

SEXUAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SKEPTICISM AND DOGMATISM: A reading of Linda Zerilli's *Feminism and the abyss of freedom*

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DIFERENCIA SEXUAL ENTRE ESCEPTICISMO Y DOGMATISMO: una lectura de *feminism and the abyss of freedom* de Linda Zerilli

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Freedom and feminism have not always been at ease with each other, insofar as Western feminists “have tended to justify the claim to freedom in terms of the social question, social justice, or social utility”¹, as if, for some unconscious patriarchal reminder, women’s freedom had to be justified by a higher goal, the betterment of society. As if women’s freedom could not have its *raison d’être* in itself. In her book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Linda Zerilli affirms that there are “received frames” that

1. L. M. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 2005, p. 4.

interpret freedom in feminism as either a “social question” or as a “subject question”, and they tend to de-politicize feminism, to render freedom either an issue of “equality” or of “sovereignty”. For Zerilli, instead, feminism is a crucial practice of political freedom and its importance lies above all in its ability to create “alternative forms of political association”².

Zerilli has the merit to transfer Hannah Arendt’s critique of the de-politicization of freedom in the Western tradition to the feminist debate. Arendt claimed that the mistrust for the public space of appearance expressed traditionally both by philosophers and Christianity implied a reformulation of freedom as an internal, individual dimension: the dimension of the “I will”: the substitution of freedom as political action (freedom as “I can”) with freedom as free will of a sovereign subject (freedom as “I will”) caused what we could call a “privatization” of the exercise of freedom. In this respect feminism is no exception: “the entanglement of feminism in the ideal of sovereignty is symptomatic of a tendency to think about freedom in terms of what I will call ‘the subject question’”³.

When, more precisely, freedom comes to be formulated, in the so-called women debates of the late 1980s and the 1990s, strictly as a subject question, the processes of subject formation come increasingly to be interpreted in terms of radical subjection to agencies outside the self. If, in other words, women’s freedom becomes interpreted as the individual freedom of the female subject, feminist debates become increasingly engaged in the problematic definition of what a female subject is, or of “what a woman is”.

Judith Butler’s famous critique, in *Gender Trouble*, of the category of ‘woman’ and its centrality within feminism is, claims Zerilli, the consequence of those debates. While putting into question the notion of “womanhood”, by claiming gender performativity, Butler’s post-structuralist approach does not move “out of the subject centered frame (which governed identity politics)”, rather, claims Zerilli, it occupies “its negative space”⁴.

Given its very influential character within Western feminism in the last two decades, I shall here discuss Zerilli’s reading of Judith Butler’s thesis –exposed in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*⁵– that gender (and sex) are performative aspects of language and rules, and not essential features of our being women and men. I consider

2. Ibid., p. 27.

3. Ibid., p. 10.

4. L. M. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, p. 12.

5. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, New York and London, 1990; Ead., *Bodies that Matter*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993.

Zerilli's critique of Butler's denial of "sexual difference" as productive in order to think of feminism as a freedom enabling practice rather than a subject-centered issue.

Political claims are not knowledge claims, says Zerilli, and "there is a sharp distinction between our everyday practices and the practice of critical thought, as well as the idea that our words and acts are rational only insofar as we can give grounds for them"⁶. Yet feminism has always thought of itself as a critical enterprise that was moved by the act of not taking anything for granted, of questioning the datum, the given, the commonplace. This attitude has become, in third wave feminism, the questioning of the "always-already-there" quality of our "two-sex-system", thereby showing that our judgments and agreements are ungrounded. The consequence of this positing of the "identity-difference" question in feminism has been that of confusing the feminist enterprise with a skeptical questioning of our "prereflective habits and customs and sets the agenda for feminist political practice"⁷.

It might be true, from a theoretical point of view which questions foundations or 'essentialism' in feminism, that the embodiment of the human species does not limit itself to two sexes (because there are exceptions to the binary, that is, bodies that do not conform to sexual dimorphism). Yet if "there are no definite criteria for sex difference" says Zerilli, "that does not mean that there are no criteria or that in our everyday encounters with other people we will not make a judgment about such difference, usually without thinking, certainly without thinking about chromosomes, or, for that matter, even genitalia"⁸.

This happens because of an unreflected agreement in language "that makes possible to establish criteria in the first place". What enables our mutual understanding is not a rational nor a conventional agreement, but something like "our mutual attunement in language; we normally do know what another person means when she or he uses a word"⁹. So even if we have empirical evidence that there are forms of embodiment that do not fall into the two-sex binary, still that binary works in real life and we keep judging things according to it.

This attunement implies that propositions such as "there are males and there are females; there are men and there are women" are not learned empirically, they are not something we must see, discover and *find convincing*. For the very same reason, "every

6. L. M. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, p. 39.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

form of representation provides a means for accommodating that which is deviant [...] without having to surrender the form of representation”¹⁰.

This is why Zerilli contests the political efficacy of a move like that of Butler who, in order to criticize the general category of ‘women’ and its exclusionary practices in feminist politics, evokes the skeptical argument in reference to the existence of ‘men’ and ‘women’.

Skepticism is not simply a negative attitude towards established and dogmatic truths; rather, as Stanley Cavell has pointed out, what matters in skepticism is knowledge: it establishes with the world and with others a *relation of knowing*. This attitude can lead to two different outcomes: it either takes us to consider as ‘failure’ the possibility of knowing each other and the world, therefore lamenting a troublesome “abyss of meaninglessness”. Or, on the contrary, it can “incite the dogmatic temptation to ground meaning outside human practices, to make it into something that has truth conditions quite apart from what we say, to seek an objectively correct way of applying a rule”¹¹. In other words, Skepticism can lead to either meaninglessness or dogmatism.

As Rita Felski also puts it, by briefly discussing the “de-naturalizing” rhetoric of Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, “it is worth asking whether the only alternatives are either to fix and solidify identities or to deconstruct them”. And she continues: “It is one thing to point out that certain ideas are bad and also taken for granted. It is another to conclude that they are bad *because* they are taken for granted –in other words, that anything taken for granted is an agent of domination”¹². The effect of this de-naturalizing posture automatically assigns to everyday language and practices a backward status. Yet Felski, like Zerilli, claims that there cannot be a purely detached, objective and “not-taken for granted” approach: also critical theory has its own “taken-for-granted assumptions” because all forms of acting and thinking depend on “beliefs and hypotheses so well-established that they do not even register as beliefs but are part of the air we breathe and the water in which we swim”¹³.

This is why we can never have a pure relationship to language rules, norms, practices, one that is objective and external to the embeddedness or imbrication in the “taken-for-granted” reality we share in order to understand each other. The issue at stake, therefore, is that taken-for-granted things are unavoidable: what matters is to distinguish those that are a source of domination from those that are not.

10. Ibid.

11. L. M. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, p. 43. She is here referring to S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Oxford U. P., Oxford, 1979.

12. R. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2015, p. 80.

13. Ibid., p. 81.

Zerilli uses Wittgenstein in order to claim that between skepticism and dogmatism there is a possible third way that amounts to call into question the whole problematic of justifying why and how we “follow a rule”. In the end, she claims, our practices are at bottom unjustified, so why should we recur to philosophical arguments to justify them? Wittgenstein’s famous argument is that “giving grounds [...] comes to an end sometimes. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition; it is an ungrounded way of acting”¹⁴.

This is another way of saying that any foundation is contingent, nevertheless it functions as a (indispensable) foundation: not in the cognitive sense, but in the practical sense that we act according to it. Whereas to posit the necessity of a foundation (or its absence) in cognitive terms means to still move within a Platonic frame, according to which there must be a correspondence between names and things. Or, to put it differently, incredulity toward the real and anxiety about essentialism are part of the legacy of Cartesian dualism, and sometimes function as traps that shut off paths of intellectual inquiry¹⁵.

Butler’s anxiety about essentialism is present in her claim, at the beginning of *Gender Trouble*, that the subject has been constituted by rules and practices that have naturalized gender identity, in ways that it appears an “original and abiding substance”¹⁶. This presupposition evokes some “natural” element that, as such, must be contested, dispersed, framed as “false”. It is exactly this “anxiety about essentialism” that Zerilli identifies and criticizes.

Butler’s position, which intends to criticize taken-for-granted sexual difference in order to “make space”, imaginatively and politically, for other forms of life, starts from what she calls a “self-consciously denaturalized position,” which alone can unveil how “the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted”¹⁷. Butler, at the same time, emphasizes the perspective of the “strange” as a privileged access to the contestation of a naturalized norm. Zerilli, instead, asks whether the de-naturalized position, or the position of that which is “strange” within the binary economy of the sexes can be successful in criticizing it.

Doubt presupposes certitude, argues Zerilli following Wittgenstein, and we cannot stand totally, fully outside our given form of life and judge it to be arbitrary. The strange

14. L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, Oxford, Blackwell 1969, p. 110.

15. See: S. Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology”, in H. E. Grasswick (ed.), *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2011, pp. 69-83.

16. L. M. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, p. 47.

17. J. Butler, *Gender trouble*, p. 110.

can help us to see the taken for granted in a critical way, or as mutable, but the strange can also be easily accommodated as an anomaly within the scheme or order of our everyday practices.

As it is well-known, according to Butler, the figure of the *drag* can be subversive insofar as it makes visible the performative nature of gender. There is no essential or natural feature in being a man or a woman, rather, she claims in *Bodies that Matter*, gender is based on a “forcible citation of a norm”, and only in this constant repetition of norms is gender established as “given”¹⁸. Butler, like Wittgenstein, contends that rules or norms do not have meaning apart from their application, and Zerilli agrees with Butler that gender is a practice and as such implies following a rule. Yet while according to Butler it is in the constant repetition of rules that possibilities for *their failure* emerge –what she calls “gaps and fissures” that can destabilize the notions of sex and gender and the norms of their consolidation– for Zerilli we do not need to invoke a failure in the citational practice of (language) rules in order to avoid determinism (and, therefore, work for transformation also in a political sense): “language is not a cage from which only the essential possibility of failure in language can save us”¹⁹. As Wittgenstein put it: “Language is like a sign post [...] So, I can say, the sign-post does after all leave no room for doubt. Or rather: it sometimes leaves room for doubt and sometimes not”²⁰.

This amounts to saying that, as anticipated, there is a third way of understanding language and norms, one that stands between no doubt at all (dogmatism) or everything must be doubted (skepticism): “any interpretation of the rule will count as understanding it”²¹. Language is open to a plural, diverse appropriation; it can be, within the boundaries of its ordinary use, the site of domination as well as the site of liberation. There is no need, claims Zerilli, to invoke a de-naturalized position or claim that *only* the standpoint of the “strange” can be subversive of a hegemonic order, and therefore transformative. What counts is to shape, as we shall see, within our ordinary language use, figures of the “newly thinkable”.

Doing and performing gender, therefore, would count for Zerilli as “understanding a rule” namely “an immediate understanding or grasping exhibited through action, not an interpretation”²². There is an immediacy of certainty that is at the basis of our sense of reality, without which we could not live. Yet this does not mean that we must comply

18. J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 232.

19. L. M. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, p. 53.

20. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, p. 85.

21. L. M. Zerilli, p. 53.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

to an already given and immutable set of norms and rules that establish what reality is. We can discover new aspects of reality, yet any previously unseen aspect of an object, even a previously unseen aspect of a gendered body, “dawns”, so to say, within the nonreflective frame that is at the basis of our experience of certainty: “The important thing is not to forget that any dawning of an aspect is always parasitic on ordinary ways of seeing rather than overcoming of some sort of illusion (for example, seeing that the woman one sees is really performing what one thinks one sees)”²³. It is the ordinary use of an object that allows me to see the dawning of a possible different use of the concept inherent to it. So, claims Zerilli, “my ability to call into question any particular gender norm is parasitic on others that are provisionally beyond question”²⁴.

This is why rather than to prove the nonexistence of the *reality* of the two sexes, a feminist critique should be involved in exercising the imagination in order to see things differently but never from a supposedly external, detached, estranged standpoint. We can discuss and criticize the gender binary, but we cannot do away with it, we cannot pretend to see, understand, judge from a disembodied and “de-naturalized” position.

Yet, in spite of this critique, Zerilli thinks that we can still appreciate Butler’s innovative proposal of gender performativity by understanding the drag as a “figure of the radical imagination”: she draws the notion from Cornelius Castoriadis, and defines it as the capacity to create figures that “do not come under the sway of truth.” This capacity “animates radical social and political movements”²⁵. Imagination –Zerilli claims, with Arendt and Castoriadis– is a collective practice of freedom. Whatever doubt we may rise about an ‘established truth’ such as gender, it does not matter as doubt, as proof of a ‘false’ perspective. It matters insofar as it opens up a productive, creative moment: “although we may arrive at the insight that a particular belief is ungrounded, our capacity to doubt has this productive moment of figuration *as its condition*”²⁶. It is the productive moment of the radical imagination that functions as the condition of any doubt.

Zerilli’s critique of Butler, therefore, aims at emphasizing that it is the spontaneous act of human freedom –the creativity of a new figuration– that counts for both democracy and feminism rather than the deconstructive skeptical attitude of doubting the ‘taken-for-granted’.

Feminism, in other words, has more to do with a different way of seeing, a radical act of the imagination (usually grounded in experiences, in ways of doing that explore

23. Ibid., p. 57.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., p. 60.

26. Ibid., my emphasis.

unimagined paths), rather than unveiling the ‘lie’ of the two sexes position through the claim that gender is performance –and therefore the drag is the embodiment of such unveiling.

Potentially valuable about a drag performance *is not* that it provides us with an instance of the strange that has the form of an empirical proposition that gives the lie to an established truth like naturalized sex difference. Valuable, rather, is that such a performance might be invoked to *dramatize a figure of the newly thinkable that allows us to envision bodies anew*²⁷.

The drag is not subversive because it reveals *the lie* of the two sexes and their contingency: the “contingency” of the two sexes can well stay, can still be the basic dynamic of our doing –not of our knowing– and it can be enriched, so to say, by a possibility of their blending, fusing, parodizing. The parody does not cancel the rule of the two sexes, nor its supposed “falsehood”, yet it can enlarge its span, so to say, avoiding it from becoming excessively exclusionary. The parody opens up the dogmatic of the two sexes, contests it, so to say, by adding a newly thinkable gendered figure. Figures of the newly thinkable are crucial for a form of feminist critique that “resists the lure of epistemology and the twin temptation of dogmatism and skepticism”²⁸.

The newly thinkable, to conclude, does not mean that the reality of men and women must be canceled out, labeled as false or unjustly naturalized. Reading gender as performance enables us to understand that there are many ways of interpreting a rule (heterosexual, homosexual, transsexual, bisexual, or simply queer) and each of them must not be exclusionary or accusatory of the other.

27. Ibid., my emphasis.

28. Ibid., p. 62.