va a Est", Paese Sera, 4.11.1978

14 Dacia Maraini, *Ibidem*.

15 Carla Ravaioli, Ufficiale ma non troppo, Il Messaggero di Roma, 5.11.1978

16 Dacia Maraini, "Quando il femminismo va a Est", Paese Sera, 4.11.1978

17 Dacia Maraini, *Ibidem*.

18 Dacia Maraini, *nessun privilegiato abbandona tranquillamente i suoi privilegi*, Quotidiano Donna, n.24, 1978

themselves as autonomous and singular political subjects?"¹⁹ Adele Cambria interprets the silences during the meeting as the expression of a great "desire for feminism" that is emerging in a context that is not totalitarian—as the Yugoslav women emphasize—but in which it is nonetheless very hard to express one's womanhood (*dire il proprio essere donna*).²⁰ The more optimistic hypothesis formulated by Manuela Fraire is that "our words will be actually useful for them, to discuss later between themselves."²¹

A possible way to make sense of the different political language among Yugoslav women was to interpret their process of consciousness-raising as "delayed" in comparison to Italy. Carla Ravaioli writes that the organizers of the meeting are "mostly young people, highly educated, dedicated to intellectual work" and that they "do not constitute a representative sample of the female masses in Yugoslavia." She asks therefore if they will be able to "be a provocative avant-garde – as it happened to us – and to become the bridgehead of a movement able to involve and drag all the others, modifying mentalities and behaviours and creating a new 'common sense' in their country?"²² In this way, Carla Ravaioli equated the situation in Yugoslavia to the situation witnessed "at the beginning of the movement" in Italy. The Yugoslav organizers, therefore, were very similar to the Italian feminists in their educational and class background, but still had to develop an outreach towards the "female masses".

Differently than Ravaioli, the delegates belonging to the Union of Italian Women (UDI) did not share the idea that feminism in Italy had been able to reach the female masses. Luciana Viviani wrote an interesting letter to Dunja Blazevic once she came back to Rome, in which she stated that the Belgrade meeting had been very important since it had allowed them to know more about Yugoslav women's "emancipation and liberation processes" (note the contemporary usage of the two terms). UDI leaders thought that the Yugoslav organizers faced similar problems: "We and you, in fact, do not derive our analysis or our practical choices within limited women's groups, socially and culturally elitist, but our field of research addresses large sectors of the feminine population (...) When operating on a large scale – added Viviani – the processes of consciousness-raising of each single woman on her role in society, in the family, in relation to men, are slower and more complicated, but in the end they are the most effective in giving contractual power to the autonomous women's movement in order to change our lives."²³ Viviani, in this way, could identify with the Yugoslav organizers' attempt to raise women's consciousness "on a large scale", without dismissing the relevance of socialist laws and of self-managed institutions.

For the organizers of the "Comrade Women" conference, however, socialist laws and policies had shown their limits, and notably their inability to transform women's

19 Manuela Fraire, *belgrado un congresso che si farà "dopo"*, Effe, n.12 (Dec 1978)

20 Adele Cambria, *quando lenin rampognava le compagne che discutevano di sesso e matrimonio*, Quotidiano Donna, n.24, 1978

21 Manuela Fraire, *belgrado un congresso che si farà "dopo"*, Effe, n.12 (Dec 1978)

22 Carla Ravaioli, Ufficiale ma non troppo, Il Messaggero di Roma, 5.11.1978

23 Letter, 13th of November 1978, Roma, Archivio Centrale UDI, Donne nel Mondo, f.330.

consciousness of oppressive gender relations in the private sphere. Even if it was not immediately apparent to foreign guests, second wave feminists in Yugoslavia had to challenge the antifascist generation in charge of state institutions, which often included members of their families, in order to voice new women's issues and demands. Towards the end of the conference, Dunja Blazevic explained to Anna Maria Guadagni: "Our mothers' generation had a great role in the revolution and it is still this generation that is directing the political structures. Today, however, the problems have changed. We have an abortion bill, but the problem is contraception. There is sexual freedom, but the young people live sexuality in a wrong and superficial way. Sexual violence is punished, even within marriage if a husband rapes his wife; but no woman will denounce the husband. To sum up, women have no consciousness of their oppression."²⁴

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24 Anna Maria Guadagni, "Belgrado: Tre giorni al femminile", *Noi Donne* n.46 17.11.1978