

GENDERING THE CLASS STRUGGLE

Trade union Feminism in Italy in the 1970s

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This paper is based on a part of the investigations I am conducting for my PhD project which is overall devoted to the experience of trade union feminism in the 1970s in the framework of a comparative perspective between Italy and France. The main objective of this paper will be to show how, at the time, Italian women unionists managed to deconstruct the supposedly neutral but on the contrary fully gendered traditional politics of the trade unions and to develop a critical and alternative approach based on feminist premises. The paper will be articulated into different sections: I will introduce the main objects and methodologies of my work, then I will briefly outline the situation of Italian trade unions, I will describe the rise of a feminist consciousness among Italian trade unionists and then I will focus on women's strong activism with regard to health issues and particularly to the legalization of abortion.

Object and methodologies:

My PhD project deals with the so-called 'trade union feminism': this label has been used by historians such as Luisa Passerini¹ and Anna Rossi Doria² with reference to one of the different 'voices' (or streams) which were part and contributed to give birth to the second-wave feminist movement in Italy. It is not an irrelevant label because, differently than the labels 'marxist feminism'³ or 'working-class feminism' it conveys the idea that we're speaking of something that was settled really inside the union and that affected the union institution itself. It's referred not just to a theoretical approach, neither just to the class background of the women involved: it explicitly refers to the context in which it developed and which it tried to change. Despite the fact

¹ See Luisa Passerini, *Storie di donne e femministe*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, 1991.

² See Anna Rossi Doria, *Dare forma al silenzio. Scritti di storia politica delle donne*, Viella, Roma, 2007.

³ See, for example, Veronica Beechey, *Unequal Work*, Verso, London, 1987; Michele Barrett, *Women's oppression Today*, Verso, London, 1981.

that this 'label' bears a heuristic value, nonetheless it is in itself problematic with regard to my object of study, as I am going to show through a couple of quotations. On the one hand, when I interviewed a woman unionist (let's call her Flavia) in Milan last year she immediately engaged with the title of my project, saying: 'Trade union feminism' into brackets, right? Because otherwise you will find the radical feminists who would tell you that this was not 'real feminism'.⁴ On the other hand, a man unionist - Sandro - shifted the critiques on the other term, stating: "The feminist logic is completely different from the syndical one. [...] If you speak about a struggle for wage equality, one can agree or disagree but it is a union struggle. But if you speak about the problem of woman's body, about the neo-patriarchy and things like these...they have nothing to do with the trade unions. [...] Trade union was a ground which allowed [the feminist approach] to move, but this doesn't mean that it accepted or absorbed it".⁵ These quotations show the difficulty of framing 'trade union feminism' of the 1970s into precise boundaries and together they delineate the interest of this peculiar approach that blurred some familiar categories.

Right because of the complex nature of my object of study, the choice of my sources is also a borderline one: in between archival and oral history. Throughout this paper I will make reference to the interviews I have been conducting in the past years with former women unionists. As the oral historian Alessandro Portelli clarified: "The element that oral sources provide with greater intensity than any other source, is the subjectivity of the narrator. [...] We are informed not only about facts, but about what they meant to those who experienced them".⁶ Moreover, within the research on trade union feminism, enhancing the narrator's subjectivity creates an ideal continuity (methodological and conceptual) with the research topic: the fact that women – a collective subject relegated for long to historical and historiographical silence – began to speak out about themselves is a fundamental *topos* in the feminist movement's representation. Particularly in the context of factory work, the symbolic expression of 'speaking out' embodied a profoundly real need felt by many women as Luisa, employee in a Genoese factory, explicitly admitted while reflecting on women's

⁴ Flavia, focus group, Milan, 08 May 2013.

⁵ Sandro, Milan, 07 May 2013.

⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *Storie orali*, Donzelli, Roma 2007, p. 11.

separatist method: "Being only women was necessary because we needed to speak and to speak freely. The women in the factory did not speak".⁷

Italian trade unions in the 'hot autumn' aftermath:

The 1970s saw Italian trade unions, strengthened by the successful struggles of the so-called 'hot autumn' of 1969, asserting themselves as prominent political actors. In a period of intense critique - especially within the left-wing field - against the established social forces, Italian trade unions proved to be sufficiently ready to intercept in some way the current demands of social change. The main confederations (the communist CGIL and the progressive catholic CISL) deeply modified their recruitment patterns and were able to expand their internal democracy thanks to the introduction of new grass-root structures called 'factory councils'.⁸ The idea at the base of these reforms was indeed of guaranteeing the most possible closeness of the workers with their union delegates: differently from the past, every factory-floor was now entitled to elect its own delegate chosen within the so-called 'homogeneous group', that is: among the people who were performing the same job, sharing a common experience on the workplace. This grass-root approach clearly re-echoed practices developed during the period 1968-69 in different contexts (both among rebelling students and among struggling workers) but it proved to be particularly relevant for the increasing women's activism within the trade unions that took place between the 1970s and the 1980s and that lays at the hearth of my investigations. The gendered nature of traditional trade unionism appears already clearly from these elements: after the second world war and particularly with the so-called 'economic boom'⁹ women had began entering massively the job market, however their presence didn't translate coherently with a substantial increase of the number of female union delegates nor in working women's interest into union elections. With the renovation of practices and methods which took place between the 1960s and the 1970s women who had so far remained distant from trade union traditional dynamics, found in

⁷ Interview realized for the video *Donne in movimento. Il femminismo a Genova negli anni Settanta* produced in 2012 by the Association for a Movements' Archive. The screenplay was freely based on the research I made for my B. A. thesis. Luisa's words can be listened at the minute 42'.

⁸ Bruno Trentin, *Il sindacato dei consigli*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1980.

⁹ See Paul Ginsborg, *Dal miracolo economico agli anni '80*, vol. II, in Id., *Storia d'Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi*, Einaudi, Torino, 1989. See also Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato: dal miracolo economico agli anni Ottanta*, Donzelli, Roma, 2005.

the new factory councils the right place where they felt ready to represent the requests and proposals of their closest colleagues and, by no surprise, these women were often elected as union delegates in factory-floors with a high percentage of female workers, thus reviving their democratic participation to union life.

Women activism within the unions:

Most of the new female delegates were young women who had experienced the highly radical struggles of 1969, many had been involved in students' or left-wing extra-parliamentary groups, and some had also got involved in the practices of the first feminist collectives which developed in the country at the beginning of the Seventies. Once entered in the trade unions dynamics they immediately realized the existing gap between the claims of an inclusive class struggle and the reality of a context where women's right to work was still endangered as demonstrated by the habit of identifying women as the first targeted group for layoff in case of workforce downsizing. Raising objections against the falsely neutral but actually male-centered union approach was everything but easy: the gendered organization of practices and hierarchies was often simply denied. Again Luisa, for example, reported:

The other thing you could hear, in the factories, from male unionists was: "Why do you make such claims here in the factory? Actually, it is out, not here in the factory, that you have to fight, because you are first discriminated outside!". There was always this idea: before this or before the other. This was something that made no sense to us, because it was just a way to hush us. [...] What we understood was that, on the contrary, there was not an 'inside' and an 'outside': it was all the same.¹⁰

Women's efforts to introduce a different but equally relevant point of view in the structures of the trade unions and in their bargaining politics was marked by enthusiasm as well as by frustration. Pina, a woman unionist I interviewed in a focus group in Milan, described the critical relations with their male colleagues referring to a feminist

¹⁰ Luisa, Genoa, 17 March 2008.

slogan they adopted: “Mate in the struggle, master in the life!”, also miming with her hands the feminist symbol of the vagina.¹¹

No wonder, then, if the first thing that women unionists found useful in order to develop their political agenda was to start meeting separately. At the beginning they organized women-only meeting in a very informal way, struggling to overcome traditional female shyness and subordination. At the beginning women unionists often decided to adopt the instrument of anonymous surveys to investigate working women’s demands and priorities: they distributed hundreds of questionnaires and they discussed their general outcomes during crowded meetings which helped to clarify and direct their political agenda. Working women started an intense discussion about the relationship between women and work, taking into account the unequal allocation of rights and duties in society as a whole. Women thought that not only did the structural relation among the classes need to change but also the social and cultural superstructures that always put women in a subordinate position. They highlighted the need of being granted equal opportunities in terms of vocational courses and career development, they unveiled that trade union attention to the crucial theme of health on the workplace was most of the time focused just on men’s needs and it didn’t take into sufficient account the issues of reproductive health and contraception. They deconstructed the artificial boundary between public and private sphere, showing how much personal life was relevant for women’s access to the public sphere and to the work market in particular. They strongly emphasized the connection between the work-place and the surrounding territory, stressing the importance of efficient public social services. They engaged with the issues of factory night work for women and they greatly debated about the introduction of part-time jobs.

For these women the “re-invention of the political”¹² went through some ‘classical’ emancipationist themes which had been marking the whole development of working-class feminist commitment,¹³ as well as new themes (especially a focus on the body, sexuality, emotional dynamics, power relations) which characterized the second-wave of feminist movements in western countries. Actually the interest of this period lays precisely in this new kind of feminist approach that working women were able to introduce within the perimeter of working-class organizations: it was not just a matter of

¹¹ Pina, focus group, Milan, 09 May 2013.

¹² Maud Bracke, *Women and the Re-Invention of the Political: Feminism in Italy (1968-1983)*, Routledge, New York, 2014

¹³ See for example Gisela Bock, *Women in European History*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002.

formally obtaining equal rights, but rather it was a matter of guaranteeing their concrete application and further modifying gender roles thus acknowledging women as fully political actors in the realm of social conflict.

To strengthen their influence on institutional mechanisms and better organize their activism, Italian women unionists set up new inter-professional and inter-confederal structures that substituted the old female committees within the unions. The newborn *Coordinamenti Donne* - as they were called - brought together women beyond the boundaries of professional sectors and beyond the membership of different unions affiliation; moreover, ensuing the widespread feminist claims for a global sisterhood¹⁴ and for the re-evaluation of unpaid care and domestic work, these structures were open to students and housewives as well. The *Coordinamenti Donne* had a horizontal structures which explicitly contradicted the usual practice of representative delegation and recalled experiences of direct democracy. This 'organizational choice' proved to be *per se* a direct challenge to unions' classical schemes (schemes that had excluded women so far: keeping them at the margins or patronizing them). An example is given by a very much ironical account made by Anna during a focus group: she laughed at remembering the surprise she provoked in her male colleague.

I remember X [a union executive] called me saying: "I bring you out for lunch!". I went with him in the restaurant where all the union secret agreements were discussed here in Milan, everybody was looking at us with great curiosity. He started saying: "I have a wonderful proposal for you! What about becoming the women's responsible?!". I answered "No" and he simply couldn't believe it: "What? This is impossible!" – you know with that approach... - "This is intolerable! [...]".¹⁵

Women started, indeed, to 'sabotage' traditional patterns of enrollment. The *Coordinamenti Donne* thus served at the same time to disarticulate union internal

¹⁴ In the 1970s an heartily and all-encompassing claim for a worldwide sisterhood was still greatly pervasive among feminists, although it's well known that the following decades would see the raising of questions about its (epistemological and existential) validity and the development of relevant critiques posed in particular by lesbian feminism, black feminism, and more recently by post-colonial feminism. See the path-breaking texts: Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, Onlywomen Press, London, 1981; bell hooks, *Ain't I a woman?*, South End Pr, Boston, 1981; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, in «Feminist Review», Duke University Press, Autumn 1988, pp. 333–358.

¹⁵ Anna, focus group, Milan, 09 May 2013.

dynamics and to challenge union bargaining agenda. In the following part of my paper I would like to focus on the issue of workers' health care and on the contribution that women unionists gave to expand this field of union intervention.

Workplace health promotion:

At the end of the Sixties Italian trade unions had begun to collaborate with young doctors (politically engaged within the students' movement) who started conducting a series of enquires about working conditions.¹⁶ They did an excellent job, with detailed questionnaires that were distributed among workers in a number of factories and other working places. However, women felt that their specific problems and needs (linked, for example, to the reproductive system and to pregnancy) were not sufficiently taken into account. That is why the *Coordinamenti*, in partnership with some feminist doctors, prepared alternative questionnaires helping women to reveal their problems and to discuss them. At the beginning these attempts crashed against women's reticence (often due to their Catholic education) to talk about so delicate and intimate issues, but step by step it was overcome and working women showed increasing interest in learning more about their body and in putting into practice autonomous forms of body-care. The focus on the body was of course a common concern among all streams of feminisms at the time and it can be said that it represents one of the most distinctive features of second-wave feminism. It was a transnational focus, demonstrated by the diffusion, just to give a reference, of the 'handbook' written by the Boston health collective;¹⁷ but in Italy in particular it proved to be a crucial terrain of feminist political practice. Radical feminist collectives put body and sexuality at the heart of their reflections: Carla Lonzi, leader of the group Rivolta Femminile, wrote *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* where she explicitly denounced the violence of a wholly phallogentric sexuality, many feminist collectives gathered around

¹⁶ See the considerations about industrial medicine developed by Christian G. De Vito in his essay, *Tecnici e intellettuali dei "saperi speciali" nei movimenti degli anni Settanta a Reggio Emilia*, in Luca Baldissara (edited by), *Tempi di conflitti, tempi di crisi. Contesti e pratiche del conflitto sociale a Reggio Emilia nei "lunghi anni Settanta"*, L'Ancora del mediterraneo, Roma-Napoli, 2008, pp. 387-426.

¹⁷ The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our bodies, ourselves*, Simon & Schuster, 1973. The Italian translation, *Noi e il nostro corpo*, realized by feminist activists, was published by Feltrinelli in 1975.

the self-help practice which aimed at criticizing and re-shaping traditional doctor-patient relationship. It was in the 1970s that the ample and controversial debate on a legal regulation (or decriminalization) of abortion gained public resonance: the law n° 194 which ensures this right in Italy was approved in 1978 and then submitted to popular referendum in 1981. Meanwhile, feminist collectives have been setting up so-called '*consultori autogestiti*' which were self-managed structures devoted to women's healthcare and in particular to offer information on contraception and promote responsible parenthood and reproductive health. These *consultori* represented a truly relevant service for women of all ages in the neighborhood where they appeared; moreover feminists working voluntarily in these centers were committed to assure that women could find here a welcoming atmosphere, where they could feel free and exchange informations and advices among each others. This social activity proved to be so much relevant that in 1975, with law n° 405, the State basically integrated its function into the National Health Service establishing public '*Consultori familiari*' aiming at promoting family planning. As this brief and necessarily just schematic overview demonstrates, female body, sexuality and health were absolutely crucial themes in the perspective of second-wave women's movement.

Italian women unionists, although according to different nuances, were certainly part of this movement and were very much interested in these topics as well. In the case of working women, the relevance of health-related objectives was clearly intersected with the then raising questions on the risks connected to work conditions. Contrary to popular belief about blue-collars, female workforce was often over-represented in the most harmful factory floors. Because of their proportionally lower professional level, they were more likely to be employed in unqualified, hard and unprotected sectors (a good example I had worked on was the 'selection sector' of ceramic factories in Emilia Romagna, where chemical products were heavily used). To have a clear 'vision' of the kind of attitude trade unions had with regard to health risks on the workplace, I'll show you the cover-page of a brochure distributed by the united metalworking union on this topic. [>> image] There is a whole set of greatly interesting works devoted, in the field of gender studies on masculinities, to the relevance of stereotypical images of male workers that were essential to preserve the myth of muscular virility and re-state over

and over again, even denying the obvious, the intrinsic nature of the sexual division of labour.¹⁸

Italian women unionists, often in connection with radical feminist collectives, decided to be very active on these themes. Over the last years I have been conducting my investigations in various contexts and it is interesting to observe the different strategies developed by the *Coordinamenti Donne* to deal with these issues. In Milan, for example, the field of work-medicine was the first one to be addressed. Women unionists started to adopt a female embodied point of view to look at the question, as Flavia - a CISL unionist explains:

We worked a lot on the theme of healthcare because it allowed us to treat the theme of the body and of the difference which starts from the body. We looked on one side at an activity with the *consultori* in order to preserve their feminist character, on the other side we looked at the problems related to the workplace. However the first thing was to understand that the body is not just a wrapper, but that - also apart from maternity - there is a difference between the man's body and the woman's body. When this problem came out, the theme was treated everywhere: in Milan as well as in the province.¹⁹

It was right in connection with this set of problems that, in 1975, they made an institutional choice organizing in Milan a conference titled "For female workers' health": it had been preceded by a widespread enquiry in most of the factories which had a high percentage of women employees and it had the official support of all the union confederations. The documents deriving from this conference were not only kept in the archives²⁰ but also published in a book²¹. As Graziella, another milanese unionist, underlined with reference to the unions: "Basically they just realized that there were aspects of women's reality they had been absolutely unable to catch".²² In Reggio Emilia healthcare was introduced as one of the topics in a series of workshops organized

¹⁸ See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Man and Woman: images on the left*, in *Worlds of labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1984. See also Ava Baron, *Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian's Gaze*, «International Labor and Working-Class History», n. 69 (Spring, 2006), pp. 143-160.

¹⁹ Flavia, focus group, Milan, 08 May 2013.

²⁰ Archivio del Lavoro, Carte Myriam Bergamaschi, Donne, b. 6, f. 52, *Conference on the defence of women's health*, Milan, 25 June 1975.

²¹ Federazione provinciale Milano CGIL – CISL – UIL, *Per la salute delle lavoratrici*, Mazzotta, 1976.

²² Graziella, focus group, Milan, 08 May 2013.

(in 1977 and 1978) by the local *Coordinamento*: at the end of this experience, participants were asked to express their preferences and suggestions for the following activities and the interest showed with regard to health issues was massive. The year after (1979) a whole workshop - titled *La salute in mano alle donne* - was thus devoted to sexuality, contraception, childbirth, abortions, menopause, medicines, etc. All these activities were organized thanks to the collaboration of feminist doctors, engaged in the local self-managed healthcare center, who provided female workers with information and support along the entire period of the workshop. Also in Genoa the *Coordinamento* organized health-related workshops: in 1979-80 *Noi e il nostro corpo*, in 1981 *Nascere e far nascere*. Another workshop, originated by these ones and then become autonomous, was titled *Espressione corporea* and aimed at proposing activities focused on the holistic concept of wellbeing. Moreover, Genoese working women obtained from the trade unions that in 1976 the so-called 'salario sociale' (a share of workers' salary saved for collective purposes) was invested to create an independent healthcare center open to the population of the neighborhood in the industrial area of Cornigliano. Another unique experience was held in Turin where the *Intercategoriale* (equivalent of *Coordinamento*), jointly with all the local feminist collectives, decided in November 1978 to occupy an abandoned division of the S. Anna city hospital: the law which legalized the voluntary interruption of pregnancy had just been approved by Italian parliament and the women's movement in Turin, strong of the participation of all its components, asked to the hospital institution and to the city authorities to prepare that medical division for this specific service. Informal negotiations went on between the different parties for some days and finally women obtained the acceptance of most of their requests.

A focus on abortion:

The entire decade saw the development of a vast feminist political commitment devoted in Italy to the issue of legal abortion. Except the daughters of the rich bourgeoisie who had their family (scared of scandals) ready to pay for secret health services performed by complicit doctors, most of working-class women risked their lives to interrupt pregnancy and many of them actually died. Many feminist collectives, at the time, were organizing journeys abroad to bring women in safe hospitals of those

countries where abortion had already become legal. In many *consultori*, the health-care centers already mentioned, free abortions were illegally performed by feminist doctors who increasingly adopted the so-called 'karman method' which was a safer and less intrusive (than the curettage) technique they had learnt abroad. In the framework of the campaign for the legalization of abortion, many feminist activists publicly self-denounced their abortions explicitly to provoke the widest possible debate on this topic, too long kept in the realm of women's private sphere.

Feminist slogans like "My body is mine" effectively highlighted what women denounced as the expropriation of their body by patriarchal society and institutions, but beyond the claim of women's own decision over their bodies, feminists reflected and worked also on the concrete practice of self-determination. Abortion was never a goal in itself: feminists' attempt was to re-shape the whole realm of sexuality, acknowledging women's desire as equally important as men's one, liberating sex from unwanted pregnancy, and promoting responsible parenthood. Another feminist slogan, maybe less powerful but very much telling of the situation in Italy, was in fact "Legal abortion not to die, contraception not to abort". Feminists' attempt, in the *consultori* as within the radical collectives...on the press as within the trade union context and in the workplaces, was always to promote women's free choice and - to guarantee it - it proved to be first of all crucial to spread information and self-consciousness about sexuality in general and contraception in particular. Although this had been certainly a unifying struggle for second-wave feminism, it must be recalled that the movement was composed of many different streams which often differentiated from each other, in terms of analysis and methods, and supported the same cause in different ways.

Trade union feminism, in particular, gave a relevant contribution to deconstruct and complicate the otherwise apparently 'frozen' landscape of the debate on abortion legalization. Because of their everyday working experience but also thanks to the already mentioned statistical investigations carried out in these years on working women health conditions on the workplace, women unionists could in fact solidly denounce and firmly condemn the dramatic occurrence of so-called '*aborti bianchi*', that is: miscarriages due to harmful working conditions. As Giovanna, a unionist in Turin, claimed during her interview:

While speaking about women's health we always strove to highlight this issue: the one of '*aborti bianchi*'. Therefore: lighter job tasks [for pregnant women],

more controls...we denounced miscarriages. This issue was also addressed in some union workshops and the political struggle for the legalization of abortion saw us in the first row, especially for the referendum. In this period we made specific assemblies in all the factories: abortion was strenuously defended and we must acknowledge that men didn't try to prevent us on this. It was a great struggle, [...] we organized debates and flyering. And finally we know what the outcome was!

Despite 'maternity protection' was a traditional issue within trade union 'classical tool box' addressing female workforce situation, the massive entry of women in the paid labour market between 1950s and '60s in Italy concretely changed its frame. As a unionist wrote commenting a medical enquiry on this topic: "From these data we can see how much the risks in the ceramic industry for all women, and particularly those working in the [harmful] 'selection' sector, is such that the frequency of miscarriages considerably grows among them in comparison with the two control-groups [we considered]".²³ Working women's over-representation in harmful factory-sectors and rapidly changing developments in work equipments, substances and procedures often frustrated unions' commitment on this. Miscarriages due to harmful working environment and material conditions were still an issue in 1970s Italy²⁴ and women unionists couldn't but logically and discursively connect it to the struggle for legal abortion. Basically, they unveiled the double-standard morality of capitalist bourgeoisie that condemned women's free choice of interrupting a pregnancy, while neglecting the same occurrence when due to the employers' pursuit of profit. The anti-abortion front (which sanctimoniously referred to itself as "pro-life") was actively committed to prevent women's autonomous decision about if and when giving birth, but it guiltily forgot women whose maternity free choice was denied by workforce's capitalist exploitation. In the juxtaposition of these situations, all the self-interested contradiction which marked the reactionary forces (political, religious, and social) clearly emerged. Italian society, voting in 1981 in favor of the law n° 194 on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy (a law that, it's worth noting, was not uncritically

²³ Biblioteca A. CdLT R. E., Federazione Provinciale – Reggio E., *La donna che lavora: soggetto politico o figura subordinata?*, contenuti del seminario monografico "150 ore" sulla condizione femminile svoltosi all'I.T.F. di Rivalta – R. E., 1979.

²⁴ Luciana Percovich, *La coscienza nel corpo: donna, salute e medicina negli anni Settanta*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2005, pp. 217-218.

welcomed by the different souls of the feminist movement) strongly expressed its will with regard to this issue. However, in the perspective of a historiographical narration of the political debate which developed around the promulgation of the law, it is interesting to delineate the relevant features that characterized the participation of each specific component of the feminist movement to the collective discussion. The intersection between women's self-determination, health care, material conditions of industrial production, and capitalist super-exploitation was obviously highly significant for most feminist activists coming from radical left-wing backgrounds, but in its concrete articulation with reference to the '*aborti bianchi*' it certainly represents women unionists' peculiar contribution.