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On Feminist Politics

Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum

Review-essay of *Economia Politica della Differenza Sessuale* by Lidia Menapace. Roma: Edizioni Felina Libri, 1987. 139 pp.

This study of the political economy of sexual difference is a significant document of Italian feminist thinking at the end of the 1980s. Written by Lidia Menapace, who participated in the "second wave" of Italian feminism after 1968, it is supplemented by women's writings from a 1986 seminar at the Centro Virginia Woolf in Rome, and a bibliography to guide further study.

Lidia Menapace's personal itinerary offers a mirror of the political and cultural history of Italian feminism: participant in the Resistance of the forties and the movement of left Catholicism of the sixties, she was a literature professor at the Catholic University of Milan in 1968 when she was fired because of radical political activities. A major new left voice, she was among the dissidents at the end of the sixties who challenged the *Partito Comunista Italiano* and then founded the newspaper *il manifesto*, and the new left communist party *Pdup*. Today Menapace is associated with the women's movement and with *Movimento Politico per l'Alternativa (M.P.A.)*; with the *Sinistra Indipendente*, she was elected (with PCI support) regional councilor for Regione Lazio in 1985.

Early on, Menapace indicated that feminism implies a modification of marxism. In her "multipolar dialectic," the first contradiction is the feminist premise, "quality of life," which Italian feminists hold prior to economic development. In a good marxist society, for Menapace, democracy should be direct, not indirect.

Not a gradualist, she states that the left must give up the notion that first we shall build socialism and then consider women's liberation, the depletion of the earth's resources, and the survival of the planet.

A cooperative work that Menapace likens to women's age-old support for one another during pregnancy and childbirth, the book is a response to the *crisi del marxismo*, a crisis that the women's movement itself helped to create. The major characteristic of this newborn marxism is its *multipolar dialectic in a multiverse*—"a truly democratic vision of the world because founded on irreducible diversities and the partiality of all universals" (2).

When Dante could not give a logical demonstration of the truth of his beliefs, he spoke of the *godimento* that a vision produces, or *pleasure* as a sign of truth. Similarly, Menapace replaces the marxist premise of classes grounded on work with her theory of *il gratuito*: work, primarily women's work, that is freely given. Women of the Centro Virginia Woolf explored with Menapace the "*ambiguo del gratuito nella vita quotidiana delle donne*" and concluded that the world women want is one where free expression, quality, contemplation, times of silence, and sentiments are valued (4). In this utopian communist vision, human needs include time, space, relations, recognition, contemplation, and leisure.

Political implications of this vision are *radical reform of work hours* and *redistribution of work* so that (a) everyone becomes responsible for the environment and for him/herself; (b) there is no gender dualism for thinking/practical work; (c) Lenin's premise that women attain liberation by leaving home for a factory job is reconsidered. Supplementing Italian feminist suspicion of this axiom, Menapace emphasizes the danger of cooptation when marxists define *women's equality* and *emancipation* with male subjectivity. For this feminist communist, a new communitarian socialist society may be created by looking to the "freely given" quality of women's work; because it is freely given, it cannot be exchanged, its value is wholly subjective, and it is ribboned with pleasure, caprice, and contemplation (84).

Going beyond facile thinking, Menapace examines the pervasive presence of women in *lavoro nero* (cottage industry in the home); the work is exploited, but it is freely chosen and should be regarded as an opportunity to think anew about women's choice of work. Women's *doppio lavoro* (taking care of the family as well as holding an outside job) may also be considered beyond shibboleths: women's *doppia presenza* offers the possibility of a better society in which women's presence informs public as well as private spaces (65).

The father/mother difference is considered: "If the principle of the father expresses quantity, uniformity, and that which is countable—the market, the normal, parity," the mother expresses "difference, the body, the freely given, care . . . diversity." For this theorist of the multiverse, the father/mother difference does not blot out other differences: e.g., "son and daughter" differences, "sister and brother" differences, et al (98).

In a society that replaces *universals* with *differences* and *partiality*, appropriate political forms become "coalitions, compromise and genuine mediation" (68). For example, a modern society can realize that agriculture cannot be run on the industrial model if one wants to keep high quality for food. Farming was originally a women's invention, Menapace points out, and women's values should inform thinking about better agriculture (70).

Differences means admitting the partiality of one's own subjectivity and regarding multiplicity as the root of beauty: Why are there thousands of herbs, hundreds of flowers, and myriads of aromas? "Why is the slow shadow of the night never the same, not even from the same window, on the same date and same hour of the year?" (17). Differences are not to be considered static, but *in movement*, like a kaleidoscope or a train in course. The popular saying, "*Il mondo è bello perchè è vario*" (the world is beautiful because it is ever different) should be adopted by marxism. Class explains a great deal, states Menapace, but it does not explain everything. Class does not explain the oppression of sex nor the man/woman contradiction. More congenial to feminism is a "model of multiplicity . . . a democracy constantly in dialectical motion . . . a science that declares its limits," and a diversity of values wherein "no value can be absolute for everyone" (23).

One large implication of multiplicity is that "every religious vision of the world that refers to a sole principle cancels difference, excludes it. If god is masculine, women die in a profound sense." Women are, in fact, "dead to history and it is incredible that to reconstruct the historical presence of women, we have to resort to oral history or to archeology . . . rather than to history." The omission of women from history Menapace regards as "a true and veritable genocide" (24-25). Even christianity, which refers to god as a trinity, has been unwilling to concede that one of the three refers to a woman divinity. The holy spirit, in the past, has been depicted as a dove or a flame; in 1986 the pope's encyclical on the *Spirito Santo* decreed that all three components of the trinity are *male*—an "absolute maculinism," says Menapace (25).

Not an optimistic rendering of the political economy of differ-

ence, Menapace's book does not find easy progress in history; the present is characterized by "neo-colonialism, neo-patriarchalism, neo-racism" wherein women's oppression has become the "general form of . . . all oppressions" (37). The world dominion of masculinist values the last ten years has, states Menapace, tried to abolish the hopes, the utopias, the women's values that began to bloom again at the end of the sixties—producing "violence, unhappiness, inequality, savage competitiveness, social indifference, vulgar exhibit of wealth and power, militarization of the economy and misery" (105).

A society founded on the model of the father lacks the dimension of difference, and therefore cannot offer the possibility of real democracy. Women are grounded on what has hitherto been hidden: desires, sex, death, sickness, birth, the room, the house, women. The goal is utopian communism; present tasks are to see to it that the market does not determine all the spaces of life, to realize that it may take longer than a generation to demolish patriarchy, and to work to institutionalize *women's difference* in all parts of society.