Alexandra Stanton
Queen Mary College (University of London)

“Evaluating the Specificity of Contemporary Italian Feminism: the Theory of Sexual Difference and the Social-Symbolic Practice of Entrustment”
Abstract

This study focuses on the particular course taken by the theory of sexual difference (*il pensiero della differenza sessuale*) in Italy. It examines Italian feminism as a current which has received hitherto little international attention. The first part of the thesis situates Italian feminism in relation to the more familiar French and Anglo-American contexts in order to consider its distinctiveness. The main body of the study then considers the historical and political emergence of contemporary Italian feminism, the elaboration of a social-symbolic practice called "entrustment" ("affidamento"), beginning in 1983, and the hegemony achieved by the theory of sexual difference amongst the majority of feminist groups. Here, I develop the central argument of the thesis: it is the elaboration of entrustment which has first occasioned contemporary Italian feminism, *as a whole*, to engage with a theory of sexual difference adapted to the highly politicised Italian context. The last section of the thesis critically evaluates entrustment and the symbolic order of the Mother created by it, and considers the debates surrounding such a social-symbolic practice. Adriana Cavarero provides an original point of view on contemporary Italian feminism since she is both a fierce critic of entrustment and one of the leading exponents of *il pensiero*. The final chapter thus utilises Cavarero's theory in order to postulate that entrustment is best considered as part of a plural but common Italian strategy of "practising" relationships between women. Sexual difference now becomes the political practice of restructuring the order of representation so that feminine sexual difference can be included.
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Introduction: Framing “Italian Feminism”

In 1990, Teresa de Lauretis deplored: “Italian feminism is not well-known in North America. With very few, very recent exceptions, its critical texts are not translated, discussed or cited by American and other Anglophone feminists.”¹ Fifteen years on, and despite a few more translations, articles and sporadic references in Anglophone publications, this is still the case. Most French feminists have been equally oblivious of the work carried out by their Italian neighbours.² Rather, it is with so-called “minor” feminist currents (Spanish, German and Dutch) that a dialogue has been established.³ It is to be hoped that the tide will start to turn, thanks to the attention that Adriana Cavarero’s thought is currently enjoying in the United States, in Britain and in Australia. It is perhaps through her work that Anglophone feminists are likely to become progressively more familiar with Italian feminism. Nevertheless, Adriana Cavarero occupies a position which is both pivotal and original within Italian feminism, as the last chapter of this thesis will argue.

This lack of attention remains surprising since Italian feminism has generally openly received and drawn on both the Anglophone and the Continental traditions of feminist thought. Could this show an inner tendency, in feminist theory, for “cultural imperialism”?⁴ It is on the issue of imperialism that Christine Delphy attacks certain Anglophone feminists who claim to study

² Although some important members of the philosophical community of Diotima in Verona regularly published in French, the French feminist landscape remains largely unaffected by its Italian neighbour. A notable exception here is Luce Irigaray who has been in constant dialogue during the 1980s. Luce Irigaray is rightly seen as a major influence on contemporary Italian feminism, as Chapter II of this thesis will argue. However, in Chapter III, I will point out that this relationship has often been presented as a one-way exchange and little attention has been given to the importance of contemporary Italian feminism for the development of Irigaray’s thought.
³ Many of the Italian feminists who feature in this thesis regularly publish in Spanish and in German. In addition, the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, which is central to my analysis of Italian feminism, is in constant dialogue with the Argentinian group “Women of the Plaza del Mayo”. In Germany, the Italian conceptualisation of sexual difference has been widely debated. For an overview, see Britta Kroker, Sexuelle Differenz: Einführung in ein Feministisches Theorem (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1994).
French feminism. Delphy argues that the French feminism discussed by many Anglophone feminists has nothing to do with the reality of feminism in France. In allegedly creating French feminism, these Anglophone theorists have imposed their version of events (a version which has served their own theoretical purposes) and have silenced many voices. For Delphy, this is where the imperialism in question lies. I am not interested in supporting or disclaiming these assertions at this point. I will come back to them in the chapter which deals with the French context (Chapter II). For the time being, what is of benefit is to relate this problem of imperialism to my own perspective on contemporary Italian feminism.

The purpose of my study is to present this trend of feminism which has hitherto received little attention from the two giants of feminist theory, while avoiding the kind of imperialism that Delphy describes. Delphy remarks astutely that “The very attempt to attribute a specific content to a feminist movement shows that we are dealing with an outsider’s view. So, even before we start looking at this content, we know that it cannot be a self-definition.” My thesis is also the result of an outsider’s view and I will here outline the particular type of Italian feminism I purport to analyse in the following chapters.

*Italian feminism, the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and the theory of sexual difference.*

This thesis is centred around a particular political practice elaborated by the Milan Women Bookstore Collective (*La Libreria delle Donne di Milano*) and first detailed, in 1983, in a pamphlet entitled “More Women Than Men” (“Più donne che uomini”). This practice is called “entrustment” (“affidamento”). A

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6 ibid., p.190. Delphy seems to ignore the fact that even self-definitions are partial. At times, she herself seems to be guilty of the very imperialism she criticises. In one particular instance, Delphy acknowledges that one of the women writers whose position has been taken as representative of the whole of French feminism – namely, Luce Irigaray – is “very popular within important part of the women’s movement in Italy” (p.219). However, she minimises the relevance of this fact as “marginal”. I would argue that Delphy surrenders to the temptation of universalising her own version of events (by disclaiming minor currents as marginal therefore not important to get a clear picture of feminism in France). In addition, this rejection of Irigaray as essentialist and a minor theorist in France is bound to give an image of the part of the women’s movement in Italy as equally irrelevant and underdeveloped.
relationship of entrustment is sought by a woman, who is moved by a particular
desire that she wishes to express in society but who is also blocked by a sense of
unease, weakness, “estrangement” ("estraneità"). She chooses an “inspirational
woman” who becomes a guide, a mentor, a point of reference. The “inspirational
woman” helps define and express this desire. Such a relationship is
controversially based on a difference in ability which separates the “inspirational
woman” (whom I call “affidataria” throughout this thesis) and the entrustee.
Entrustment is both a symbolic and a social practice since it is based on the
assumption that reality, although presented as neutral, is shaped by male desire
and body. Entrustment thus responds to what is perceived as a need to sexualise
social relations. It is also a social practice since it is designed to empower women
to participate in social relations by creating a network of support through
multiple relationships between entrustees and their “inspirational women”.
Relationships of entrustment are thus meant to allow women’s participation in
society on their own term by setting a new social contract between them.

From this provisional description of entrustment, one can already grasp the
influence of Luce Irigaray (examined in Chapter II). Irigaray herself has toured
Italy and has not only participated in feminist seminars but has also been a
favoured guest speaker at many annual conferences of the Italian Communist
Party (P.C.I.). In order to place entrustment within its Italian context, I would
nevertheless like to observe that the Italian adaptation of Irigaray’s theory of
sexual difference, from the 1980s onwards, has achieved a more or less complete
theoretical hegemony. So much so that a majority of feminists and political
activists have been grouped under the banner of il pensiero della differenza
sessuale (sexual difference thought). That said, it is here important to make three
additional points. Firstly, despite the theoretical hegemony achieved by the
theory of sexual difference, there still exists, in Italy, some feminists who favour
an egalitarian perspective.7 Secondly and as this thesis will show, not all the
exponents of il pensiero have embraced the social-symbolic practice of

7 For example, this is the case of Stella Bianchi, Franca Chiaromonte, Elena Montecchi, Claudia
Mancina, Laura Penacchi, Tana de Zulueta, Miriam Mafai, Marina Calloni. These women are all
members of the association “Emily in Italia”, which aims at providing more means and support
for women who wish to enter politics as party activists, candidates and MPs. For an account of
egalitarian feminism in Italy, see Chiara Valentini, Le donne fanno paura. La verità sulla vita
delle italiane (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1997). For an account of the activities and goals of “Emily in
entrustment. For example, this is the case for Adriana Cavarero. We will return to her contribution to *il pensiero* and to her critique of entrustment, in Chapters IV, V and VI.

The third point I would like to make clear at this early stage is that entrustment, while widely known and discussed, is a product of a few feminist groups. As Chapters III will show, Italian feminism, from its emergence at the end of the 1960s as a movement, is characterised by the diversity of its contributors and of the themes chosen, as well as by its diffusion across social groups and geographical areas. I concentrate on a few of these feminist collectives. The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, both as “inventor” of entrustment and exponent of *il pensiero*, occupies an important place in the history of contemporary Italian feminism and in my thesis. The philosophical community of *Diotima* in Verona and the Cultural Centre Virginia Woolf Group B are two other prominent groups. Their members have either been directly implicated in the creation and promotion of entrustment, or have at least started from a common philosophical premise and have theorised the relationships between women in similar ways. Following the developments initiated by Luisa Muraro, these feminists have concentrated their research on the relationships between women as a way of establishing a Symbolic Order of the Mother. Chapter IV will compare this Symbolic Order of the Mother and the new social contract between women that the social-symbolic practice of entrustment has attempted to create.

I suggest that at least three factors explain the temptation to confound Italian feminism with theoretical production of the Milan Bookstore and of *Diotima*. Firstly, it can be explained by the wide diffusion of the theory of sexual difference in Italy during these two decades. Chapter III of this thesis will map the context (from the late 1960s) in which a move towards sexual difference is noticeable. This particular cultural background itself determines the good reception of Irigaray and the central place that her thought occupies in

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8 See Bono and Kemp, op. cit., pp. 4, 7.
9 Although their presence in this thesis is not as conspicuous, I could have mentioned the philosophers of the co-operative *Transizione*, or those of the Centro Donna of Naples.
10 Rosi Braidotti has, in the past, expressed her annoyance at the fact that, when discussed outside Italy, Italian feminism has often been reduced to that of the Milan Bookstore and the *Diotima*. See Linda M. Zerilli, “Refiguring Rights Through the Political Practice of Sexual Difference”, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15:2 (2004): 85 n.1.
subsequent years. Secondly, it can be argued that the Milan Bookstore and
Diotima have attracted the greatest attention due to the presence, at their heart, of
three important theorists: Lia Cigarini (a lawyer and long-standing member of
the Bookstore), Luisa Muraro (a philosopher both active within the Bookstore
and within Diotima), and Adriana Cavarero (who, with Muraro, co-founded
Diotima before taking her distance in the early 1990s). Thirdly, although feminist
collectives in Italy are generally of a separatist nature, an effort is made, in the
1980s to export il pensiero della differenza sessuale outside the singular context
of the feminist group. In particular, the Communist Party attempts to inscribe
entrustment in its Women’s Charter (“La Carta delle Donne”), discussed in
Chapter IV, and appoints Adriana Cavarero as a member of its executive
committee at a crucial stage in the history of the Party.11 As a result, both the
social-symbolic practice of entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale
become widely known outside feminist circles and its exponents become
notorious.12

The Milan Bookstore and Diotima are thus vital to an understanding of
contemporary feminism in Italy. However, I do not confine my thesis to their
arguments alone. The central claim of my study is that there are two factors
which give contemporary feminism in Italy its specific character. A first source
of originality lies in the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Entrustment is
what has given the theory of sexual difference its distinctly “Italian”
characteristic precisely because it has helped polarise feminist debates in Italy.

11 From “Partito Commuunista Italiano”, it becomes the P.D.S, or “Partito Democraeto della
Sinistra” (Democratic Party of the Left).
12 During an interview that I held at Warwick University in May 2004, I asked Adriana Cavarero
about this particular period in Italian feminism and about her appointment within the executive
committee of the P.C.I/P.D.S. She had this to say: “By the mid-1980s, the philosophical
community of Diotima had become very famous in Italy. In my own way, I had become
notorious too. When we used to hold conferences in universities or in women’s centres,
audiences of 500 women used to gather. We had become a phenomenon which was both socially
and politically conspicuous. I have always been from the Left, but my interest in Left-wing
politics and in the Italian Communist Party had not involved, up to then, much militancy. It was
the P.C.I. which contacted me in Rome, mainly for instrumental reasons. As I had become
famous amongst women and as the question of sexual difference had become an important issue
within the party, the P.C.I. probably thought that I could become a central figure in what was then
called the Central Committee. While I was in the Central Committee, the passage from the P.C.I.
to the P.D.S. occurred. Unlike some other feminists, I was very much in favour of this passage
and actively worked towards it. I felt that the P.C.I. had become a party rigidly structured around
a Soviet model. I was subsequently disappointed by the P.D.S. because nothing changed at all. I
hence distanced myself from the Party’s hierarchy because I felt (and still do) that such
hierarchical politics does not achieve anything.”
Whether argued for or disputed, the social-symbolic practice of entrustment has never been ignored and has occupied centre stage, not only theoretically but also politically. It is these contentious and heated debates which take my analysis outside the sole groupings of the Milan Bookstore and of the philosophical community of Diotima in Verona. Secondly, I argue that entrustment has directly contributed to the subsequent hegemony achieved by il pensiero amongst a majority of feminist groups. Although not all sexual difference theorists embrace entrustment, they all work towards the restructuring of the symbolic order so that feminine sexual difference can be accommodated.

**Unfolding the specificity of contemporary Italian feminism.**

In the opening three chapters of my thesis, I return to the problems of framing Italian feminism and of relating it to more familiar contexts. “What are the common historical and conceptual characteristics that allow one to relate Italian feminism to other feminist strands, while marking it out as distinctive?” is here the chief question. Together, these three chapters aim to convey a sense of Italian feminism emerging in its specificity from an earlier and more general historical origin. Thus, I begin with the broad context of important debates which have accompanied the development of Anglophone feminism. In particular, I use the prominent debate between equality and difference, that has marked the vicissitudes of the history of Anglophone feminism and which has recently been contested. I identify key contentions in relation to sex, gender, essentialism and anti-essentialism to sustain but also to undermine the chasm that has often been constructed between Anglo-Saxon and continental feminism. The critical arguments of Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich, Diana Fuss, Judith Butler and Christine Battersby are established as points of reference for a subsequent comparative discussion of entrustment and of il pensiero.

In Chapter II, I examine the ways in which such debates between equality and difference, essentialism and anti-essentialism have been inflected or refined by certain French feminists. Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, the “Psychanalyse & Politique” group and, of course Luce Irigaray, are identified as important to the development of Italian feminism. The aim of the chapter is to see how the French context specifically engaged with these issues of equality and
difference, and to determine which aspects of Irigaray's work filtered through to *il pensiero* and entrustment.

Chapter III concentrates on the way in which Italian feminists have both used and adapted the Anglo-Saxon and the French perspectives to the Italian case. I argue that there are grounds for conceiving of the history of Italian feminism, from its early formulations to the establishment of entrustment, as a passage from egalitarianism to gynocentrism. However, I also show that *il pensiero* and entrustment have to be seen as "home-grown" theories. In endeavouring to retrace a history of feminism in Italy, I hence prefer to investigate the shift from an analysis of the relationship between the sexes to a conceptualisation of the relationships amongst women. I argue that relating such an evolution helps to identify the key moments which have led to the creation of entrustment and to the hegemony of *il pensiero*. This evolution also shows the importance that the practice of relationships between women has held within Italian feminism since the earliest feminist groups. My intention, in these three opening chapters, is to add the Italian perspective to the Anglo-Saxon and the French ones, without reifying any particular "strand" of feminism.

The remaining chapters deal more directly with *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* and with the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Chapter IV is entirely and exclusively dedicated to the specificity of entrustment. I argue that, while the mark of Luce Irigaray is both evident and acknowledged, the Italian specificity of the theory of sexual difference lies in the political practice of the relationships between women, which has defined Italian feminism from the 1970s and continues to do so. In addition, an explanation of the aims and mechanisms behind entrustment enables my argument to consider critically why entrustment is both specific and original to Italian feminism. In this chapter, I also attempt a comparison of the social contract between women that entrustment seeks to create and of the Symbolic Order of the Mother as theorised by members of *Diotima*.

Chapter V addresses the criticisms and the limitations of entrustment. In particular, I concentrate on the concept of power, as articulated through the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. I return to what the previous chapter has identified as entrustment's main source of both originality and contention—namely, that it is a relationship structured by the disparity which exists between
two women. I also examine the nature of the female subject that the practice of entrustment calls forth and consider it in the light of different accusations of essentialism. It is in this chapter that the different voices of contemporary Italian feminism are heard, since other feminists from within il pensiero support my own critique.

Finally, Chapter VI deals with the most important of these voices, that of Adriana Cavarero. My focus is on the complexity of the relationship which links Cavarero’s thought to il pensiero della differenza sessuale. I trace an evolution in her work from an Irigarayian to an Arendtian influence. My aim is to illustrate how, like entrustment theorists, Cavarero inherits from Irigaray the critique of the existing “hom(m)osexual” symbolic and answers the call to “invent” feminine sexual difference. This is what situates Cavarero, Diotima and entrustment theorists under the common banner of il pensiero della differenza sessuale. However, I argue that Cavarero’s thought occupies a specific position within il pensiero on two particular counts. Firstly, she adapts the Arendtian categories of natality, uniqueness as well as action to feminist purposes. Secondly, these themes prevail over the Irigarayian concept of female mediation (central to entrustment and to Diotima). She thus replaces a politics of difference by one of uniqueness. In this way, expressing sexual difference is no longer the starting point of a feminist political strategy but its inevitable effect.

All in all, the chapters of this thesis add the Italian voice to contemporary feminist theoretical debates. Focussing on the social-symbolic practice of entrustment helps to account for the specificity of contemporary feminism in Italy. Indeed, this social-symbolic practice has only been elaborated within the Italian context and, although it is not unanimously embraced, has contributed to the hegemony that il pensiero della differenza sessuale has achieved over the last twenty years. This thesis therefore postulates that entrustment is best considered as part of a plural but common Italian strategy of “practising” relationships between women in a bid to restructure the order of representation so that the latter can include feminine sexual difference. As such, the Italian voice, if heard, can contribute to current feminist debates on the problematisation of the feminine and feminist subject position.
Chapter I
“Surfing the Waves”: Equality and Sexual Difference in the Anglophone Context

Introduction: Italian feminism in an international context.

The aim of the opening three chapters of this thesis is to situate Italian feminism within a historical and international context. At the outset, purporting to study “contemporary Italian feminism” already sets up a spatio-temporal frame to my analysis. In the coming chapters, I will show why, in Italy, one can consider post-1983 feminism “contemporary”. Firstly, 1983 marks the opening of polarising debates surrounding the invention of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Entrustment also directly contributes to the second contemporary characteristic of Italian feminism – namely, the subsequent hegemony achieved by the theory of sexual difference (il pensiero della differenza sessuale).

The geographical limits that the adjective “Italian” suggests are more difficult to pin down. Is feminist theory to be considered “Italian” when it is conducted within the geo-political frontiers which delineate the nation-state of Italy? Adopting such a preposterous logic would force us to consider, for example, Luce Irigaray’s Democracy Begins Between Two, written in Italy, as a work typical of Italian feminism. Are we, then, to label feminist theory “Italian” when it is produced by Italian-born philosophers? This is what Nancy K. Miller seems to suggest indirectly when she calls, at the end of the 1980s, for a more international outlook on feminist debates, one which would not only include Anglo-Americans, French but “also Italians, for instance.” In referring to “Italians”, Nancy K. Miller has Teresa de Lauretis and Rosi Braidotti in mind. Although both are Italian-born thinkers who have maintained a critical relationship with entrustment theorists and with the exponents of il pensiero

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della differenza sessuale, they have both lived and worked outside Italy for some time, and I would guard myself from thinking them representative of contemporary Italian feminism.

**Sexual equality or sexual difference?**

This first chapter identifies the common historical and theoretical features which Anglophone and Italian feminisms share and prepares the discussion of the specificity that allows one to mark the theoretical productions of feminists from Italy as "Italian". In particular, I here retrace the development of Anglophone feminism. The central debate on which I concentrate opposes advocates of equality to supporters of difference. Equality and difference are essentially contested concepts, the precise meanings of which have never been univocal but have shifted according to the different historical and political positioning of various feminists. Within feminism and political theory in general, equality and difference act as units of an inseparable couple. There is a wide recognition that women are both equal and different to men, and rare attempts have been made to favour equality or difference independently and unequivocally. Feminism’s concern has been the articulation of the relationship between the two concepts (Carole Pateman calls it “Wollstonecraft’s dilemma”). What are the different definitions of equality and difference? What are the fluctuations in the relationship between these two concepts? These will be two recurrent questions in this chapter.

My purpose is not to offer a monolithic and comprehensive narrative of the history of Anglophone feminism. The equality vs. difference debate is much rehearsed and I do not wish to repeat it as such. Rather, my objective is to select the key aspects and thinkers who will subsequently aid me to confirm as well as undermine the distance separating Anglo-Saxon from Continental feminism, and

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3 I will have many occasions to use and mention their perspective on entrenchment and on il pensiero della differenza sessuale in the coming chapters. Here, I will only give two provisional examples of de Lauretis and Braidotti’s critical connection with Italian feminism: Teresa de Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U. S., and Britain”, Differences 1 (Summer 1989): 3-37, and Rosi Braidotti, “Commento alla relazione di Adriana Cavarero” in Cristina Marcuzzo and Anna Rossi Doria (eds.), La ricerca delle donne. Studi femministi in Italia (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987).

to establish the originality of the Italian position. In addition, the equality vs. difference debate is a good starting point because it is so theoretically charged as to contain other concepts which will reappear in my analysis of entrustment and of il pensiero della differenza sessuale. The opposition between equality and difference also calls forth debates between sex and gender, and between essentialism and anti-essentialism. At different times, these additional debates have dominated and determined the hierarchy between a strategy of equality and one of difference.

Preliminary definitions.

Because of the connection between equality/difference, sex/gender, and essentialism/anti-essentialism, I feel it would be useful, at this early stage, to give a few preliminary definitions. The debates characteristic of the so-called “second wave” of feminism have been fought on the distinction between “sex” (as biologically and naturally determined sexual difference) and “gender” (as culturally constructed difference). Although traceable to the central claim of The Second Sex (1949), where Simone de Beauvoir asserts that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, we will see how egalitarian theorists of the first wave already use this distinction implicitly.

Similarly, the debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism is a frame which is specific to the late 1980s and to the 1990s. However, one can notice the endorsement or refusal of the two terms in many earlier feminist arguments. Briefly, “essentialism” designates, in the words of Diana Fuss, “a belief in the real or true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of the given reality”. This conception of essence as “what it is to be”, as the timeless elements which persist across change, goes back to Aristotle. In feminist theory, essentialism thus refers to a given set of characteristics without which a woman would not be a woman.

6 Christine Battersby, The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p.25 and Ch. 2 as a whole. In the last part of the chapter, we will see that Christine Battersby argues that it is the Aristotelian conception of essence which has dominated the essentialist/anti-essentialist debate in the Anglo-American countries.
However, the problem is that essentialism is "a loose tongue"\(^7\) and as such, is used in conjunction with other close terms such as biologism, naturalism, universalism which also connote necessity and fixity. To succinctly follow the distinctions delineated by Elizabeth Grosz, biologism and naturalism are particular forms of essentialism. While the former designates the biological capacities forming the bedrock of essence, the latter postulates a fixed nature for women (one which is not always given in biological forms). Finally, universalism (whether articulated in terms of biology, nature or culture) refers to the tendency of assigning common characteristics to women across historical, cultural and social contexts.\(^8\) In the course of this chapter, I will come back to refine and develop these definitions.

"Surfing the waves".

This chapter thus consists of three parts. The opening two sections deal with how the first two waves of feminism articulate the relationship between equality and difference. In a first instance, I confront liberal and Marxist theorists who, although ideologically opposed, have tipped the balance in favour of equality. I pay particular attention to Juliet Mitchell because she tries to bridge feminism, Marxism and psychoanalysis, three fields which have also played a major part in the development of Italian feminism. Secondly, I concentrate on the shift of priority operated by difference theorists focusing, in particular, upon the views on mothering adopted by Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich. Chodorow’s perspective is of notable interest since she exemplifies another way in which feminism and psychoanalysis have been related in the Anglophone context. Although Chodorow deals with psychoanalysis and mothering, the political implications of her thought for women are different from those envisaged by entrustment theorists. I also examine Adrienne Rich’s treatment of motherhood and of the relationships between women to argue that she is,


alongside Irigaray, the other great inspiration behind the development of entrustment and of il pensiero.

The third section of this chapter brings us to the present and deals with the way “third-wave” theorists have attempted to go beyond the equality/difference, sex/gender, essentialism/anti-essentialism dichotomies. In a first instance, this has created space for the consideration of other differences such as sexuality and race to feature in feminist politics. In addition, the progressive questioning of any stable identity, that the increasing influence of poststructuralism and postmodernism over feminism has encouraged, has presented feminism with an ontological and a political challenge to which I will return. Therefore, the closing part of this chapter looks at some solutions offered to overcome this problem. Amongst them, I focus on the importance of strategic essentialism and begin to ask whether entrustment could be considered as a practical application of this politics. I also follow up Judith Butler’s proposal for a feminist genealogy of the category of “woman”, in order to contrast it with Italian feminists’ use of the term “genealogy”. Finally, I consider the work of Christine Battersby since her proposal of a new feminist metaphysics recalls many aspects of Adriana Cavarero’s politics of uniqueness (discussed in the closing chapter of this thesis).

Section I. The Egalitarian perspective:

From a chronological point of view, equality is the chief preoccupation of first-wave feminism (1830 – 1920). I have typically divided egalitarian feminists into two groups. The first group uses the framework of liberalism to argue for sexual equality via the acquisition of rights. Here, equality is first given a legal and political definition until the emergence of the second wave (around the later

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9 Although I here lump together poststructuralism and postmodernism, I am aware that these two currents of thought, while sharing obvious affinities, are not exactly the same. As Christine Battersby rightly points out, poststructuralism “involves a thesis about language ‘after’ structuralism”, while postmodernism “involves a variety of theses about modernity and temporality” (Battersby, The Phenomenal Woman, op. cit., p.13). For a comparative discussion of these two theoretical currents, see Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism (London: Harvester, 1988). For an exposition of the implication of each term for feminist theory, see Diana Coole, Women in Political Theory (London and New York: Wheatsheaf Harvester, 1993), Ch.10. In the coming chapters, I will argue that poststructuralism has had a much greater influence upon Italian feminism than postmodernism.
1960s), when equality is considered broadly in sexual terms. The second group of egalitarians, of a socialist/Marxist conviction, first targets the more structural (economic) reasons for inequality. Beyond the writings of Marx and Engels, mentioned in this part, one could consider the more “dormant” period of the feminist movement (c.1920-1960) as an attempt to settle the “Woman Question” and to reconcile feminism and Marxism. This attempt is furthered when feminism re-emerges as a movement at the end of the 1960s. It is then that Juliet Mitchell endeavours to “rehabilitate” psychoanalysis and to combine it with Marxism for feminist ends. Let us now turn to these two groups of egalitarians in more detail.

1. The liberal approach to the debate between equality and difference.

Liberalism holds much potential for improving the condition of women in society. Its emphasis on the fundamental natural freedom and equality of all individuals, reflected and upheld by legal rights, together with its definition of politics as a public sphere where the differences which exist between citizens become irrelevant to an equal and free political debate, are first considered as positive force for women. At the time of its emergence as a major political ideology, liberalism thus offers a first opportunity to claim the freedom, equality and rights which are badly lacking for women. The task of the first feminists is thus to hold liberalism accountable to its universal ideals, and to use the latter to request sexual equality in front of the law.

In order to do that, early liberal egalitarians have to go against a whole tradition of political thinkers who explain women’s social subjection by the biological or natural differences between the sexes. The essentialist strategy that these political philosophers use is centred around the distinction between nature and culture. While such misogynist arguments make a sharp distinction between the “male” (the animal ruled by passions and often located in a state of nature) and the “masculine” (the sophisticated, rational, free, political agent), they collapse the “female” and the “feminine” together in nature. Thus, women are described as lacking the capacity to transcend their body and reach the rational, detached and objective standpoint that political activity is considered to require.
They are often associated to Nature, the irrational, the passions, that is to all the things which liberal philosophy rejects as unfit and dangerous for public life.\textsuperscript{10}

Early liberal feminists historicise these descriptions of women, contending that they do not portray women's nature but the characteristics of \textit{contemporary} women who have been denied rights and opportunities. They thus recuperate the distinction between nature and culture in order to apply it to women. In addition, many note that such descriptions are not objective but prescriptive since they set guidelines for an acceptable \textit{feminine} behaviour.\textsuperscript{11} Nature vs. culture, prescription vs. description and historicist arguments still form the basis of second wave attacks on "Patriarchal religion, popular attitude and to some degree, science as well [which assume the] psycho-social distinctions to rest upon, the biological differences between the sexes, so that where culture is acknowledged as shaping behaviour, it is said to do more than co-operate with nature."\textsuperscript{12}

The differentiation between that which is naturally produced and that which is culturally induced becomes particularly important to second-wave radical egalitarians, who reformulate it as the sex vs. gender opposition. Although already implied in writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill,\textsuperscript{13} feminism owes the extremely influential distinction between biological sex and cultural gender to Kate Millett who, in \textit{Sexual Politics}, recuperates it from Robert J. Stoller.\textsuperscript{14} Once the sex vs. gender dichotomy is formally made and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} For example, such descriptions are to be found in Denis Diderot's essay on women where he argues that the uterus is the cause of all of women's excesses. Jean-Jacques Rousseau also typically collapses together the biological characteristics of the female sex with the feminine character when he declares that "the male is only male now and then, a female is always a female." See Denis Diderot, "Sur les femmes" in \textit{Oeuvres} (Paris: Editions de la Pléiade, Gallimard, 1951), p.954, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, \textit{Emile ou De l'Education} (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p.477. However, it should be pointed out that, in the same essay, Diderot does acknowledge that natural and positive laws have been combined to keep women in their inferior state.
\item \textsuperscript{11} See, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau's \textit{Emile} in \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman} (1792).
\item \textsuperscript{13} See, for example, John Stuart Mill, "On the Subjection of Women", in Alan Ryan (ed.), \textit{Mill} (New York and London: Norton, 1997), p.149.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Millet, op.cit. pp.29-31. Stoller is at the origin of other distinctions which will be very influential for feminist theory. For example, in the passage that Millett quotes, Stoller stresses the distinction and the contingent correspondence between male/female and masculine/feminine
\end{itemize}
used to claim political as well as socio-economic equality for women, the contiguity and intermingling of the two terms, emphasised in Stoller, is nevertheless lost. While the early liberal egalitarians mentioned above are keen to downplay some aspects of sexual difference in order for women to qualify as bearers of natural rights, we shall shortly see that they both retain some notion of sex. Once the distinction between sex and gender is explicitly formulated, gender, to use Tina Chanter’s expression, is “deified” and becomes immune to any serious questioning. Correlatively, difference, essentialism, biologism and naturalism become closely connected and depreciated as irremediably determining the social fate of women.

This evolution of the sex vs. gender dichotomy has, to a certain extent, influenced the negative reception of Luce Irigaray’s writings in the Anglophone context. This has not been the case in Italy, where Irigaray has been received favourably right from the early translation of *Speculum* in 1975. In Chapter III, we will see how this can be explained by the specific historical development of feminism in Italy, where the debate between sex and gender has never been so pivotal, or polarised as in the Anglophone context.

(p.30). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler indeed favours the subversive potential that unusual combinations between these terms can have on politics. As we shall see, she also questions the adequacy with which the sex/gender distinction has been used within feminist theory. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.11.

Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Re-Writing of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.40. Tina Chanter also points out that Stoller acknowledges his debt to Freud but that, in her intent to criticise Freud, Millett (like other liberal feminists) omits the psychoanalytic lineage of the distinction between sex and gender. According to Chanter, it is precisely “The abstraction of the distinction from psychoanalysis [which] has generated a discourse in which attempts to retain a sense of [the sex vs. gender] complexity have been outlawed” (ibid., p.41).

This prejudiced reception of Irigaray is now widely recognised. See, for example, Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, op. cit., Introduction and Ch.1, Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, Ch.4, or Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray”, *Differences* I (Summer 1981): 38-59.

Luisa Muraro translated Irigaray’s *Speculum* a year after its original publication in French but 10 before its English translation.

The lesser importance of the sex-gender dichotomy in Italy can be partly explained linguistically. As Kirsteen Anderson points out at the outset of her translation of Irigaray’s *La democrazia comincia a due*, the Italian language “does not distinguish between ‘male’ and ‘masculine’ or ‘female’ and ‘feminine’, both meanings are covered by ‘maschile’ or ‘feminile’” (in Luce Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, op. cit., p.vii). The same applies to the French language, where “féminin” is used “for all the varieties of sexual difference that relate to ‘woman’” (Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, op. cit., p.19).
The requirements of equality and the ghost of essentialism.

The liberal perspective can be used to illustrate the artificiality of the sharp opposition between equality and difference. Once women's differences from men are both downplayed and described as socially constructed, it is felt that women can truly be "considered in the grand light of human creatures" and can thus be included in the universals upon which liberal rights are erected. Liberal feminists can then request sexual equality. For Wollstonecraft and Mill, sexual equality is to be achieved by extending rights to women and by emphasising equal opportunities. But, as later feminists will find out, translating equal opportunities politically (in maternity leave for instance) often erodes the rigid barriers between equality and difference. Equal opportunities require setting up special measures because, generally, women can have children.

In addition, a certain degree of essentialism pervades liberal egalitarianism. Despite its rejection of the biologist or naturalistic justifications of women's subjection, there are at least four ways in which essentialism haunts the liberal argument for equality. Firstly, early egalitarians such as Wollstonecraft and Mill are often limited by the liberal perspective they endorse. For example, Wollstonecraft or Mill never truly challenge the sexual division of labour or the separation of public from private. Wollstonecraft demands more rights and autonomy for women so as to make of them better wives and mothers since "the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female sex by nature". Similarly, Mill's view of the family, to which he thinks the majority of women belong, is also embedded in a bourgeois sentimentalism - it is the seed of virtue, where progressive values are taught. In that way, the essentialist assumptions that both Wollstonecraft and Mill criticise are displaced onto the family. One could therefore argue that, instead of being ignored, sexual

20 In Italy, where the feminist movement arose as a result of the massive demonstrations for the legalisation of abortion and of divorce, the simultaneous fight for equality and difference is recognised and actively practised until the beginning of the 1980s. For a history of the two laws on abortion and divorce, see Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (eds.), Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), Ch. 11.
21 Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, op. cit., p.156
difference is in fact protected, confined to the private realm (where liberal rights do not reach) and thus de-politicised.

Socialist feminists will challenge this view of the family and the liberal separation of the private from the public. A similar critique is also put forward by second-wave liberal feminists who target sex roles. For Millett, sex roles are “allotted to the female [and tend] to arrest her at the level of biological experience” and, when supplemented by force (rape, brutality and ridicule), engineer women’s consent to their own oppression. This is how Millett extends the notion of politics, beyond the fight for rights, to encompass “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of person is controlled by another.”

Secondly, Wollstonecraft or Mills’ defence of women’s rights as a “means to general well-being rather than absolute ends intrinsic to every individual” does not only open the possibility of defending the reduction of women’s rights on the same utilitarian basis. It also paradoxically undermines the fact that women, as an integral part of the human race, are constitutively entitled to natural rights. We seem to have thus returned to this Aristotelian premise — although women are “human” (and have the minimal characteristics which constitute the essence of “human”), they do not instantiate that essence in its most perfect form.

Thirdly, essentialism also makes its way back into the liberal argument for equality via universalism. The type of equality demanded by Wollstonecraft and Mill seems to benefit only one section of the female population, namely middle-class women. The problem of universalism is not fully resolved in the second-wave. Indeed, in their exhortation for women to work, both Friedan and Millett ignore the specific case of those women who already have to work. Millett’s universalist tendencies are also apparent in the concept of “patriarchy”, which

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23 Millett, Sexual Politics, op. cit., p.26. Millett reserves a section of Sexual Politics to John Stuart Mill (pp.89-108) whom she sometimes praises, not least for his description of the home, in existing marital arrangements, where women are treated as slaves and are often subjected, without resources, to sexual violence (p.99).
24 ibid., p.21. We will see how the feminist movement in Italy, also arises from a rejection of a narrow definition of politics.
25 Diana Coole, Women in Political Theory, op. cit., p.115.
she introduces in the language of feminism. For her, patriarchy crosses the barriers of different epochs, cultures, and classes.²⁸

Fourthly, liberal egalitarians of the first two waves of feminism still rely on a particular conception of human nature. Human beings are essentially rational and perfectible. Even for those second-wave feminists who focus on the psychological engineering of consent, sex roles can be voluntarily fought by a revolution in consciousness, that is, an intentional refusal of the housewife image, of marriage and motherhood as ends in themselves.²⁹ A girl would then learn to compete, “not as a woman, but as a human being”.³⁰ In addition, liberal egalitarians either cherish an ideal of the whole, where the two sexes complement one another (Wollstonecraft, Mill), or one where humans are androgynous (Friedan, Millett). However, androgyny is far from being “genuine” here since it is not a question of annulling sexual difference by blending the characteristics that are usually associated to both sexes. Rather, it is a question of being able to ignore female sexual difference by taking the male as model. Androgyny is irremediably androcentric. This critique certainly also applies to some aspects of the Vindication, where Wollstonecraft openly wishes women to become more masculine.³¹ In general, liberal egalitarians have been criticised for pursuing a strategy of assimilation into a social and political system which effectively takes man as its norm. Apart from the fact that rights and equal opportunities have to be asked to the oppressors, they also imply individualist, autonomous and competitive actors. Arguably then, “equality” comes to mean “sameness” since conceptions of humanity and of society are modelled on a masculine criteria and approach to social life. In the following chapters, we will see how Irigaray and il pensiero theorists have certainly inherited this definition of “equality” as “sameness”. For them, equality not only means “sameness” but also “equalisation” of women as the “other” of man.³² For the moment, let us examine the socialist argument for equality.

²⁸ Millett, Sexual Politics, op. cit., p.25. This critique is also often directed at Irigaray (see Tina Chanter, Ethics of Eros, op. cit., p.5).
³⁰ ibid., p.318.
2. Socialist egalitarians: between class and gender:

One of the major contributions that Marxism makes to the analysis of the situation of women in society is to point to inequality as a structural problem. To a certain extent, this challenges the universalist grounds of the liberal fight for equality since Marxism recognises class as an index of variation in women’s experience. Marxism is nonetheless faced with the problem of striking a difficult balance between equality and difference. This means that, although stressed in various ways, the two concepts subsist side by side. The way out of this dilemma is to relinquish the category of gender to that of class.

Marxism and “the Woman Question”: the materialist approach to equality.

The historical and materialist approach to the concept of equality holds some great promises for women. The materialist analysis of history as a series of “stages”, each characterised by a particular mode of production and a specific class conflict, conveys that inequality is not natural and therefore not immutable. Marxists seek to demonstrate, as Engels does in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1884), that the economic foundation of gender inequality can be traced to the appearance of private property.

Accordingly, it is the advent of the capitalist mode of production which inaugurates the difference between working and middle-class women. While both classes of women suffer inequality as a result of the capitalist system, the type of inequality they have to endure is different. Large-scale industry drives working-class women to join the mass of the male workforce. They hence suffer as exploited labourers. With the advent of capitalism, it is middle-class women who, because of their sex, have to endure confinement in the home, a life of slavery, producing heirs to the patriarch’s fortune. The bourgeois family, depicted favourably by John Stuart Mill, is for Marx and Marxists a system of monogamous marriage, “supplemented by adultery and prostitution”, 33 one where women are “owned” in common. Essentialism is here coupled with biologism and fatalism and displaced onto the bourgeois family.

Although women from different classes face different types of inequalities (of sex or of class), Marx and Engels nominate a common solution to achieve universal equality - the overthrow of capitalism. Here, the Marxist critique of rights amounts to a refusal of liberal equality as assimilation to an existing system. However, Marxist equality also requires a form of assimilation since women's sexual difference becomes irrelevant when joining the proletariat. Although ideological enemies, both liberals and Marxists envisage an androcentric future, where the presence of the female gender could be ignored.

*Marxism, feminism and psychoanalysis.*

Marx's weak analysis of gender within Capitalist society creates major obstacles to a "happy marriage"\(^3^4\) between feminism and Marxism. Most notably, Marx's materialist account of history and his conception of production does exclude women from being the agents of history until they join the working class and become workers themselves. Their oppression is somehow necessary for history to progress. Secondly, Marx uses a narrow conception of production which excludes all activities traditionally assigned to women. Although basic to human survival, these activities "fall outside of a capitalist 'economy'"\(^3^5\). Therefore, one could argue that the historical/materialist approach avoids the issue of essentialism precisely because it relegates essentialism outside production. Essentialism once again subsists within the home where child-bearing, child-rearing, housework and the care of the sick are activities that remain unanalysed.

Such a shortcoming from an otherwise promising theory has forced some second-wave radicals to unify sex and class by recuperating the concept of production and extending it to include reproductive activities and housework.\(^3^6\)

\(^{34}\) This expression obviously recalls Heidi Hartmann's famous essay "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union" in Lydia Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1985).


However, very often these same feminists still uphold solutions to women’s oppression that tie in with the ideal of an androcentric future where sexual difference would disappear.\(^37\)

A second obstacle to an unproblematic reception of Marxism within feminism is the correspondence, in Marx and Engels’ writings in particular, of women’s oppression with capitalism and the capitalist family. Following Marxist theorists such as Gramsci, Lukács, and Althusser, feminists of the Left criticise the Marxist conception of equality as economically reductionist. For them, capitalism and patriarchy, exploitation and oppression do not necessarily co-exist, and an analysis of the ideological superstructure of patriarchy is badly needed. It is here that new tools of cultural and ideological analysis, such as consciousness-raising practices and psychoanalytic theory are employed.\(^38\)

Consciousness-raising derives from a Maoist practice of "speaking bitterness", current amongst Chinese peasants.\(^39\) Within feminism, it is practised in small groups of women who concentrate on their experience and feelings, and on bringing to consciousness the unconscious aspects of oppression. In terms of the debate between sex and gender, women see, by means of consciousness-raising, the process through which they become women culturally.\(^40\) Once articulated within a small revolutionary group, what was formerly personal becomes political (hence the famous slogan of second-wave feminism). Another important contribution that the practice of consciousness-raising makes to the debate between equality and difference is its expression of a fundamental commonality between women despite their various personal, social, racial, sexual situations. This commonality is culturally expressed as "the fact of being a

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37 This is definitely the case of Shulamith Firestone who wishes to free women from the pain of (and oppression implied in) biological reproduction through artificial means, contraception, the abolition of the biological family and greater socialisation of childcare. See Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, op. cit., p. 239-240.

38 Although I here treat the feminist use of consciousness-raising and psychoanalysis side by side, I do not wish to suggest that the former is a type of group therapy. Juliet Mitchell herself refutes such a suggestion, while acknowledging some obvious similarities between consciousness-raising and psychoanalytic therapy [*Woman's Estate* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.61]. In Chapter III, we will see how the future entustrment theorists nourish a much closer link between “autocoscienza” and psychoanalytic practice.


woman and of being treated as and considered a woman by others". Nevertheless, many later feminists see consciousness-raising as a universalist practice since "what white, heterosexual, middle-class, and educated women feel in their personal experience does not necessarily correspond to a condition shared by all women". Consciousness-raising practices pave the way for the subsequent gynocentric perspective on the debate between equality and difference. We will see how the importation of such a feminist practice also marks, in Italy, the opening of an important dialogue with Anglo-American feminism.

Within the Anglo-American context, Juliet Mitchell is the first feminist to propose psychoanalysis as a tool for analysing "patriarchy". Mitchell begins by rejecting what she views as the distorted interpretations of Freud (current in the U.S.A. in particular), arguing that they are "pre-Freudian". For her, these interpretations explain or criticise Freud from a standpoint external to the context of psychoanalysis itself. Contrary to these distorted readings, psychoanalysis does not account for biological difference between the sexes but for psychic reality (reality as it is lived out by a subject who tries to insert himself, as gendered, into that culture). Mitchell points out that some form of essentialism lies behind such feminist social explanation of the sexual differentiation between the sexes. Since they refute both the unconscious and the importance of infantile sexuality, the feminists in question immediately place the individual at the behest of reality principle, thus implying some essential and unified self whose alienation is subsequent to its integration into society.

For Mitchell, psychoanalysis contains the obvious advantage of accounting for the formation of a social and sexually differentiated subject within the family. In order to explain the relationship between patriarchal ideology and the unconscious formation of the subject who lives himself as gendered, Mitchell recuperates Lacan, at this point still virtually unknown by Anglo-American feminism.

41 ibid., p.38.
42 Fuss, Essentially Speaking, op. cit., p.68.
43 Mitchell already argues for a feminist use of psychoanalysis in Woman's Estate (Ch. 9), but her landmark study is, of course, Psychoanalysis and Feminism (1974).
45 ibid., p.351.
46 ibid., p.355.
feminists. In particular, it is Lacan’s emphasis on the castration complex as embodied by the position/word of the father ("le nom/non du père"), symbolised by the phallus, which Mitchell puts to use. Mitchell does not use Lacan in connection with structural linguistics. Rather, she reads him alongside Levi-Strauss’ stress on exchange as the basis of society and Althusser’s account of ideology as partly transmitted via the family (in its function as an Ideological State Apparatus [ISA]). Mitchell’s marriage of feminism, Marxism (via Althusser) and psychoanalysis thus lies in the description of kinship/family relations as relations of exchange. These relations transmit subjectivities which are unconsciously (as well as consciously) lived as “feminine” or “masculine”.

Mitchell thus rehabilitates psychoanalysis within feminism by arguing that the former shows that “it is [...] not on account of their ‘natural’ procreative possibilities but on account of their cultural utilisation as exchange-objects (which involves an exploitation of their role as propagators) that women acquire their definition.”

Mitchell’s use of Lacan is significantly different from that made by Luce Irigaray, entittance theorists, and il pensiero philosophers. Jane Gallop, amongst others, has criticised Psychoanalysis and Feminism for purging its use of Lacan of what Mitchell herself describes as “the whole framework and thrust of [his] theory: the importance of language”. Gallop claims that, as a result, Mitchell is guilty of the same offences that she identifies in Freud’s detractors. Firstly, she frames and imprisons her discussion of Lacan and feminism within the context from which she writes, that is within a feminism which “reflect[s] the way American psychoanalysis ignores the ego-subverting significance of

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48 The other influential feminist essay which discusses Freud in relation to Lévi-Strauss is of course Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women: Notes Towards a Political Economy of Sex” in Rayna Reiter (ed.), Toward an Anthropology of Women (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975). However, Rubin’s essay does not serve my purpose of placing Italian feminist within a historical and international perspective as well as Psychoanalysis and Feminism. Firstly, it is subsequent to Mitchell’s book and secondly it does not introduce the Anglo-American context to Lacan. Rubin’s essay could therefore serve as a point of contrast, whereas I can use Psychoanalysis and Feminism as a point of contrast and of comparison. I have therefore chosen to record its importance in a footnote rather than in the main body of my discussion.
49 Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, op. cit., p.xxx.
50 ibid., p.407.
51 Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, op. cit., p.398.
language. In addition, by limiting the scope of her discussion, Mitchell herself falls back upon a biologist and reductionist use of Freud, where actual reality overshadows psychic reality. This is particularly noticeable in the solution she proposes in last chapter of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. She argues that women should work towards a cultural revolution which would demonstrate "the social non-necessity, at this stage of [economic] development of the laws instituted by patriarchy", those regulating the trade of women as objects of exchange. This solution is very much voluntarist (as if one could escape the hold of the unconscious by being a feminist) and the unconscious becomes a mere depository of culture. One must also note Mitchell’s universalist use of the concept of patriarchy. In Italy, it is this voluntarist politics and the limited emphasis upon desire and language, current in *autocoscienza* groups, that have been criticised by entrustment theorists.

**Conclusion.**

Despite claiming different ideological allegiances, the feminists dealt with in this first part all share basic assumptions and viewpoints. Whether given a legal, economic or sexual definition, it is equality which is pursued at the expense of difference. When equality is understood as the means for emancipation, it usually involves inclusion (in public life, in the fight against capitalism). In contrast, the second wave conceives equality in terms of liberation, defined in negative terms (e.g. liberation from sex roles which exercise a psychological hold on women). Correlatively, difference is generally blamed for women’s inequality such that its defence becomes either suspicious or undesirable. Biologism (the existence of biological capacities which form the bedrock of women’s essence) and naturalism (the fact that women have a fixed nature) are widely rejected for confounding women’s condition with fatality.

52 Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, op. cit., p.8.
53 ibid., p.12.
Nevertheless, difference is not completely eradicated. I have argued that early liberals protect it by displacing it onto the bourgeois family. By excluding difference from their analysis of production, Marx and Engels also confine it to the private realm of domestic labour, child-bearing and child-rearing. In both cases, essentialism thus subsists in the private sphere. Marxists feminists, for their part, seek to reintroduce difference by pointing to the specific exploitation that women endure and by distinguishing between capitalism and patriarchy.

I have also stressed that essentialism is not eradicated with a simple rejection of sexual difference. When it is not displaced onto the family, it reappears where the conditions of oppression are considered to be the same and to be experienced in an identical fashion by all women across classes and cultures (universalism). It is also present in the humanist vision of a future that all egalitarians share – a future where individuals can express, free from the burden of gender categorisation, an essentially rational nature.

As the following chapters will show, similar weaknesses are to be found in the argument put forwards by those Italian feminists who argue for equality. For the time being, let us turn our attention to the other pole of the dichotomy set up between equality and difference in order to see which definitions of equality, difference, sex, gender and essentialism can be retrieved.

Section II. Arguing for difference: the gynocentric perspective.

Due to a dramatic reversal of emphasis to which the practice of consciousness-raising has started to point, a split occurs within feminism around the middle of the 1970s. Some feminists now argue that, if re-assessed, women’s differences may contain the seeds of liberation, and the key to the betterment of society as a whole. The reassessment of women’s differences by gynocentric feminists is achieved mainly by a renewed analysis of mothering and motherhood. Gynocentric feminism in the Anglo-American context is thus very important to delineate both the commonality and originality of the development of Italian feminism towards entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale. In this second part of the chapter, I will focus on Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich and their respective views on mothering, motherhood and the mother-
daughter relationship. I will deal with the re-articulation of the relationships between equality and difference, sex and gender, essentialism and constructionism, as well as with the renewed understanding of essentialism and its cognates. In addition, this part will further demonstrate that, far from being overruled by the shift from egalitarianism to gynocentrism, the theoretical framework which opposes equality to difference and sex to gender is re-affirmed. Equally, the theoretical and political problems associated with these dichotomies are not transcended.

1. Nancy Chodorow and the reproduction of mothering.

Thanks to an analysis of Nancy Chodorow’s work on the reproduction of mothering, I will presently pursue and refine my account of the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism. Chodorow’s work points to another school of psychoanalysis used by feminism, namely, object-relations theory. Briefly, object-relations theory rests on the premise that the “child’s social relational experience from earliest infancy is determining for psychological growth and personality formation.”57 A healthy development thus depends, most importantly, on the infantile relationship with the mother. At the start of his life, the child comes to know himself by a process of gratification or frustration of the demands he directs to the mother. If “good-enough”, to use Winnicott’s formulation, the mother will adequately respond to the child’s demands, and the child will develop into a “healthy” individual.

In The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (1978), Chodorow examines the psychological reasons behind the socio-historical fact that it is women who mother.58 Against essentialist and constructionist accounts,59 Chodorow claims that “[w]omen’s mothering perpetuates itself through social-structurally induced psychological mechanisms”.60 It is the family which forms the knot between the natural, the

58 ibid., p.7.
59 ibid., pp.13, 21, 31.
60 ibid., p.211.
cultural and the psychological. Through the sexual division of labour, the family meets the requirements of society by creating personality structures that play the roles assigned to them. In turn, these personality structures contribute to the perpetuation of sex roles.⁶¹

As it will become clear in Chapter IV, Chodorow’s theory shares common aspects with the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. First of all, Chodorow shifts the attention from the relationship with the father in the Oedipal situation, to the pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother. The mother becomes the central character in the child’s psycho-social evolution, since the nature of her responses determines the child’s healthy development.⁶² Secondly, she claims that mother-daughter and mother-son relationships are fundamentally different. For Chodorow, this accounts for the differently gendered personality structures, which psychologically determine little girls to mother. Chodorow explains that, when entering into a relationship with her child, the mother is aware of her similarity (with the daughter) or her difference (with her son), and of the social evaluation of gender differences.⁶³ The infant also gradually becomes appreciative of the mother’s responses and of the weight society places on gender differences. Thus, the girl identifies with her mother and transforms the need to be nurtured into a need to care for others. This is how Chodorow accounts for women’s alleged capacity for relatedness and compassion as well as for their weaker sense of self and autonomy. In contrast, the boy becomes conscious of the power given to men, learns to be more independent from the mother but later fears relationships. According to Chodorow, two different personality structures (but one negative social attitude towards women) thus arise from the diverging types of relationships with the mother.

⁶¹ ibid., p.38.
⁶² ibid., p.57.
⁶³ A similar claim which bridges the physiological sex of the child with the mother’s perception of her own difference is noticeable in the notion of the maternal continuum, as it is described in Luisa Muraro’s *L’ordine simbolico della madre*. This is only a similarity and not a correspondence since Muraro focuses on the *symbolic* role of the mother as the provider of the first language. We will return to this in Chapter IV.
Sexual indifference, essentialism and the absence of the symbolic.

Chodorow’s ideas have been deeply influential upon subsequent standpoint theories that seek to examine a specific way of apprehending experience. Despite its merits, *The Reproduction of Mothering* contains some problematic aspects. Let us first return to the debate between equality and difference. Although Chodorow explains the existence of different psychological structures, she is far from upholding them. According to her account, patriarchy does not allow the full development of our personalities as it represses one side in favour of another so that men and women can fit in the roles assigned to them. Chodorow endorses the social solution of shared parenting, thanks to which personalities could be re-balanced. Difference is thus salutary and can be used to better society as a whole. It is not valued for its own sake but as a means to attain the kind of gender-blind society also envisaged by egalitarians.

Secondly, Chodorow universalises the construction of a feminine identity. Her account obscures differences in both cultures (under such terms as “the mother-daughter relationship”) and in personal lives and character traits. One is left wondering whether there might not be an inherent psychical mechanism which determines all mothers to behave in the same typical way. Chodorow could thus be accused of presenting a particular version of essentialism not hitherto encountered — namely “psychic essentialism”. In addition, some inconsistencies arise from Chodorow’s heterosexual bias. Indeed, if it is the mother-to-daughter relationship (that is, a woman-to-woman relationship) which

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64 For example, Carol Gilligan has used Chodorow extensively in order to distinguish between an ethics of justice (generally characteristic of men) and an ethics of care (more adapted to women). See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). For an assessment of the contribution to moral philosophy made by the Kohlberg – Gilligan debate, see Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalised and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory” in Benhabib and Cornell (eds.), *Feminism as Critique*, op. cit., pp.77-95. In Italy, the “ethics of care” has not been influential for the development of feminist theory.

65 Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, op. cit., p. 211


67 This expression “psychic essentialist” was coined by Lynne Segal in her discussion of Irigaray. See Segal, *Is The Future Female? Troubled Thought Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago, 1987), p.132.
is primordial, then women may be drawn to lesbianism rather than motherhood.\textsuperscript{68} Furthermore, and as Elizabeth Spelman has argued, Chodorow reduces the cause of oppression to one single and universal factor – mothering – at the expense of other factors such as class and race.\textsuperscript{69} Concentrating on sex as the bedrock of identity is, in this light, an essentialist move.

Finally, some of Chodorow’s assertions in \textit{The Reproduction of Mothering} seem to deny the psychic primacy of the unconscious. She argues that the maternal attitude to femininity gives rise to a particular set of anxieties and emotions for individuals of both sexes. But Freudian psychoanalysis tends to argue the opposite - that it is (unconscious) anxieties and emotions which give rise to a particular set of attitudes.\textsuperscript{70} This observation could be applied to object-relations theory in general. Object-relations theorists often see in Freudian psychoanalysis an exaggerated emphasis on innate drives determining behaviour and individual development.\textsuperscript{71} Despite this rejection of biological determinism, one could however argue that object-relations theory is still based on the essentialist assumption that the human subject has a basic \textit{impulse} to form relationships.\textsuperscript{72}

It is in fact here that the comparison between Chodorow’s use of psychoanalysis and that made by entrustment theorists ends. The latter are influenced by Lacan’s return to Freudian psychoanalysis and are thus likely to argue that \textit{The Reproduction of Mothering} does not account for the unconscious symbolic structures that relegate women at the margins of language and which themselves require changing. Entrustment theorists have thus deplored the lack of an analysis of the \textit{symbolic} dimension in the mother-daughter relationship, a relationship which needs to be \textit{symbolically} rather than just socially reclaimed.\textsuperscript{73}

In terms of the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis as it


\textsuperscript{69} Elizabeth Spelman, \textit{Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p.81. Chodorow has since revised her opinion on that matter – “I no longer think that one factor or one dynamic, can explain male dominance (even if I still have my own predilection for particular theoretical contenders)”. Nancy Chodorow, \textit{Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p.5.

\textsuperscript{70} Frosh, \textit{The Politics of Psychoanalysis}, op. cit., p.208.

\textsuperscript{71} For example, see Chodorow, \textit{The Reproduction of Mothering}, op. cit, p.48.

\textsuperscript{72} Frosh, \textit{The Politics of Psychoanalysis}, op. cit., p.203.

establishes itself in the 1970s, we can see that the barrier between Anglo-American and Continental feminism is rigidly demarcated. Neither Nancy Chodorow (who favours object-relations theory), nor Juliet Mitchell (who uses Lacan for an analysis of exchange) tackle the symbolic dimension of gender.

2. Adrienne Rich and the “common world of women”.

Adrienne Rich is more evidently connected to the gynocentric perspective partly because of her link with lesbianism. In Chapter III, we will see how lesbianism is a conspicuous presence in the history of Italian feminism. It acts as an undercurrent in some early separatist groups as well as in the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. But it also takes a more explicit form with the rise, in the 1980s, of “lesbofemminismo” (discussed in Chapter V).

What is particularly interesting for the present discussion is the distinction between “male-identification” and “woman-identification” that Rich makes in an influential essay entitled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980). A “male-identified” woman casts her social, political and intellectual allegiances with men by internalising and upholding their values. In contrast, the woman who is woman-identified believes in the primacy of the relationship between women from which she derives a sense of self, legitimacy and strength. With this distinction, Rich undermines the understanding of equality as assimilation, suggesting instead outright separatism. We will find an echo of these notions of “male” and “female” identification and of this call for separatism, not only in Carla Lonzi’s work, but also in entrustment and in il pensiero della differenza sessuale.

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74 This distinction was first developed by Ti-Grace Atkinson, March Hoffman, Ellen Bedoz, Cynthia Funk, Rita Mae Brown, Lois Hart and “Barbara XX”, all authors of “The Woman-Identified Woman”, in A. Koedt, E. Levine, A. Rapone (eds.), Radical Feminism (New York: Quadrangle, 1973).
77 Many of the themes encountered in “Compulsory Heterosexuality” had already appeared in 1974, in Carla Lonzi’s La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale. Although not a lesbian theorist, Lonzi uses the more sexually charged “clitoral” and “vaginal woman” to designate what Rich calls, respectively, the “woman-identified” and the “male-identified woman”. See Carla Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel, La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti (Milan: Grammalibri, 1982). Carla Lonzi is also one of the first Italian feminists to call for social and cultural
In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, Adrienne Rich exhorts feminists theorists to consider lesbianism more seriously and to engage in an overdue critique of the “compulsory heterosexual orientation”.\(^{78}\) She argues that heterosexuality, like motherhood, has been imposed as a “political institution”\(^{79}\) because of men’s fear of a primary connection between women. According to Rich, what men see as a threat to the supremacy of male power is women’s capacity to function on their own. Compulsory heterosexuality thus breaks the primacy of these relationships between women and it is those which must be reclaimed and restored.\(^{80}\) For Rich, what must be studied is a “common world of women”\(^{81}\) or a “lesbian continuum”. She defines the “lesbian continuum” as “a range – through each women’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience”.\(^{82}\) Women must create a feminist history by looking at women in the past who have resisted male-power.\(^{83}\)

An early criticism can be here made of Rich’s feminist politics. In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, Rich proposes to replace the term “lesbianism” by “lesbian existence” and “lesbian continuum” (which indicates forms of “primary intensity between and amongst women”, whether or not this intensity is expressed sexually).\(^{84}\) Arguing that, in the case of women, heterosexuality is more often imposed than chosen is certainly a radical move. However, by extending lesbian existence to all women (irrespective of their sexual orientation), Adrienne Rich runs the risk of ignoring the specificity of lesbian experience (where lesbianism is also lived sexually). It is therefore not surprising, given the influence of Rich’s “lesbian continuum” in Italy, that “lesbofemministe” have attacked entrustment theorists for their vision of separatism. I discuss Lonzi’s work more extensively in chapter III. As for entrustment theorists, they recuperate male and female identification both in relation to language and to the access of the symbolic order (see Chapter IV).

\(^{79}\) ibid., p.637
\(^{80}\) In the following chapter of this thesis, I argue that entrustment theorists also find a similar idea in Luce Irigaray’s thought – namely, that the existing symbolic order prevents the establishment of relationships between women (especially those between mother and daughter).
\(^{83}\) As we shall see in Chapter IV, the same idea lies behind Italian feminists’ wish to identify the “symbolic mothers” of their history, and to establish a “maternal continuum”.
lesbianism as a mere symbolic practice (see Chapter V below). What is the theoretical shape of Rich’s feminist politics and how does she draw on the experience of motherhood?

The experience of motherhood and essentialism.

The mother-daughter connection and the problems of relationship between women are two central themes in Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). She argues that society ignores, or seeks to hide the fact that every single individual coming to the world has spent nine months inside a woman’s body, and that most individuals have had their first emotions and experiences with a woman. This relationship is particularly intense when it involves a mother and a daughter, “two biologically alike bodies.” Like Chodorow in the U.S.A., Muraro and Cavarero in Italy, Rich explains this effort to forget, compensate for or deny our connection to the mother as a fear of regression, on the part of men, to a state of “dependence on a woman for life itself.” She distinguishes between two aspects of motherhood—the experience (“the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children”) and the institution (“which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control”). While sympathising with earlier feminist critiques, this distinction allows Rich to recuperate motherhood as part of a strategy for potential liberation. It is indeed in the experience (and not in the institution) of motherhood that the origin of women’s connection to one another and that the source of a specific relation to their physicality are to be found.

85 “Probably, there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, the other which has laboured to give birth to the other.” Rich, *Of Woman Born*, op cit., p.225-226.
86 For example, see Muraro, op. cit, and Adrianna Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
88 ibid, p.13.
89 ibid., p.57. In *In Spite of Plato*, Adriana Cavarero makes a similar argument when discussing abortion and artificial insemination. This discussion is introduced by an interpretation of the myth of Demeter and Kore, a myth also used by Adrienne Rich. See Adriana Cavarero, op.cit, ch.3 and Rich, *Of Woman Born*, op. cit., pp.238-240. I come back to this in Chapter VI.
In assessing Adrienne Rich’s politics, we no longer have to search for some hidden essentialist assumption since essentialism is here openly embraced. “Female biology”, which Rich defines as “the diffuse, intense sensuality, radiating from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; [the locus for] the gestation and fruition of life”; 90 gives women a particular way of apprehending experience as well as a specific relationship to their body, to one another and to nature (the “universe” is Rich’s own word). It is this connection to our physicality which, Rich believes, has been usurped and misused to serve patriarchy. 91 Rich “implicitly asks us to distinguish between embodiment as experience and embodiment as institutions.” 92 Rich therefore conceives of a feminist revolution as a rethinking of our physicality which would allow it to be applied in a much broader way than has been under patriarchy. Indeed, the “authentic”, untarnished, experience of sexuality, and our proud relationship with our body (like that of motherhood) remains to be rediscovered under the layer of patriarchy.

Adrienne Rich’s essentialism tarnishes her feminist politics for a number of reasons. To begin with, Rich fails to consider, unlike Chodorow, the way the institution of motherhood has pervaded women’s psyche to such an extent that the distinction between motherhood as institution and experience might not be easily recognised, and the former not simple to defeat. Rich trusts that this new embodied knowledge will suffice to free women’s creativity. In an interesting leap which becomes evident in the closing section of the book, Rich no longer confines motherhood to the new human life that only a fertile woman can give. In an almost cosmic vision, she declares that creating new life can also mean creating “the visions, the thinking necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence - a new relationship to the universe.” 93 There is here a clear correspondence between female physiology and a feminine psychology (a particular form of creativity).

In addition, once reclaimed from the patriarchal context, Rich tends to idealise the experience motherhood, the relationships between /amongst women

90 ibid., p.39.
91 ibid., p.55.
92 Spelman, Inessential Woman, op. cit., p.129.
and the relationship to the mother that women need to strengthen.\textsuperscript{94} We shall encounter a similar criticism in relation to entrustment and \textit{il pensiero} later in this thesis. For Rich, the way to redeem the conflict-ridden mother-daughter relationship is simply to empower mothers into wanting their own freedom and that of their daughters. This is to be done through a woman-to-woman network (the lesbian continuum).\textsuperscript{95}

Finally, whilst Rich does not explicitly refer to an intrinsic goodness in women, there are certain unclear assertions which verge on this naive contention. It is true that Rich remains ambiguous about the distinct form and nature of women's "creative" qualities which the overthrowing of patriarchy would liberate. Nevertheless, she seems optimistic about the fact that, once re-valued, these feminine qualities would be used only to do good. I will reconsider these criticisms in the light of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment later in this study.

\textbf{Conclusion.}

The gynocentric perspective encompasses a variety of views which flirt, more or less explicitly, with essentialism. At one end of the spectrum stand those feminists who, like Chodorow, argue that women's specific characteristics result from their historical position. At the other extreme, are those feminists who openly embrace essentialism and contend that it is biology which gives them specific characteristics. For example, this is the case of Mary Daly,\textsuperscript{96} and, to a lesser extent, of Adrienne Rich. For the latter, women's physiology accounts for feminine creativity, for a specific way of forming relationships and for a distinctive way of apprehending reality, all of which are to be searched for under the layer of patriarchy. It is in writings such as Rich's that equality, assimilation and alienation become very closely associated, while difference now suggests liberation, separatism and sometimes superiority.

\textsuperscript{94} This is the central contention of both "Compulsory Heterosexuality" and "The Common World of Women", which is reiterated in \textit{Of Woman Born} on pp.245, 246, 255.
\textsuperscript{96} For example, see Mary Daly, \textit{Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism} (London: Women's Press, 1978).
As this part of the chapter has suggested, gynocentric positions tend to fluctuate between these two extremes. Indeed, the pole of difference is re-valued for various ends. Whilst Chodorow still holds an ideal of an androgynous society, where personalities are re-balanced, Rich envisages one where women’s creative relationship to their body could find full expression. Nevertheless, both feminists hold an idea of “women” as rational enough to be capable of bringing about change in a voluntarist manner. In addition, Chodorow’s argument is not immune to all forms of essentialism despite her apparent constructionist account of mothering. As we have argued, these essentialist undertones lie in Chodorow’s belief that the individual’s basic impulse is to form relationships and in her heterosexual, white and middle-class bias.

In later chapters, I will return to these issues when dealing with the themes that Chodorow and Rich share with entrustment theorists – namely, the importance of the mother and of the pre-Oedipal phase, the specificity of the mother-daughter relationship, woman-identified experience, the lesbian continuum, separatism and the understanding of equality as assimilation. We will then have the opportunity to consider whether these critiques re-appear despite entrustment’s emphasis on language and on the symbolic, an emphasis which is absent from both Chodorow and Rich’s accounts.

Section III. Challenging equality and difference.

Chronologically speaking, the mid-80’s marks yet another departure for feminist theory, one which sees the debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism become the theoretical paradigm. There are two definite (but simultaneous) “dynamics” to this evolution. From the mid-1980s, a critique of universalism emphasises the differences amongst/between women and difference becomes pluralised. In Chapter III, I argue that the history of Italian feminism should not be related in terms of “waves”. Not only does this tend to give a picture of Italian feminism as lacking in relation to its Anglo-Saxon counterpart, but it also ignores the cultural specificity of the Italian context. I rather propose to retrace the theoretical debates which have led some feminists to choose entrustment as a social-symbolic practice by thinking of the history of Italian feminism in terms of a theoretical and practical move from an analysis of sexual relationships between men and women to a study of the relationships between/amongst women.
one between identity and difference. Whilst the equality vs. difference framework regarded relations between the sexes, the new paradigmatic opposition between identity and difference considers the relationships between women. The issue at stake is no longer to establish whether women are equal or different from men. It is rather to determine what (constructed) similarities and divergences enable women or prevent them from forming an ontological and political group. When opposed to "identity", the meaning of the term "difference" therefore changes since it no longer uniquely refers to gender.

The second defining dynamic follows the erosion of the barrier set up between Anglophone and Continental theory. Apart from the impact made by theorists such as Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Anglo-Saxon feminism opens a dialogue with its French counterpart (and with, amongst others, Luce Irigaray).\(^98\) As we shall see shortly, the influence of postmodernist and post-structuralist theories problematize the very category of "woman" at the basis of feminist theory and political activism, whilst the engagement with difference theorists such as Irigaray fuel the debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism. We will examine how this second dynamic also alters the meaning of "difference". "Difference" now implies a thesis about language and discourse as constructing rather than simply communicating reality.\(^99\)

This final part of the chapter will first briefly spell out the problematisation of the category of "woman" in terms of these two dynamics. These two dynamics will also help to disclose the conundrum that the questioning of the category of "woman" presents to feminism – if no "woman" but only "women" exists, or indeed, if "woman"/"women" do not exist at all, how can one pursue a feminist politics? Subsequently, it will challenge any definition of the so-called "third

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\(^{98}\) One will note that, although Anglophone feminism engaged with some French feminists, there has been little contribution from elsewhere on the Continent. Hence Nancy K. Miller's call, mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, for a more international outlook on feminist theory.

\(^{99}\) It would be useful to point out, at this early stage, that it is in this sense that Irigaray can be considered a "difference" theorist. Unlike the previous gynocentric feminists that we have encountered, Irigaray does not seek to re-value all the "so-called" feminine characteristics that patriarchal society allegedly depreciate. As Chapter II will explain in more detail, this strategy of reversal is illusory for Irigaray since it works within the same phallocentric symbolic system which creates its own categories. Instead, she believes that the challenge faced by feminists is the creation of sexual difference independently of the dualistic definitions of male/female, masculine/feminine. More will be said on this point in the remaining part of this chapter and in Chapter II.
wave" of feminism as the simple refusal of the category "woman" by focussing on three particular theorists (Diana Fuss, Judith Butler and Christine Battersby) who propose to confront the "conundrum" of feminism and who will aid my future discussion of contemporary Italian feminism.

1. Challenging sexual difference:

Some theorists have defined the "third-wave" of feminism as comprising "all critical work that points to the homogenising or exclusive tendencies of earlier feminisms." According to this definition, Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988) is firmly anchored in the "third wave". *Inessential Woman* is of particular interest for its exploration of what "essentialism" comes to mean at the end of the 1980s. In this work, essentialism is irremediably linked to universalism (two concepts which, as said in the introduction to this chapter, are not necessarily conflated). The main target of Spelman's book is the exclusionary potential held in the idea of "woman-ness" at the basis of feminism. Spelman shows that this idea harbours the point of view and focus of only one particular group of women (the privileged white, middle-class), making the life-experience of other women "inessential". These privileged feminists have not only universalised but also essentialised their position since they have made gender the core of women’s identity (hence "single-cause feminism"), and sexism the core of their oppression (thus defining "patriarchy" as the identical oppression of all women). In contrast, Spelman points out that identity is not made of separate components that one can study in isolation from one another. In her view, there are many ways of constructing gender, including ones which consider race and class. Therefore, when feminists talk about "woman", warns Elizabeth Spelman, they should be aware of the theoretical and politico-cultural presuppositions that inform their conception of "woman".

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100 Contesting this definition of the "third-wave" also forms the rationale behind Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (eds.), *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), p.1.
103 Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, op. cit., p.5.
Similar attacks on the exclusionist tendencies of feminist theory have thus pushed some to stress plurality (of voices and of social structures determining identity) and have practised a so-called "identity politics".\textsuperscript{105} But many others (those using a postmodern or poststructuralist approach in particular) have stressed that "identity politics" is only a pluralised form of difference politics and as such, it still presents problems of criteria of judgement, closure and exclusion, only on a smaller scale.\textsuperscript{106}

As Chapter III will consider, in Italy, a shift from an analysis of the relationships with men to a study of the relationships between/amongst women similarly occurs in the mid-70s. In fact, it is the recognition of differences between women and the critique of the sisterhood spirit of the first consciousness-raising groups which motivates the elaboration of entrustment (a practice based, as Chapter IV will explain, on the empowering disparity between two women). A limited attempt to practice "identity politics" has been made in the mid-1980s with the advent of "lesbofemminismo". As we shall see in the case of entrustment, the differences between women are not conceptualised in relation to class, race or sexuality, but in relation to language/ the symbolic order. Indeed, it is their view of language/ the symbolic order as constructing (and not simply communicating) reality which informs their conception of "difference".

Following the poststructuralist leanings of Irigaray, entrustment theorists and \textit{il pensiero} philosophers base their feminist politics on the fact that language constructs \textit{all} women as "the other" of man. This not only denies them an access to subjectivity but also equalises all women in the role of the other, despite the differences which separate them. The political task facing them is therefore to make difference appear in language. We will come back to this common standpoint that both Irigaray and \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale} adopt in Chapters II and IV. For the moment, let us analyse how poststructuralism has filtered through the Anglophone context.

\textsuperscript{104} ibid., p.133.

\textsuperscript{105} "The term [identity politics] refers to the tendency to base one's politics on a sense of personal identity". See Diana Fuss, \textit{Essentially Speaking}, op. cit., p.97.

\textsuperscript{106} For example, see Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference", op. cit., p.145, and Fuss, \textit{Essentially Speaking}, op. cit., p.20.
Difference and dichotomies.

The second anti-essentialist dynamic of the “third wave” of feminism introduces a new conception of “difference”, directly derived from Saussurian linguistics and from its subsequent use mainly by Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction. As we shall see more extensively in the following chapter, the Saussurian analysis of language shows that the meaning of a particular term derives and rests on the rejection of its opposite. Hence, meaning does not result from the correspondence of a word with an external object but from an eternal play of differences, existing within language, between words/symbols or “signifiers”. “Difference” is thus not antithetical to “equality” but constitutive of equality. It is constructed as a “constitutive outside” that aids the formation of the concept but appears to be outside it. Poststructuralists thus target any theoretical system which exposes reality dichotomously. An implicit hierarchy inevitably structures binary oppositions such as male/female, gender/sex, culture/nature, subjectivity/objectivity - the first term is valued at the expense of the other, while also being defined in contrast to the other (therefore not allowing for true, non-relational difference).

This poststructuralist approach has radical implications for feminist theory. Firstly, it is used to deconstruct binary oppositions that have been used to define “woman” (for example nature/culture, passion/reason, body/mind) and to expose their political purpose. Secondly, it is now argued that politics does not provide a reflection of identities (as egalitarians, difference feminists, and identity theorists believe), but instead constructs them. Politics cannot be the reflection or expression of a pre-existing ontological identity since all identities are deemed to be relational, contextual, political and without any ontological foundation. Thirdly, this new approach is employed to contest the very debates which have defined feminist theory and have been the object of this chapter. Strategies of equality and difference are now viewed as invalid. While egalitarians theorise equality as assimilation to an existing model, the gynocentric feminists lack

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107 The expression “constitutive outside” or “abjected outside” is Butler’s. Butler explains that “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, and abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation.” (Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter [New York: Routledge, 1993], p.3).
radicalism. Although difference theorists challenge the dominating values in society by re-emphasising women's contribution (thus following a strategy of reversal), they equally fail to question the framework according to which these values are presented. If equality means inclusion into a male norm, difference equally signifies deviation from the same male norm. Because neither egalitarian strategies nor tactics of difference challenge the dichotomous and constructed framework which structures reality, the male norm stays in place.

Italian feminism approaches post-structuralism, not via Derrida, Lacan, or Foucault, but via Irigaray. The latter's influence begins to be felt from the middle of the 70s. Rather than the destabilising effect that poststructuralism has on the dichotomies hitherto used in feminist theory, it is Irigaray's critique of the "monosexual" symbolic order and her exploration of the possibility of establishing a speaking position for women which are influential at this point. The precise contours of Irigaray's position and her influence upon Italian feminism will be explored in Chapters II, III and IV.

2. Confronting the “conundrum” of feminism.

In the light of the dynamics outlined above, both feminist theory (which primarily deals with the subject position occupied by women) and feminist politics (which is the fight for women as a homogenous group) are thrown into an apparent crisis. If "woman" as an ontological category and "women" as a homogenous political group do not exist, how can we theorise and practice "feminism"?

Many feminists have confronted this conundrum and have refused to give in to what Spelman calls the "bleak outlook". In the 1990s, a renewed interest in affirming the "body's inescapability" and for thinking corporeality and embodiment while avoiding the pitfalls of fixity, exclusion and essentialism (as

108 Coole, Women in Political Theory, op. cit., p.204.
110 Spelman, Inessential Woman, op. cit., p.172
111 This expression is Diane Elam's. See Diane Elam, Ms en Abyme: Feminism and Deconstruction (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.174. For a discussion of the
well as well as the latter's cognates) becomes manifest. I have here chosen three prominent feminists who have confronted this crisis and who have tried to think of gender in a novel theoretical way. Let us begin with Diana Fuss.

**Diana Fuss and “strategic essentialism”**.

In recent years, some theorists have expressed their impatience at the ways in which “essentialism” has been used (either too loosely or as anathema) to preclude its rigorous intellectual examination. Diana Fuss is one of those who have sought to recuperate and question this concept. In *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (1989), Fuss claims that, in and of itself, essentialism is neither good, nor bad, because “essentialism” does not have an essence (a philosophically, historically and politically stable content). Its usefulness or harmfulness depends on where and how it is employed, and on the political effects it yields. Thus, Fuss deconstructs the debates that have opposed essentialists to anti-essentialists in an attempt to show that the two are interdependent. Indeed, constructionism does not do away with essentialism but instead displaces it onto the idea that social determination confers meaning to identity and to sexual difference. For Fuss, social constructionism is nothing more than a form of “sociological essentialism” since “both posit an utterly passive subject subordinated to the shaping influence of either nature or culture and both disregard the unsettling effects of the psyche.”

Since essentialism is for her ubiquitous and inescapable, Fuss calls for the “risk of essence” to be taken. Essentialism, Fuss contends, must be re-deployed through the strategy of historicisation. One must indeed differentiate between

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112 As fascinating examples of this renewed interest, I would like to mention works which I unfortunately will not have the space to discuss here. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) and Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

113 Many of these impatient feminists can be found in Schor and Weed, *The Essential Difference*, op. cit.

114 The same claim is made by Schor in “This Essentialism Which Is Not One”, op. cit., p.40.


116 I think that, to a certain extent, Fuss is here guilty of “essentialising” constructionism. As we shall see when dealing with Butler’s *Gender Trouble* “constructionism” and/or “social determination” can be much more fluid and theoretically nuanced than it is suggested here.
“deploying/activating” essentialism (that which feminists must strive for) and
“falling/lapsing” into essentialism (that which must be avoided). This distinction
is made according to the subject’s positioning - who is risking essentialism? How
is essentialism used? Where are its effects concentrated?118 Essence is culturally
and historically contingent and its definition has to be constantly reformulated
and re-framed. The social constructionists who “insist that essentialism is always
and everywhere reactionary [...] act as if essentialism has an essence”.119

For some, “risking essentialism” is no risk at all since it is based on
maintaining a safety net for those who are afraid to erode metaphysical
certainty.120 For others, strategic essentialists must still believe implicitly that
there are some common areas of women’s life which require political
intervention. Or else, what would be the point of “a strategy of affirming
fictitious commonalities amongst women” [...] “in a world where women do not
really have any common characteristics or experiences”?121 In Italy, entrustment
theorists and theorists of sexual difference in general, have invoked essentialism
on slightly different grounds. Points of commonality that women share are still
deemed fictitious. As we shall see from chapter IV, it is indeed to put an end to
the equalisation of women in their gender that entrustment is created. However, it
is partly because society (or rather the existing symbolic order) considers women
as a “gender” and not as singular speaking and thinking subjects, that they will
appeal to essentialism.122 It is the common positioning of women at the margins
of signification which brings women together to devise a social-symbolic
practice. But this essentialism is a temporary strategy and not an end in itself
since entrustment seeks to contest the common positioning of women at the
margins of signification.

118 ibid., p.20
119 ibid., p.21[original emphasis]
120 ibid, p.19
122 Ida Dominijanni, “Il desiderio di politica” in Lia Cigarini, La politica del desiderio (Parma:
The second theorist I have chosen to exemplify those feminists who have creatively embraced the purported crisis of feminism is Judith Butler. Apart from reflecting her important contribution to feminist theory in recent years, this choice is informed by the Foucauldian aspect of her thought. In particular, I wish to focus here on the genealogical account of gender. I will later contrast her use of genealogy to that explicit in entrustment theory (Chapters IV and V).

Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), rejects another opposition which has accompanied the history of feminism – that between sex and gender. Like Fuss, Butler argues that *both* sex and gender are produced discursively, and are hence constructed culturally. She captures the relationship between sex and gender as follows: gender is “the discursive and cultural means by which ‘sex nature’ or ‘natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.”\(^{123}\) She follows Foucault who, in the *History of Sexuality*, contends that the category of sex is itself constructed through a historically specific mode of sexuality. Butler indeed argues that sex and gender are constructed so as to fit the norms of a particular masculinist and heterosexual society which establishes a heterosexual continuity between sex, gender, sexual practice and desire.\(^ {124}\) The body thus becomes, for her, a “cultural situation”\(^ {125}\) where the effects of discourse and power become manifest.

Like Fuss, Butler embraces what we have called the “conundrum” of “third-wave” feminism, whereby it becomes paradoxical to call oneself a feminist since both the ontological category of “woman” and the homogenous political entity of “women” are illusions. But she faces this paradox in a different way and disregards “strategic essentialism” as an inadequate solution because “strategies always have meanings that exceed the purposes for which they are intended”.\(^ {126}\) Instead of searching for some stable notion of gender on which to

\(^{124}\) Ibid., p. 17.
\(^{126}\) Butler, *Gender Trouble*, op. cit., p. 4.
base a feminist politics, she instead welcomes its erosion. In doing so, she recuperates Foucault’s reading of Nietzsche’s notion of genealogy as that which is opposed to the search for “origins”. For Foucault, such a search “is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities; because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession.”

Butler’s proposal is thus radically anti-essentialist or, in her own words, “anti-foundationalist”. Unlike the constructionists whom Diana Fuss targets for positing an utterly passive subject subordinated to the shaping influence of culture, Butler once again relies on a Foucauldian notion of a subject who is not uniquely constituted by norms in a passive way. Such a subject also assumes and reinterprets these same norms actively. Butler therefore redefines “construction” as that material process which “not only takes place in time but is itself a temporal process [operating] through the reiteration of norms.”

Butler’s project is therefore to map a “feminist genealogy of the category of women”, which involves “tracing the political operations that produce and conceal what qualifies as the juridical subject of feminism”. Women become connected to one another, not through a common essence derived from “sex”, but through multiple chains of historical interpretations of the category “woman” which have been both passively assumed and actively taken up and re-signified in different ways. Thus women are not a unified political group but can nevertheless form a “coalition” in pursuit of a particular end. Identity no longer has to be the basis of politics, and feminism not longer needs “women” or “gender” as a foundational category. Butler in fact embraces the “conundrum” of

127 ibid., p.5.
128 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in Paul Rabinow (ed.), The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought (London: Penguin, 1991), p.78. In On the Genealogy of Morality, Nietzsche points out that “anything in existence, having somehow come about, is continually interpreted anew, requisitioned anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior to it; that everything that occurs [...] consists of overpowering, dominating, and in their turn, overpowering and dominating consists of re-interpretation, adjustment, in the process of which their former ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ must necessarily be obscured or completely obliterated” (see Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morality [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], p.55).
129 Butler, Gender Trouble, op. cit., p.15.
130 See “Variations on Sex and Gender”, where Butler re-examines de Beauvoir’s notion of the body as a “situation”. See Butler, op. cit., esp. p.133.
131 Butler, Bodies That Matter, op. cit., p.10.
132 Butler, Gender Trouble, op. cit., p.5.
133 ibid., p.15.
contemporary feminism because she sees in it an opportunity to do away with feminism’s inherent exclusionary and normative structure. She thus writes that “An open identity will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand, it will be an assemblage that permits multiple convergences and divergences without an obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.”

As we shall see in the next chapters, entrustment theorists and il pensiero della differenza sessuale also use the notion of genealogy. Unlike Butler, however, they do not borrow it from Nietzsche and Foucault, but from Luce Irigaray’s analysis of the existing symbolic order. In this second sense, genealogy refers to relationships between women and those between mothers and daughters. It is intended as a symbolic “lineage” or “descent” which connects women both to their origin (the mother) and to one another. Nevertheless, in Chapter V, we will explore the possibility of thinking of entrustment in ways which might recall Butler’s “coalition” of women. We will indeed ask to what extent a relationship of entrustment can be conceived as a coalition between two women (on the basis that they are positioned by the existing male symbolic order at the margins of language) in pursuit of a particular end (the social translation of a specific project/desire).

Christine Battersby and feminist metaphysics.

Christine Battersby’s work on feminist metaphysics offers an ideal conclusion to my account of the development of feminism in the Anglo-Saxon context. Battersby not only provides yet another example of recent theorists who have faced contemporary feminism’s dilemma. She also occupies a somewhat anomalous position within the socio-historical context that I have sketched in this part of the chapter. I will therefore use her Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity (1998) to briefly show the elements which constitute this anomaly and which mark a certain affinity with Italian feminism as it has been taken beyond entrustment and il pensiero by Adriana Cavarero.

134 ibid., p.16.
Like the other feminists discussed in this part of the chapter, Christine Battersby refutes essentialist positions which claim that an underlying and unchanging core in women's identity determines their specific way of knowing and experiencing the world around them.\textsuperscript{135} In addition, like Fuss and Butler, Battersby recognises that both sex and gender are discursive constructions that are, as such, historically and culturally contingent.\textsuperscript{136} Her position can nonetheless be considered unusual because she wishes to recuperate metaphysics in order to put it to feminist uses. In a similar way to both entrustment theorists and Adriana Cavarero, Battersby explores "models for conceptualising ontology that would allow us to retain a notion of sexual difference while also theorising differences among women."\textsuperscript{137}

Battersby contends that, in the anti-essentialist rejections of the categories of "woman", "women" or "female", an Aristotelian notion of essence has been privileged over other existing alternatives.\textsuperscript{138} She interrogates the history of western metaphysics in order to arrive at a notion of a "female" essence which "involves registering the norms and regulative practices that at one particular time and in one type of culture act as sexual definers".\textsuperscript{139} In a theoretically useful way, Battersby hence dissociates essentialism from biologism, naturalism, fixity and timelessness.

The starting point for this search is women's common "positioning vis-à-vis the founding metaphysical categories of 'identity', 'self', substance' and 'personhood'."\textsuperscript{140} She identifies five features of the female position (themselves contingent and subject to change). These are "the conceptual link between the paradigm woman and the body that births",\textsuperscript{141} the socialisation of women as primary carers, the impregnation of the self with otherness, the connection of women with the flesh/the body, and the experience of the female as the anomalous/monstrous. Throughout The Phenomenal Woman, Battersby contends that if we took woman as norm, that is, if these five features acted as starting

\textsuperscript{135} Battersby, The Phenomenal Woman, op. cit., p.6.
\textsuperscript{136} ibid., p.21.
\textsuperscript{137} ibid., p.13.
\textsuperscript{138} ibid., p.31. It is on the basis of this tendency to "[homogenise] the history of metaphysics in ways reminiscent of Heidegger" (p.119) that Battersby criticises Irigaray's later works such as Sexes and Genealogies (1987), Le Temps de la Différence (1989), Je, Tu, Nous (1993).
\textsuperscript{139} ibid., p.32.
\textsuperscript{140} ibid., p.200.
\textsuperscript{141} ibid., p.7.
points, our conception of essence and of metaphysics would be transformed so as to register contingency, multiplicity and change rather than fatality, fixity and timelessness.

Many of the characteristics of the self that this metaphysics of “immanence/becoming” calls forth suggest affinities with entrustment and Cavarero’s accounts of the self (discussed in the last three chapters of this study). Firstly, the category of natality is put at the centre of Battersby’s feminist metaphysics. For both Cavarero and Battersby, natality implies embodiment but also a regard for the new. It hence opposes fixity with multiple potentialities. However, while Cavarero borrows and adapts natality from Hannah Arendt and lays more emphasis on the relationship between natality and action, Battersby rather relies on Kierkegaard’s account of a self “which is birthed from a multiple play of possibilities”.

Secondly, in both Cavarero and Battersby, natality also implies relationality. Taking the female as norm involves, for the latter, taking into consideration a body which can be impregnated with otherness. Thus, the self both includes the other and depends on the other for its constitution. Following Kierkegaard, Battersby argues that the self is “marked – ‘scored’ – into specificity by its relationship with ‘otherness’”. These relationships are multiple and changing. This contests any notion of “substance” and allows for differences between women, since these relationships contain a plurality of possibilities, and are differently experienced. Furthermore, these multiple and evolving relationships do not foreclose any form of permanence. Indeed, patterns (of relationships, responses and habits) are established over time so that “stability can emerge in a world of ‘events’ and ‘becoming’”. In Chapters IV and V, we will return to these multiple patterned relationships which form the subject’s

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142 ibid., p.11.
143 ibid., p.200.
144 Battersby registers both dynamics of the self containing the other, and depending on the other. In chapter V, I will argue that, in entrustment, only one aspect of this dynamics is taken into consideration. Entrustment theorists indeed stress that the entrustee’s emergence as subject depends on the relationship she has with her inspirational woman. However, they hardly focus on the position of the other that the “inspirational woman” occupies. In Chapter V, I will contend that this lack of attention leaves entrustment vulnerable to abusive power relationships.
145 ibid., p.12.
147 ibid., p.12.
specificity to compare and contrast them to those established by the social-symbolic practice of entrustment.

Thirdly, the type of metaphysics that both Cavarero and Battersby propose is “fleshy” since it concerns itself fundamentally with the corporeal aspect of the subject. In Battersby’s account, the body itself is scored by these “patterns of becoming”. These are constituted by what Battersby calls “forcefields”, which can be linguistic, cultural, historical or social norms, bodily activities or training, or ways one apprehends one’s morphology. They are “patterns” because they are actively repeated, intersected, and evolving. In that sense, conceptions of “‘Male’ and ‘female’ can be viewed as different patterns of potentiality”. 148

Affinities can also here be detected between the political consequences of Battersby’s metaphysics of becoming, Cavarero’s politics of uniqueness, the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale. Battersby herself confesses, in the concluding pages of Phenomenal Woman, that the model of identity developed in her book challenges ideals of sisterhood, equality, self-determining freedoms, and hence are bound to attract much feminist criticism.149 In Battersby’s account of identity, power inequalities and dependency also occupy centre stage (as in entrustment, they are exemplified in the mother-child relationship). Battersby accepts Foucault’s assertion that power is ubiquitous. But she also calls for “an adequate distinction between abusive and non-abusive relationships of power”.150 As we shall see in Chapter IV, this distinction has been attempted by entrustment theorists. In Chapter V, I will argue that, despite this attempt, power is insufficiently theorised and, as a result, its potential abuse undermines the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Battersby (together with Cavarero) rejects entrustment precisely because it renders the abuse of power possible. Because of these common themes that she shares with il pensiero della differenza sessuale as a whole and because of her unequivocal dismissal of entrustment as a “harmful” practice,151 I will refer back to Christine Battersby’s metaphysics of sexual difference during the course of this thesis.

148 ibid., p.204.
149 ibid., p.205. It is because of these same issues of power differentials and dependency that debates following the invention of entrustment have torn il pensiero della differenza sessuale in half.
150 ibid., p.209.
Conclusion.

From the mid-1980s then, the foundations of feminist theorist and activism have seriously been shaken. As this part of the chapter has shown, the theme of essentialism has been ubiquitous. The questioning of "woman" (both as an essentialist and as a social construct), as well as the undermining of the sex/gender, equality/difference, essentialism/constructionism dichotomies, have led feminism to an apparent impasse. However, far from abandoning the terms of the debates mentioned above, some feminists have sought to re-examine them. We have seen how, thanks to their strategic essentialism, genealogical account of gender and feminist metaphysics, Diana Fuss, Judith Butler and Christine Battersby have respectively sought to recuperate a notion of gender and embodiment which avoids the pitfalls of essentialism that previous feminists had identified.

Due to the hegemonic influence of Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference in Italy, entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale have sought to conceptualise differences between women, while retaining a notion of sexual difference as ontological. We will therefore have to re-examine (mainly in Chapter V) the question of essentialism in an Italian context. Chapter VI will also demonstrate that Adriana Cavarero’s “politics of uniqueness” attempts to move beyond the debates mentioned above. “How does Cavarero’s politics of uniqueness still manage to remain a feminist politics?” will therefore be one of the closing questions of my thesis.

Concluding remarks: Avoiding the “Grand Narrative of Feminism”\footnote{ibid., p.119.}

One risk involved in presenting a linear account of the history of feminism, in terms of its successive waves, is to give the crude impression of a smooth development (from egalitarianism to gynocentrism and to an enlightened abandonment of both perspectives). I hope that the discussion of the Anglophone
context with which I have opened my thesis has made clear that all the "traditions" and perspectives outlined above co-exist to some extent and that all thinkers, at some level, are obliged to acknowledge a mutual relationship between equality and difference. It is in order to demonstrate such an assertion that I have examined the ways in which essentialism (in one form or another) makes its way back, insidiously, into most arguments. It is also with such an intent that I have outlined the manner in which, if considered chronologically, so-called "third-wave" feminists still conjure up some notion of sexual difference, embodiment, or metaphysics. In conclusion, one could say, together with Judith Squires, that "the equality/difference debate has certainly been shown to be more complex than originally presumed, but its hold appears as strong as ever." 153

Another danger that I have sought to avoid in this opening chapter is to set a rigid barrier between Anglophone and Continental feminism. My selection of particular feminists for the specific issues they deal with has been done with the intent of setting bridges between the two contexts, while preparing to argue that Italian feminism can still be thought of as "specific" (a contention that the rest of the thesis will defend). The following chapter will pursue this enterprise. Chapter II deals with the development of the debates encountered in Chapter I, but in the French context. If, as we have just seen, the social-symbolic practice of entrustment has explicitly recognised the influence of Anglophone feminism, via an adaptation of Adrienne Rich's work, it has been even more indebted to a particular current of French feminism. Entrustment indeed inherits some aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis, of the political work of the Parisian group "Psych & Po", and of Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference. It is to these influences that we will now turn.

153 Squires, Gender in Political Theory, op. cit., p.139.
Chapter II
Sexual Difference in a French Context

Introduction: inventing “French feminism”:

In the scathing article mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Christine Delphy claims that what English-speaking feminists call “French feminism” is an invention.1 Anglo-American commentators have taken “a certain overtly antifeminist political trend called ‘Psych et Po’ as the core of French feminism and have repeatedly promoted Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray as the ‘Holy Trinity’.2 Delphy also argues that, due to their alleged essentialist nature, the theses advanced by “French feminists” are altogether reactionary and detrimental to the very existence of feminism. According to her, there is an ideological motive at work behind this creation:

[its Anglophone inventors] did not want to take responsibility for what they were saying and, in particular, for their attempt to rescue psychoanalysis from the discredit it had incurred both in feminism and throughout the social sciences. They pretended that another feminist movement thought it was great – the fact that it was all the other, admittedly strange, movement was interested in.3

For Delphy, Anglophone inventors of “French feminism” simultaneously criticise and promote essentialism by arguing that the essentialism allegedly found in “French feminism” is no essentialism at all.4 Since this chapter of my thesis deals with what Delphy calls “French feminism”, with psychoanalysis and with one of the women writers

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2 ibid., p.191.
4 ibid., p.212.
forming the "Trinity" (namely, Luce Irigaray), I feel compelled to open my discussion by confronting Delphy's uncompromising assertions.

As I have argued in the introduction above, Delphy's article is to be praised for raising the issue of imperialism within feminist theory. It is to combat homogenising and imperialistic tendencies of dealing with so-called "Anglo-American", "French" or "Italian" feminism that my introduction has begun to situate the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale within the broader context of contemporary Italian feminism.\(^5\) I would like to point out that this particular chapter does recognise the diversity of the women's liberation movement in France ("Mouvement de la Libération des Femmes" or MLF). It deals with psychoanalysis, "Psych & Po" and Luce Irigaray, not because they exemplify French feminism, but because they are relevant to the Italian context (analysed in Chapter III).\(^6\)

This chapter also contests many of Delphy's assertions. In particular, I will here question the claim that Luce Irigaray offers a vision of sexual difference which is essentialist and problematic for a feminist politics.\(^7\) I will also challenge Delphy's opinion that the work produced by male theorists, by those who see themselves as anti-feminists or indifferent to feminism cannot provide an impetus for feminist analysis.\(^8\) Indeed, I will here approach Lacan as a major theorist with whom Irigaray and the social-symbolic practice of entrustment engage critically.

Sexual difference in a French context.

The aim of this chapter is thus three-fold. Firstly, I will open my discussion with a consideration of egalitarian arguments as they are exposed in France. Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) will here take centre stage. I will briefly examine Beauvoir's famous anti-essentialist argument that one becomes a woman and relate it to her existentialist understanding of freedom. This discussion of Beauvoir's existentialism,

\(^5\) One could certainly point out, that Delphy is here guilty of the same mistake. She talks about an "Anglo-American compulsion to homogenise the French" (p.214) as if this compulsion itself were experienced by all Anglo-American feminist theorists.
\(^6\) Delphy herself acknowledges that "Although Irigaray's work is not used in Women's Studies in France, her theses are very popular with important parts of the women's movement in Italy" (p.219).
\(^7\) ibid., p.194.
be it a limited one, will be useful in order to later show that, although opposed to egalitarian feminism, entrustment theorists sometimes propose a notion of freedom which bears existentialist traces. In addition, I will investigate Beauvoir's analysis of woman as Other since this aspect of The Second Sex acts as a reference for second-wave feminists such as Irigaray.

The second and most important aim of this chapter will be to investigate the link between the social-symbolic practice of entrustment, that which makes Italian feminism specific, and the theory of sexual difference as developed in France by Luce Irigaray. Of all the thinkers influencing Irigaray, I will particularly concentrate on Lacan. My reading of Irigaray will here establish the centrality of the critical engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis for the feminist project of creating a feminine symbolic. In addition, it will show why Lacanian psychoanalysis is so important to understanding the way in which Italian feminists have read Irigaray. Lacanian psychoanalysis will also be a useful tool for my own critique of entrustment, which I will develop in Chapter V.

The third and final aim of the chapter is to identify those aspects of Irigaray's work central to the elaboration of entrustment and to il pensiero della differenza sessuale. At this juncture, I will isolate three important themes that are shared - the critique of the existing symbolic order, the theme of the relationships between women, and the forgetting of the mother. In this last part of the chapter, I will evaluate critically these three themes, while trying to outline the similarities and differences between Irigaray's writings and the political work of "Psych & Po". I will also identify the insights as well as the risks that inheriting a perspective from Lacan and Irigaray entail for Italian feminism.

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8 ibid., p.219.
Section I. Simone de Beauvoir and the Second Sex.

There are noticeable similarities between the emergence of feminism in France and in the Anglo-Saxon countries. As in the Anglophone context, the equality perspective is the first to be articulated. The Enlightenment’s emphasis on universal reason and fundamental equality brings various political theorists to reject women’s natural inferiority and to use liberal natural rights arguments in order to claim greater equality for women in society.¹⁰ Like Mary Wollstonecraft, some demand reforms in women’s education,¹¹ but very few insist on enfranchisement.¹² Like their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, most of these early liberal feminists also retain some notion of woman’s specificity¹³ and still defend women’s rights on a utilitarian basis.¹⁴ A socialist tradition of egalitarian feminism also emerges in the C19th.¹⁵ What might locate the French context closer to the Italian is the existence of a strong republican tradition which brands liberal individualist feminism as “foreign” and opts rather for a pro-family and nationalist discourse.¹⁶ There has been, enough “homegrown” theories about women for Simone de Beauvoir to open The Second Sex with those words:

¹² See the Article VI of Olympes de Gouges’s “Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne” in André-Jean Arnaud and Elizabeth Kingdom (eds.), Women’s Rights and The Rights of Man (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990), p.105. De Gouges is, by far, the most radical of the feminists mentioned here. Her demands include an equal share in writing the constitution (XVI), in drafting the law (VII), in public administration (XIV) and in industry (XIII), the open access to all functions (VI) and the right to property (XVII).
¹³ For example, Condorcet believes that “women are superior where gentle and domestic virtues are concerned”. See Condorcet, “Sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cité”, op. cit., p.124.
¹⁴ Like Wollstonecraft, Madame de Staël believes that education provides better wives and increase women’s sense of morality. See, respectively de Staël, On Germany, op. cit., p.205 and Letters on Rousseau, op. cit., p.40. It should be stressed that de Staël, unlike Wollstonecraft, is a great admirer of Rousseau’s ideas on education.
¹⁵ One of its representatives is Flora Tristan (1803-44). These early egalitarian currents are described in Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, ed. and trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Johnathan Cape, 1972), pp.121-157.
¹⁶ Karen Offen, “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach” in Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 14.1 (1988): 144. In the following chapter, we will come back to the republican feminist discourse which, in Italy, is of Mazzinian inspiration.
"Enough ink has been spilled in quarrelling over feminism, and perhaps we should say no more about it."17

Given the status of The Second Sex as a classic and the wealth of feminist responses and debates that it still generates, I will not attempt to present here a comprehensive exegesis. Rather, I will approach The Second Sex with a view to situating the debate between equality and difference within a French context. My aim is also to assess Simone de Beauvoir’s legacy for French feminism (and, indirectly, for contemporary Italian feminism). This first part of the chapter therefore concentrates on two central axes of The Second Sex – the contentions that one becomes a woman and that woman is the Other of man.

1. Constructionism and existentialism in The Second Sex:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”.18 In the introduction to The Second Sex, Beauvoir acknowledges the differences between the sexes as phenomenological, but also points out that woman’s functioning as a female is not enough to indicate what woman is.19 If being female is natural, being a woman is the product of civilisation. Thus, The Second Sex is, first and foremost, an anti-essentialist work in its rejection of biologism.20 This part will briefly examine Beauvoir’s discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis and Engel’s historical materialism in order to highlight two slightly different theoretical oppositions that this influential “slogan”21 of The Second Sex contains – first, the essentialism vs. constructionism antagonism that we have already encountered in Chapter I and second, the tension between essentialism and existentialism.

It is on this account that Beauvoir welcomes Freudian psychoanalysis and historical materialism. For the former, it is not “the body-object described by

18 ibid., p.273.
20 See in particular, the first chapter entitled “The data of biology”.
21 Chanter, Ethics of Eros, op.cit., p.78.
biologists that actually exists, but the body as lived in by the subject”. 22 For the latter, humanity is not simply left vulnerable to the dictates of nature but is actually characterised by its ability to transform or repossess it. 23 Thanks to a consideration of technological evolution, historical materialism does not confine women to their biological destiny. Instead, woman’s nature is a direct consequence of the economical development of a given society. 24

In addition to the opposition between essentialism (biological determinism) and constructionism, another conflict is also implicit in the assertion that one becomes a woman. In The Second Sex, “determinism” is indeed redefined according to the existentialist perspective Beauvoir openly adopts. It is hence in comparison to existentialist ethics that Freudian psychoanalysis and historical materialism are deemed “determinist” since both theories shun the individual’s potential to make choices. Apart from their masculine bias, 25 Freud’s theories are forsaken for offering a deterministic explanation of human life on the basis of sexuality alone. 26 Similarly, historical materialism is rejected because it sees technology as determining the different stages of human history, regardless of men’s and women’s individual responses to technological changes. This leads Engels, on whom Beauvoir concentrates, to make a number of essentialist assumptions - a spontaneous sexual division of labour, man’s natural ties with private property, the weakness of the female body. 27

In The Second Sex, essentialism is hence not so much contrasted to constructionism as opposed to existentialism. Let us pause on this “quest of being” 28 of which sexuality and technology are but two aspects. Beauvoir theorises liberty in existentialist terms. It is fundamental to the subject, irremediably linked with action and constantly actualised through the practical translation of new

22 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, op. cit., p.65.
23 ibid., p.79.
24 ibid., p.79
25 ibid., p.67. As we shall see, this assertion is not far from Irigaray’s claim that the imaginary of psychoanalysis is male.
26 ibid., p.69. Disputing Beauvoir’s claims about Freudian psychoanalysis is beyond the scope of my argument. For a critique of Simone de Beauvoir’s assertions, see Juliet Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism (London: Penguin, 2000), pp.205-218.
27 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, op. cit., pp.81, 83.
28 ibid., p.72.
projects: “every subject plays its part as such specifically through exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence: he achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out of other liberties”. Although freedom is an ontological component of the human individual, its responsibility can be sometimes daunting and the individual can choose to refuse it. In this case, the subject’s consciousness falls back into immanence. This is an ethical affront since the subject chooses to ignore the fundamental drive towards liberty that defines him as a human being (this is what Sartrean existentialists call “bad faith”). Refusing transcendence and opting for immanence is a choice that the free subject always has to confront. Liberty would indeed not be liberty if some kind of free-will were not involved.

_Inheriting Beauvoir’s constructionism._

As many commentators have argued, such a perspective borrowed from existential ethics is equivocal if applied to the situation of women in society. I shall come back to this point in the following section. For the moment, I would like to examine the way in which Beauvoir’s constructionism is inherited by some second-wave feminists. One should point out here that the publication of _The Second Sex_ in France at the end of the 1940s is initially met with indifference or hostility. It is not until it is acclaimed in the U.S.A. that the French feminist scene opens up to _The Second Sex_ in the 1960s. It is then that Marxist feminists such as Christine Delphy and Monique Plaza recuperate the constructionist side of Beauvoir’s argument. For Beauvoir, economic independence, which is to be achieved through work, is highly desirable and likely to better women’s condition but insufficient for emancipating women. Beauvoir perceives an additional need for moral, social and cultural evolution. In other words, change needs to affect men and women’s

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29 ibid., p.27. For a detailed study of the connection between _The Second Sex_ and Sartrean existentialism, see Michèle Le Doeuff, “Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism”, _Feminist Studies_ 6 (Summer 1980): 277-289.

30 Beauvoir, _The Second Sex_, op. cit., p.20.

31 see Margaret A. Simons, “Sexism and the Philosophical Canon: On Reading Beauvoir’s Second Sex” in _Journal of the History of Ideas_ 51.3 (July-September 1990): 487-504.

consciousness. In claiming Beauvoir’s inheritance, materialist feminists gather around Delphy and the periodical Questions Féministes to focus on Beauvoir’s account of the complexity of women’s oppression. They seek to establish a feminist science that could unmask the convoluted ideological workings of patriarchy.

The theorists of Questions Féministes also use Beauvoir’s constructionism as a key weapon in the bitter battle which opposes them to the “new” feminists of sexual difference, partly represented by Luce Irigaray. All stress on sexual difference is henceforth deemed essentialist, reactionary and anti-feminist because it supposedly re-invigorates the myth of the “eternal feminine” that Beauvoir so convincingly writes against. We will come back to contest the kinds of criticism that Delphy and Plaza direct against Irigaray in the third part of the chapter.

Several reasons have been advanced for the lack of interest or for the hostility that The Second Sex has occasioned amongst certain feminist circles in France. One could mention the fact that, prior to the 1970s when she restates her position, Beauvoir has always kept a sharp distance from feminism. One could also record her constant declarations of allegiance to Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism and her persistent rejection of her own philosophical originality. However, the factor on which I would like to focus particularly is that of an evolution in French intellectual life. The end of the 1960s witnesses the decreasing influence of existentialism on the one hand, and the rise, on the other, of poststructuralist theory that a variety of “new” difference feminists embrace.

33 ibid., p.169.
37 Chanter, Ethics of Eros, op. cit., p.74.
38 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, op. cit., p.25.
It is within these circles that Beauvoir’s existentialist approach is received with suspicion because of the masculinist conclusions it calls forth.\(^41\) *The Second Sex* rejects sex as immanence, difference as inferiority and traditional female identity as alienating. Many feminists indeed feel uncomfortable with Beauvoir’s existentialist disdain for embodiment, nature and biology.\(^42\) It is in female biology that women’s inferiority is located so much so that Simone Beauvoir’s assertion arguably verges on essentialism. In Beauvoir, it is the specificity of female biology which makes it even more difficult for women to achieve transcendence. I will return to this existentialist tendency to denigrate the body and the biological in Chapter VI, when dealing with Hannah Arendt’s existential politics.

For now, let me point out that one can detect in Beauvoir’s exhortation to transcend one’s bodily limitations the dream of overcoming the distinction between the sexes.\(^43\) In Chapter I, we have seen how this vision of an androgynous future is recurrent within Anglo-Saxon egalitarian feminists such as Millett or Firestone’s (both of whom have dedicated their books to Beauvoir). I have also noted how this androgyny is irremediably androcentric. It is precisely on this point that Irigaray rejects Beauvoirean egalitarianism. While Beauvoir seeks difference to be expressed within equality, Irigaray seeks equality in difference.\(^44\) In the third part of this chapter, we shall grasp the extent to which Irigaray’s project of rethinking sexual difference sets her up against Simone de Beauvoir. For the moment, I will point out that entrustment theorists and *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* share Irigaray’s rejection of a Beauvoirian type of egalitarianism, which they see equally as an attempted homologation to a male model. However, we shall find an echo of existentialism in the emphasis that entrustment and *il pensiero* put on action as “the social translation of the human value of being a woman”\(^45\) and on their particular

\(^{41}\) For one example amongst a variety of feminists who have attacked Beauvoir on this point, see Dorothy Kaufmann McCall, “Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Jean-Paul Sartre” in *Signs* 5 (Winter 1979): 209-223.

\(^{42}\) See, for example, Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspective on Difference and Equality* (Indianapolis: Bloomington, 1991), pp.2, 58, 127.

\(^{43}\) Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, op. cit., p.49.

\(^{44}\) For example, see Irigaray’s efforts to establish sexuate rights in *Jc, Tu, Nous*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1990), p.12.

understanding of freedom as the capacity to express sexual difference in words and actions.

A schematic view of the French backdrop to the debate between equality and difference can thus be glimpsed by an analysis of the feminist responses to *The Second Sex*. However, the other aspect of Beauvoir’s landmark study - that which accounts for the status of woman as Other - makes it possible for difference feminists such as Irigaray to be reconnected to Beauvoir. It is to this second dimension of *The Second Sex* that I shall now turn.

2. *The Second Sex* and Otherness.

The other axis of *The Second Sex* opens with these lines:

“humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being [...] She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, the Absolute – she is the Other.”46

In order to analyse this passage and its impact on difference feminism, I wish to return to the two greatest philosophical influences behind *The Second Sex* – namely, Sartrean existentialism and Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. I will argue that, while both are central to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir implicitly alters them in order to account for the specific nature of woman’s oppression.

*The Second Sex* argues that the category of otherness is fundamental to consciousness. Thus, to define oneself is to define oneself against the other.47 But this other sets up a reciprocal claim and the relationship between the subject and its

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47 ibid., p.17.
other is one of conflict. The problem with the account of oppression that Sartre offers in Being and Nothingness is that it is somehow incompatible with the stress on the fundamental freedom of the individual. There cannot be oppression as such since the individual is fundamentally free either to submit or to resist and re-assert his freedom by objectifying the other.

Beauvoir certainly employs this existentialist stand on oppression to account for women’s complicity to patriarchy, suggesting that they are partly (but only partly) responsible for the situation they are in. She repeatedly mentions the relative economical and metaphysical advantages of a situation where man provides both material protection and moral justification for woman’s existence.48 We have however already observed that this temptation to forgo one’s liberty and to live as a thing is equally experienced by men. Why is it, then, that women almost unanimously, succumb to it? We shall come back to this question after a Hegelian detour.

Hegel’s master-slave dialectics is often regarded as the other great influence behind The Second Sex.49 What is interesting for an account of the way it is employed by Beauvoir, is to point out that the key to the resolution of the conflict between master and slave lies with the latter. It is the slave who confronts death and chooses life even if this choice means servitude. It is thus the slave who, by choosing servitude, confirms the master’s freedom. In addition, one could say that there is no evolution of consciousness for the master. It is the slave who develops his consciousness. By confronting death, the slave becomes conscious of the fact that, without life, freedom is but an abstract idea. The slave also achieves a certain level of creativity and independence through work – he transforms nature into products for human consumption and satisfies his desires (understood here as basic biological needs). The slave finds confirmation of his own consciousness in the products he makes, and independent of the master’s reciprocal gaze.50

48 ibid., p.20.
49 For example, see Tina Chanter, Ethics of Eros, op. cit., p.50, or Michèle Le Doeuff, “Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism”, op. cit., p.285.
Simone de Beauvoir’s innovation lies in the application of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic to the relationships between the sexes. However, Beauvoir herself acknowledges that only “certain passages” of the master-slave dialectic allow for the comparison. For example, she admits that, in the conflict that opposes her to man, woman never risks her life. Many commentators have also highlighted other limitations to this comparison. For example, Eva Gothlin argues that the conflict between man and woman is much less dynamic since, in Beauvoir’s account, woman’s consciousness never evolves. Thus, only the first phase of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic (where, unlike the slave, “the master has proved himself as pure consciousness by not having set life up as supreme”) is applicable to women.

*Woman as Other.*

Beauvoir’s use of Sartre and Hegel thus enables her to ask two logical questions. We have said that, in relation to Sartre, Beauvoir asks – why is it that women almost unanimously succumb to the temptation to forgo one’s liberty? And in relation to Hegel – if “the Absolute Lord” of the relationship between man and women is thus not Death, why do women, abandon their claim as subjects? These two additional questions show that *The Second Sex* implicitly recognises the insufficiency of Sartre and Hegel’s theories for an account of the extent and specificity of woman’s oppression.

Whilst Beauvoir seems to have little sympathy for those who passively become accomplices of patriarchy, she also mentions the “lack of resources” for women to claim their status as Subjects. As some critics have noted, Beauvoir had already tried to present, in *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1946), a more forceful theory of

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52 ibid, p.96.
53 See Susan James, “Complicity and Slavery in *The Second Sex*” in Grosholz (ed.), *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir*, op. cit., p.74. Tina Chanter also notices the lack of dynamism in the relationship between man and woman. She argues that, in *The Second Sex*, there is a tension between the Sartrean idea of freedom and the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. See Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, op. cit., pp.55-79.
oppression than that found in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943).\(^{56}\) She had asserted that oppression exists when one is prevented from accessing the instruments to realise the projects one has set oneself.\(^{57}\) In that case, the oppressor is unethical because he chooses to refuse to recognise the Other and prevents him from becoming a subject. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir furthers this assertion that one does not simply choose oppression but that, in oppression, one is rather prevented from choosing. Men thus act as this unethical and oppressive collectivity - they deny women self-determination because they find certain advantages in keeping women in a condition of Otherness.\(^{58}\) Men's "bad faith" lies in denying women's dialectical progression by confounding description (of phenomenological sexual difference) with prescription (of the norms tagged onto phenomenological sexual difference). Beauvoir here appeals to Hegel to explain that "when an individual (or group of individuals) is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he is inferior. But the significance of the verb to be must be rightly understood here; it is in bad faith to give it a static value when it really has the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become'".\(^{59}\)

Some critics claim that, rather than restricting herself to the first phase of the master-slave dialectic, Beauvoir in fact goes beyond Hegel in describing women as "Absolute Other".\(^{60}\) Nancy Bauer shows that, while Hegel assumes that the subject will struggle to get recognition as a subject, Beauvoir develops the idea that the Other will struggle to get confirmation of his status as object. The Other will attempt "to seduce others into allowing [her] to alienate [herself] in their gaze".\(^{61}\) This is the reason why women are the oppressed group which manifests the most


\(^{58}\) Amongst these, Beauvoir mentions the economic advantage of having more jobs reserved to them, and the psychological narcissistic advantage of having somebody with whom to compare oneself favourably. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, op. cit., p.23.

\(^{59}\) ibid., p.23. There are of course problems in describing men as a compact oppressive collectivity. We will also encounter them within Italian feminism, in particular in the thought of Carla Lonzi who, like Beauvoir, equalises the differences between men in expressions like "the male", "masculine attitude".

\(^{60}\) James, "Complicity and Slavery in *The Second Sex*," op. cit., p.75.

\(^{61}\) Nancy Bauer as quoted in James, ibid., p.74.
complicity. Bauer's interpretation is particularly interesting if one is to assess the way in which Beauvoir's treatment of woman as Other has been inherited by subsequent generations of French feminists. As the rest of this chapter shows, women as "mirror" to men, defined in such a way as to confirm male subjectivity rather than self-identity, is a theme that one finds in Irigaray (and in Il pensiero).

**Conclusion: after Beauvoir and existentialism.**

Naomi Schor has argued that "Irigaray's work cannot be understood without situating it in relationship to Beauvoir's". Both Irigaray and Beauvoir are indeed concerned with rectifying the state of things which prevent women from accessing subjectivity, and both concentrate on this problem of the Other/other. They denounce the fact that, under patriarchy, "man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative." Nevertheless, Beauvoir and Irigaray's understanding of "Subject" and "Other" is radically different. This difference is the result of a clash of philosophical currents that we have already mentioned above. Beauvoir's "Subject", is the "strong", intentional, active subject of Sartrean existential humanism. The "Other" is the debased, immanent object who is contrived to renounce his aspirations to transcendence. Therefore, difference, women's status as Other, is here wholly negative. It is that which has to be fought in order for women to access subjectivity. The Other must be transformed into the other - men must recognise women as subjects. It is thus the "mechanisms of othering" that The Second Sex describes, and it is on this humanistic ground that materialist feminists such as Delphy argue against the position of Irigaray. Without anticipating on the

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63 Naomi Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips With Irigaray" in Differences 1 (Summer 1989):45.
64 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, op. cit., p.15.
65 ibid., p.686.
66 Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One", op. cit., p.44.
third part of this chapter, I will point out here that the human subject analysed by Irigaray is poststructuralist rather than existentialist. It is not a subject who uses language as a means of communication, but a subject constructed in/by language. It is Irigaray’s conceptualisation of the subject and other (as other of the same) that entrustment and il pensiero will inherit. We shall now examine, in the second part of the chapter, how Lacan presents this subject before concluding the chapter on Irigaray’s complex relationship with the Lacanian theory of subjectivity.

Section II. Jacques Lacan.

The opening chapter of this thesis has considered the emerging dialogue between psychoanalysis and feminism in the 1970s. I have stressed that Juliet Mitchell and Nancy Chodorow’s work illustrates the gap between the feminist reception of psychoanalysis in the Anglo-American and the Continental contexts. While Mitchell and Chodorow use different schools of psychoanalysis, neither consider the symbolic dimension of gender. The second part of this chapter describes the different feminist reception reserved to psychoanalysis in France. In particular, it points to a privileging of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan forms the Société Française de Psychanalyse in the 1950s in reaction to the popularisation of psychoanalysis in the U.S.A (through ego psychology and depth-therapy), to the rise of object-relations theory in the U.K. and to the stifling presence of the Société Psychanalytique de Paris in France. Lacan has played a central role in revitalising the national and international resonance of French psychoanalysis. This success of this enterprise must also be attributed to the work of many “dutiful daughters”.67 It is this national resonance for feminism that I will now describe. In the following part of this chapter, I will concentrate on Luce Irigaray, considering her as a “defiant” rather than dutiful daughter.68 In order to do so, it is necessary to spell out Lacan’s analysis of language, sexual difference and subjectivity.

67 Braidotti, Patterns of Dissonance, op.cit., p.21.
For Lacanian psychoanalysis, subjectivity is constituted across three different orders - the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. These are not to be conceived of as stages in the individual's development but as coexisting and interlocked psychic components. Lacan first outlines his critique of the strong humanist subject in the 1930s. In “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I” (1936), Lacan accounts for the fundamental split and alienation of the subject who first acquires a sense of self in relation to a specular reflection in a mirror. In this paper, Lacan describes how this external and unified reflection challenges the infant's inner experience of chaos, lack of co-ordination and control. The “Mirror Stage” explains how the assumption of this “mirage” in which the infant “misrecognises” himself gives the ego an illusory and frail sense of mastery, characteristic of the order of the Imaginary.

We will later come back to this metaphorical function of the mirror (as other/mother/analyst) when dealing with Irigaray and with the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. For the time being, let us point out that Lacan’s account of the formation of the ego in “The Mirror Stage” works within universal categories. It is not until Lacan’s elaboration of the order of the Symbolic, in the 1950s, that sexual differentiation comes to play a part. It is therefore Lacan’s structuralist account of the subject in language, where the latter takes up a position with regard to the phallus, which has been most interesting and contentious for feminists. The point of contact between Lacan, Irigaray's theory of sexual difference in France and il pensiero in Italy lies in the elaboration of the symbolic order.

Lacan, psychoanalysis and linguistics.

In “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (1953), Lacan stresses the importance of understanding the two central concepts of

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the unconscious and of sexuality in relation to the field of language. Lacan
"returns" to Freud through the lens of Saussurian structural linguistics. Briefly,
Ferdinand de Saussure breaks language down to its most elementary component,
namely the sign. A sign is composed of two unified elements – the signifier (the
sound-image) and the signified (the object-concept). Lacan takes up the distinction
between signified and signifier but, unlike Saussure, insists on their separation and
hierarchical ordering. Lacan goes against the common understanding of language as
the expression of concepts, ideas (signified) by means of words (signifiers). He
inverts the relationship and submits language to the laws of the signifier. Indeed,
following Roman Jakobson’s so-called “diacritical thesis”, Lacan argues that the
identity of the signifier does not derive from a signified to which its sends back but
from its difference with another signifier. The signifier thus never exists on its own
but always in relation (or, more exactly, in opposition) to another signifier. Hence,
meaning is not to be found in the signified but in the connections between pre-
existing signifiers, in what Lacan calls “the signifying chain”.70

I would like to highlight two important points in relation to Lacan’s
conceptualisation of language. First, it confirms the lack of unity or substance of
the subject, already exposed in “The Mirror Stage”. The subject does not control
language or produce meaning but is enslaved by the signifying chain, in which he
functions as a mere signifier.71 In conformity with Freud, Lacan argues that when
the subject speaks, he produces a truth he himself does not know.72 This truth is
temporarily glimpsed in the sliding from one signifier to the other, that is in the
gaps of the subject’s own discourse.73 Secondly, and most importantly for my
account, Lacan’s assertion that the signifier functions independently, implies that in

70 Lacan, “Agency of the Letter In the Unconscious Or Reason Since Freud” in Alan Sheridan (ed.),
73 See Lacan, ibid., p.154. The functioning of language in terms of metaphor and metonymy, that
Lacan models on Freud’s description of the unconscious processes of condensation and
displacement is outside the scope of my study. I here wish to confine myself to a concise discussion
of Lacan’s conceptualisation of language in relation to sexual difference. For a feminist allusion to
the distinction between metaphor and metonymy, see Luce Irigaray, “La Mécanique des Fluides” in Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p.108 and Gallop, Reading Lacan (Ithaca and
order to access language, the infant will have to take a position in this signifying chain which pre-exists him. This brings us back to the importance that sexual difference plays in the infant’s entrance into the symbolic order (the order/law of language and signification). 74

Language, desire and sexual differentiation.

What breaks the identification of the infant with the (m)other in the Real (the order where the infant is completely dependent on his mother for the satisfaction of his biological needs) and what strengthens the imaginary self-mastery glimpsed in the mirror is the infant’s entrance into the Symbolic order. In Lacan, the subject’s accession to language parallels Freud’s account of the vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex when the child becomes an autonomous social (and speaking) being. For both Freud and Lacan, this process is experienced differently by boys and girls. In Freud, this difference is determined by the castration complex, to which Lacan comes back. 75 Lacan however substitutes the phallus as a signifier to the biological penis of Freud’s account. Lacan’s linguistic construction of Oedipal relation is centred around lack as ontological category, and around the phallus as the privileged signifier of that lack and of the desire to fill that lack. Therefore in Lacan’s account of the formation of the subject in the Symbolic order, lack, desire and the phallus are inextricably linked.

Lacan defines human desire in Hegelian terms as “the desire of the other”. 76 The infant progressively accesses the position of subject by means of

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76 Lacan, “Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” in Ecrits: a Selection, op. cit., p.58. Benvenuto and Kennedy rightly point out that, in French, “le désir de l’autre” carries two meanings which both play a role – “le désir de l’autre” can refer to the Other’s desire or the desire
identifications. In the Real, the identification with the mother, who fulfils the child's every need, is complete. In the order of the Imaginary, the child tries to compensate for the mother's absence and for the delay in the fulfilment of his needs, by identifying with what the mother desires, that is the phallus. Lacan defines his dependence on his mother's love as the desire for her desire. Conversely, the infant takes up the role Freud has assigned to him, that of providing the mother with the only possible substitute to the phallus.

In the accession to the Symbolic, a further identification in relation to the desire of/for the other is made. In the first instance, which can be seen as the re-interpretation of Freud's castration complex, the father intervenes to break the imaginary dyad between the infant and the mother. The father is the law-giving father who forbids the desire of the mother (in both senses – as the desire for the mother, and as the desire to be what the mother desires)78. The access to the phallus is here forbidden because the phallus only belongs to the father (as embodiment of the law). It is only subsequently to this assumption of the castration complex as a law, which Lacan calls the Law-of-the-Father, that the child (if male) can identify with the law-giver. This is how Lacan describes the shift in the position of the little boy from being the phallus for the mother to having it.

We can here restate the relationship between desire, lack and sexual difference. Desire is always a desire for what one lacks, and by definition, impossible to satisfy. In addition and most importantly for feminists, lack is always articulated around the phallus. Thus "the phallus is the privileged signifier".79 The mother desires the phallus. The child first desires to be the phallus for the mother and eventually acquires the phallus himself. The phallus also becomes the signifier of sexual difference. Women take a position in the signifying chain as those who lack the phallus, while men are positioned in the same signifying chain as having the phallus.

78 ibid., p.83.
79 ibid., p.82.
Language thus imposes order on confusion. It pre-exists and assigns meaning to the individual who is split and whose sexuality is, in Freudian terms, polymorphous. However, in order to be assigned meaning, that is, in order to assume the Name-of-the-Father, the individual has to abandon something (the mother, the original confusion, the polymorphous sexuality...). Language therefore always contains a remainder of desire repressed or expressed symptomatically within the gaps of discourse.

Lacan's phallocentrism.

Clearly, privileging the phallus as signifier of desire and lack has different consequences for masculine and feminine subjects. It is true that both subjects face incompleteness in language since desire subsists as repressed. However, one could easily argue that because the phallus is the privileged signifier and because this privileged status seems to be confirmed by our present cultural norms, it is at least easier for the masculine subject to imagine that he is master. In other words, language confirms him as master. Lacan himself acknowledges the disadvantaged position of woman in her relationship to the phallic term, which he describes as a relationship of "masquerade". ⁸⁰

Before coming to Irigaray's critique of Lacan's "phallocracy", ⁸¹ I would like to stress that Lacan's differentiation between the penis (as the biological organ) and the phallus (as a signifier) is often advanced in response to such attacks. ⁸² Against Lacan's allies, some commentators have claimed that this distinction, already unclear in Freud, is slippery in Lacan. ⁸³ Diana Fuss sees a hidden essentialism in privileging the phallus as signifier since the phallus constantly conjures up images

⁸⁰ ibid., p.84
of the penis. Indeed, Lacan himself seems prone to slips of the tongue where he mentions a "real phallus" in reference to the penis. For her part, Gallop argues that, rather than a slip of the tongue, Lacan uses "the real phallus" ironically in order to show how this term has been misunderstood. She nonetheless remarks that "such subtleties of irony never leave the user uncontaminated." Furthermore, if one combines this with the sexism inherent in Lacan's many puns on words which systematically reduce femininity to the female genitals, the claim of essentialism is strengthened. Although positing the phallus as distinct from the penis, Lacan is thus inclined to regressing to the biological. So much so that Macey claims that, in accordance with his own definition of metaphor, Lacan merely substitutes "the penis" for "the phallus." Lacan just reformulates Freud's account of the castration complex in structural terms.

As we shall see in Section III of this chapter, Irigaray also maintains the centrality of sexual difference and of the symbolic to subjectivity while contesting the phallocentrism of the Lacanian account. As Chapter IV will make clear, her attempt to contest the inherent pessimism of Lacanian theory, for which "symbolisation is destiny", and her suggestion that an alternative to the phallic symbolic order is possible, are followed by the Italian theorists of sexual difference. I would like to postpone this discussion by examining what Lacan explicitly says about Woman and about her relation to the order of the Real.

2. The Real and the feminine:

From the Sixties, Lacan re-enforces his thesis about the fundamental split of the subject between the imaginary knowledge he has of himself and the truth visible in the cracks of his own discourse. This truth, to put it paradoxically, is that there is

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87 For an analysis of these puns, see Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, op. cit., p.202 - 209.
88 ibid, p.188. Also see Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, op. cit., p.62.
no "truth" of the subject. The domain of this truth, that which surfaces in full speech from the unconscious, and that which resists symbolisation is the order of the Real. It should be said from the outset that, although the meaning and importance of the concept of the Real evolve throughout Lacan’s writings, it is in no way to be confounded with reality, or with the individual’s perception of the phenomenological world.

The Real can be associated to Freud’s death-drive. For Lacan, the subject, once spoken, is motivated by a desire to recapture its origin, its own nothingness at the margins of discourse. From the start, the subject is marked by death. The inanimate state towards which Freud’s death-drive was supposed to strive is, for Lacan, the symbiosis with the mother in the Real. But this return to the Real is impossible (and dangerous). It is within the structure of this impossibility that desire is formed. Desire could also be defined as the ceaseless demand for the lack of being to be filled. It is a demand for fullness. This demand is made to the Other (mother, psychoanalyst) in the belief that the Other will be able to fill it. But, as said above, through the intervention of the father in the mother-child dyad, the child realises that the mother is equally marked by a lack. The Other thus becomes the other, an object a, whose fullness is barred (borah). We can now see the relationship between need, demand and desire – "when the child demands something of its mother, his needs are satisfied but there is always a trace of that original loss and whatever the mum gives, it won’t fill the gap/division." Desire is therefore the residue left when needs have been satisfied. It is also in relation to this lack that language is created. Language can thus be conceived as a “defect in the purity of non-being." It signifies existence in so far as it bars non-existence, that is the Real. The Real is that which the individual comes up against when attempting to

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91 This is the origin of another Lacanian objection to the social-symbolic of entrustment, which seeks to recuperate the symbolic potential contained in the pre-oedipal mother-daughter relationships. By seeking a “return” to the mother through a practice of the relationships between women, entrustment could be thought to imprison women in a pre-linguistic essence. We shall come back to evaluate the validity of this point in Chapter V.

92 Jacqueline Rose in *Feminine Sexuality*, op. cit., p.32.

signify desire. The Real threatens signification and subjectivity, and as such, it is forbidden by the phallus as signifier. For Lacan, all human knowledge is hence built upon this repression of non-being. The phallus is the guarantor of knowledge and female genitals (which cannot be seen) remind of that threat to knowledge. The Real is ultimately the “dark side” of the subject, the domain of origin (death), of the mother. That is why the origin (in mother) must be overcome, something which Irigaray, entrustment and il pensiero theorists seek to challenge.

*Lacan and the jouissance of The Woman.*

Crucially for my argument here, the Real is also the site where Lacan situates the feminine. That is why woman in language only exists as a part object (*object a*). Her existence is necessary in so far as she confirms the existence of human identity. However, Woman as such does not exist (*The Woman*). Sexual difference is inscribed in language only in relation to the phallus. It is precisely this definition of women subjected to the symbolic power of the phallus that Irigaray aims to challenge.

It is with the idea that language exists to fill the void left by the subject’s lack of being that Lacan approaches the topic of the specificity of woman’s sexuality in his seminar “Encore” (1972-73). It is here that he differentiates between (phallic) pleasure and *jouissance*. Language and knowledge are pleasurable in the sense that they give the individual a feeling of cohesion and mastery. But, at the same time, the individual is unable to enjoy truth in language. In acceding language, the subject trades a superior kind of enjoyment which Lacan calls *jouissance* for phallic pleasure. Language harnesses *jouissance* because of the latter’s connection with desire, truth and the Real. *Jouissance* is detected when something resists phallic enjoyment.

When man identifies with the phallus in language, he binds himself to phallic enjoyment. Lacan hypothesises that woman’s access to the symbolic as “not-all” (as lacking the phallus) points the fact that she might have access to *jouissance*. Lacan defines her enjoyment as something supplementary, which transcends phallic
enjoyment (thus the title “Encore”). This surplus cannot be integrated into language and is thus prohibited under the law of castration. Jouissance is something which woman can know by virtue of her place at the margins of the symbolic. But it is also something that she cannot express. A surprising assertion thus follows - Woman might be the one who is in contact with the real phallus because the phallus of language is a fraud.

This analysis of women’s sexuality is ambiguous for a feminist reading. On the one hand, it suggests that female sexuality could be considered as autonomous (“beyond the phallus”). On the other hand, and precisely because “jouissance” is beyond the phallus, it cannot be signified. Thus, women are unable to know or express their sexuality, independently of the phallus. Equally, Lacan’s contention that Woman does not exist could be favourably welcomed as an anti-essentialist claim which Beauvoir herself could have uttered. However, by portraying women as this unsymbolisable “not-all”, Lacan does not budge from the description of women’s sexuality as the “dark continent” and still does not (intend to) answer Freud’s question “What does a woman want?”. In Lacan, Woman is still mysterious, hysterical and her sexuality is still devouring, threatening to civilisation. Lacan could thus be read in essentialist terms since

essence in fact operates in Lacan as a leftover classical component which re-emerges in his theory of woman precisely because it is woman who escapes complete subjection to the Symbolic and its formative operations. In her inscription as not

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95 ibid, p.69. Lacan compares this experience of jouissance with religious ecstasy and cites Bernini’s statue of St Theresa (p.71). St Theresa is a figure who reappears in both Irigaray’s thought (see “Cosi Fan Tutti”, in This Sex Which Is Not One) and in the elaboration of il pensiero (see Diana Sartori, “Perché Teresa” in Diotima, Mettere al mondo il mondo: oggetto e oggettività alla luce della differenza sessuale [Milan: La Tartaruga, 1990]). Irigaray criticises Lacan for looking for an expression of female jouissance in a statue sculpted by a man. Diana Sartori seems to take up Irigaray’s suggestion and examines what Theresa herself has to say. Theresa becomes an inspirational woman who has found a way of signifying sexual difference in a phallocentric world, and of putting words to jouissance, thus making feminine sexuality active.
all (as Truth, lack, Other, objet a, God) woman becomes for Lacan the very repository of essence.\textsuperscript{97}

\textbf{Conclusion: after Lacan.}

From the above discussion of Lacanian psychoanalysis, one can easily understand why one finds, within post-Beauvoiran French feminism, both "anti-Lacanians" and "Lacanians". The anti-Lacanian camp is occupied by theorists such as Delphy and Plaza who reject psychoanalysis (with its focus on embodiment, the unconscious and sexual difference) as inimical to feminism. The Lacanians embrace all three broad aspects of Lacanian theory: the critique of the humanistic subject, the centrality of sexual difference and of the symbolic to subjectivity, and the analysis of socio-political reality in terms of an analysis of language. They take up the questions linked to female sexuality that Lacan reopens but fails to answer - how does women's enjoyment go beyond the parameters of the phallus? How far our language has been unnecessarily confined to phallic parameters? Is there a need, in psychoanalytic theory, for the subversion of the Oedipus Complex? \textsuperscript{98} And, if so, what would be left of psychoanalysis altogether? The following part will precisely deal with the answer provided by some Lacanian feminists. In particular, it will concentrate on Luce Irigaray and the controversial group "Psychanalyse & Politique" ("Psych & Po") as the two acknowledged French influences behind the social-symbolic practice of entrustment.

\textbf{Section III. Specular games: Luce Irigaray and the theory of sexual difference.}

1974 marks a decisive year in the relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism. Within that same year, Juliet Mitchell’s \textit{Psychoanalysis and Feminism}
and Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* are published in England and in France respectively. Unlike *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, the novelty presented by *Speculum* does not reside in the fact that it sets up a dialogue with Freudian theory, since psychoanalysis already forms the battleground on which materialist Beauvoireans oppose difference theorists such as Irigaray and "Psych & Po". Within the history of the *Mouvement de la Libération des Femmes* (MLF), the latter plays a central and controversial role. The picture of French feminism emerging from the social unrest of 1968 is similar to its Italian counterpart. It is heterogenous, not organised and only shares the strategy of separatism and the goal of liberation. At the outset, "Psych & Po" distinguishes itself for its declared antagonism to the French women's movement, which it sees as re-asserting, rather than challenging, what it calls "phallocentrism". Under the leadership of the charismatic and authoritarian psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque, "Psych & Po" eventually usurps the MLF and, through a legal case, transforms it into a registered trademark. MLF déposé, as "Psych & Po" comes to be known, imposes a homogenised and hierarchical image on this very disorganised and eclectic feminist landscape.

Against this historical background, the originality of Irigaray's *Speculum*, which occasions Irigaray to be thrown out of Lacan's *Ecole Freudienne*, lies in its more critical engagement with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Certainly, Irigaray is not solely a (practising) psychoanalyst and her intellectual influences cannot be reduced to Freud and Lacan alone. However, she defines her project as a "process of interpretative reading [which] has always been a psychoanalytic undertaking" as well. That is why we need to pay attention to the way the

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100 For an account of this painful episode of French feminism, see Kaufmann-McCall, “Politics of Difference”, op. cit., pp.282-293, or Claire Duchen, *Feminism in France: From May 1968 to Mitterand* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), ch. 2. If we take into account the fact that, through its approach to feminist militancy, "Psych & Po" effectively tried to silence many diverging feminist groups, it is not surprising to find, in writers like Delphy, a strong wariness of any tendency to equate French feminist movement with psychoanalytic feminism.
unconscious works in each philosophy and perhaps in philosophy in general”.

Irigaray adopts and adapts psychoanalysis for her theoretical purposes while treating it as a discursive symptom of the inability to think sexual difference. Like "Psych & Po", Irigaray seeks the transformation of Lacan’s “phallocentric order”, to be achieved via a return and a symbolisation of this original “homosexual” pre-oedipal link with the mother. However, Irigaray is critical of the political practices (such as homosexuality and Lacanian analyses) promoted between the members of the Parisian group. Through an exegesis of Irigaray’s work, this last part of the chapter will thus also compare and contrast the positions adopted by Irigaray and by "Psych & Po", as both are central to the theoretical debates and practical political experiments which led to the creation of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. In Chapter III, we will indeed see the way in which “Psych & Po” prompted the adoption in Italy of the “Practice of the relationship between women” ("la pratica delle relazioni tra donne") and “Practice of the Unconscious” ("la pratica dell’inconscio"). We will also advance reasons for the eventual dismissal of the latter practice in favour of entrustment. Moreover, I will argue (in Chapters III and IV), that it is the Lacanian Irigaray which has been privileged by entrustment in particular and by il pensiero della differenza sessuale in general.

1. The scopic economy:

Let us begin by focusing on Irigaray’s critique of psychoanalysis as a discourse of knowledge. I shall approach Irigaray’s argumentation by referring to the imagery of the mirror that she here uses in two distinctive ways. On the one hand, Irigaray contends that psychoanalysis is a discourse which mirrors a male imaginary. On the other, she focuses on the mirror which psychoanalysis itself uses in order to represent the body, and offers the speculum as an alternative.

102 Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, op. cit., p.75. For a further analysis of this comparison and contrast between Irigaray’s style and the format of a therapeutic analysis, see Gallop, Feminism and Psychoanalysis: the Daughter’s Seduction (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp.57, 71-74.
Irigaray contests the Freudian account of the little girl’s psychosexual
development because it is modelled on the little boy’s and articulated around the
penis.\textsuperscript{103} She argues that Freud’s masculinist bias is not disputed by Lacan. The
latter indeed maintains the centrality of the castration complex and of the penis
envy which are “further elaborated in [their] structural dimension.”\textsuperscript{104} The
foundations of the psychoanalytic discourse are thus not rational but passionalexternal in
that they are grounded in a male body.

For Irigaray, the Freudian and Lacanian “phallic economy” is also a “scopic
economy”.\textsuperscript{105} It assumes that that which can be seen exists (the penis/phallus), and
discards that which cannot be seen as non-existent (female genitals).\textsuperscript{106} Irigaray
illustrates this point by returning to Lacan’s mirror stage. But instead of
concentrating on the image which is reflected in the mirror, Irigaray now draws
attention to the mirror itself. It is a flat mirror,\textsuperscript{107} which only reflects the surface of
the body. In Irigaray, the Lacanian mirror becomes, a metaphor for the
“Ho(m)osexual imaginary”\textsuperscript{108} where the desire for the same (the male) dominates
the rules of representation.\textsuperscript{109}

To this image of the flat mirror, Irigaray opposes the new form of the
speculum, that curved mirror which enables to see beyond what is visible.\textsuperscript{110} The
speculum reverberates the surface of the female body but also what lies inside it —
namely, the major part of the female genitals. The speculum allows Irigaray to
present a possible alternative to the psychoanalytical discussion of woman’s
pleasure and desire.

\textsuperscript{103} Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which Is Not One}, op.cit., pp.36-39.
\textsuperscript{104} ibid., p.62.
\textsuperscript{105} ibid p.26. Instead of the “scopic economy”, Irigaray employs, in \textit{Speculum}, Derrida’s expression
of the “metaphysics of presence” (See Luce Irigaray, \textit{Speculum of the Other Woman}, trans Gillian G.
Gill [Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1985], p.83)
\textsuperscript{106} see Lacan’s assertion that “the female sexe has the character of an absence, a void, or a hole.” (as
\textsuperscript{107} Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which Is Not One}, op. cit., p.129.
\textsuperscript{108} A combination “homme” (man) and “homosexual”. See Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which Is Not One}, op.
cit., p.171.
\textsuperscript{110} Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which Is Not One}, pp.154-155.
One cannot ignore the etymological proximity of “speculum” and of “speculation”, which both come from the same Latin root “specere” (“to look at”). To speculate is to conjecture. Irigaray thus conjectures that what is excluded in psychoanalysis (or, what psychoanalytic discourse does not “see”) is the possibility of a feminine auto-eroticism which does not depend, as Lacan would have us believe, on the desire of the other. It is in “This Sex Which Is Not One” that Irigaray invokes the image of the two lips which constantly touch one another. Against the one organ of the phallus, she points out that woman is neither one (lip) nor two, but multiple, simultaneously active and passive. Her sexuality is also “plural” since her erogenous zones are spread out all over her body. In an implicit reference to Lacan’s “Encore”, Irigaray explains that women desire “always something more and something else besides that one – sexual organ, for example – that you give them, attribute to them.” In “Cosi Fan Tutti”, Irigaray accuses the existing imaginary (which language reflects) for making female jouissance impossible to symbolise. But Irigaray adds that this is so only because the logic of the same has repressed any type of sexual pleasure other than phallic pleasure.

This discussion of the specificity of woman’s pleasure has often been used to argue for Irigaray’s biological essentialism. In contrast, I would stress that, rather than favouring clitoral over vaginal pleasure or arguing that “women […] have a distinctive psychology and desire given by the nature of their sexual organs”, Irigaray uses female sexuality as an image of multiplicity to challenge the logic of the same. The image of the two lips conveys another logic whose existence is repressed by the dominance of a male imaginary. Therefore, Irigaray uses the metaphors of the mirror and of the speculum in order to contest the ahistoricism of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, like any other discourses of knowledge, reflects the prejudices of its time and is informed by a male imaginary centred around the phallus/penis. It is thus marked by the impossibility of thinking sexual difference.

111 ibid., p.29.
112 This is how Janet Sayers interprets Irigaray’s discussion of the two lips. See Janet Sayers, Sexual Contradictions: Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Feminism (London: Tavistock, 1986), p.42. The superiority of clitoral over vaginal pleasure is explored by many feminists in the 1970s, including Carla Lonzi in Italy (see my Chapter III).
113 Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, pp.98-99.
In addition, the term “speculation” also has a financial connotation which Irigaray, who repeatedly uses an economic lexical field, certainly takes into consideration. “To speculate” means to engage in the buying (or selling) of a commodity in the hope of considerable financial gain. Financial speculation involves an element of chance or risk. The risk of Irigaray’s enterprise, is double. As mentioned, Irigaray risks the charges of biological essentialism, conservatism or anti-feminism. In her opening woman’s body up to theoretical speculation, Irigaray also risks conjuring images of penetration, rape, objectification, or voyeurism, already numerous in Lacan. These risks are nonetheless worth taking since the gain involved in Irigaray’s speculation is the prospect to think and symbolise the feminine (I will shortly come back to what this requires). Irigaray can only speculate on the content of this feminine. She does not prescribe it but allows for a possibility to think/speak it in all its plurality. The precise poetic style of her works concurs with this attempt to combat the logic of the One – one approach, one interpretation. By playing on the polysemy of language and subverting grammatical rules, Irigaray favours a plurality of styles and meanings.

This is probably where one of the significant differences between Irigaray and “Psych & Po” lies. Like Irigaray, “Psych & Po” relies on psychoanalysis as the only discourse on sexuality. “Psych & Po” equally contests the extent to which feminine sexuality has been confined to phallic parameters and stresses female multiplicity. Unlike Irigaray, the members of “Psych & Po” devise an active homosexual sexual practice which is said help women resist this imposed phallocracy. Trying to define sexual difference starting from sexual practice is highly problematic, since it can lead to the replacement of one sexual norm (heterosexuality) by another (homosexuality) which is deemed, in essentialist terms, more “authentic”. Replacing phallocracy with lesbianism is a leap Irigaray

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114 For these last two charges, see Delpy, “The Invention of French Feminism”, op. cit, p.218 and Plaza, “Phallomorphic Power and the Psychology of Woman”, op. cit., p.9.
115 see Macey, Lacan in Contexts, op. cit., pp.178-184. On this point, it is interesting to note that, in medicine, a speculum is an instrument used to dilate the opening of a corporeal cavity (especially the vagina) for medical examination.
116 Duchen, Feminism in France, op. cit., p.88. As we shall see, this strategy of plurality is referred to as “parler femme” (speaking as a woman/ like a woman).
117 Antoinette Fouque as quoted in Duchen, Feminism in France, op. cit., p.83.
Implicitly refuses to make by \textit{indicating} the possibility of a feminine sexuality and not \textit{devising} one. We shall encounter the same problems in Chapter III with the differentiation Carla Lonzi makes between a clitoral and a vaginal woman. We will also see how many of the forerunners of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment resist this sexual dogmatism to opt, like Irigaray, for a promotion of symbolic homosexual links between women.\footnote{In that respect, Irigaray, for whom homosexuality is primarily symbolic, is closer to Rich’s notion of a “lesbian continuum”. Entrustment and \textit{il pensiero} perceive this affinity between their two sources of inspiration.}

\textit{Irigaray’s imaginary.}

The speculum that Irigaray proposes is thus a theoretical invitation to think our relation to our body in different terms and thus acknowledge, at least, the partiality of the male imaginary. In that way, Irigaray’s understanding of the imaginary does not confine itself to the Lacanian notion of a phantasised relationship of mastery over one’s body. Irigaray also thinks of the imaginary as something produced socially and historically. It reflects the (false) ideas a particular society has of itself. In that respect, it is akin to Althusser’s definition of ideology as “the \textit{imaginary} relationship of individuals to their \textit{real} conditions of existence”\footnote{Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)” in \textit{Essays on Ideology} (London: Verso, 1984), p.36. I will of course point out that Lacan had a recognised influence on Althusser’s conception of ideology. For an account of the similarities and differences between Lacan’s concept of \textit{m	extae connaissance} and Althusser’s concept of “\textit{interpellation}”, see Caroline Williams, \textit{Contemporary French Philosophy: Modernity and the Persistence of the Subject} (London: Athlone Press, 2001), pp.68-70 and pp.105-106.}. In Lacan, consciousness (that part of the ego which thinks about itself as a unified subject) is always “false” because it is based on a \textit{m	extae connaissance}. Irigaray does not oppose this “false” masculinist consciousness to a “true” feminine one,\footnote{This corresponds to Duchen’s reading of Irigaray (see Duchen, \textit{Feminism in France}, op. cit., p.101).} but to the possible existence of \textit{alternative visions of reality}. In addition, Irigaray also understands the imaginary as a function of the conscious, imagining mind. On the one hand, she links this understanding of the
imaginary to mythical, artistic or literary products of imagination. On the other, the imaginary also helps to designate an alternative which has to be imagined and created (as we shall later see, through the work of "specula(risa)tion"). This contrasts strongly with Lacan’s pessimism about change and justifies the political reception of Irigaray’s work in Italy. As the following chapters show, entrustment and il pensiero exponents have inherited this critique of the “hom(m)osexual” imaginary which informs both the discourses of knowledge and social reality. Italian feminists have also taken up Irigaray’s polysemic imaginary. Let us now turn to a second use which Irigaray makes of the metaphor of the mirror – that of language as a mirror to men and not women.

2. The symbolic mirror

The comparison of language to the flat mirror which does not reflect women’s identity is a leitmotiv of Irigaray’s work, one on which she has elaborated ever since the publication of Speculum. It is also a theme which has been crucial in the development of the theory of sexual difference in Italy in its attempt to devise a feminine symbolic order. In addition to spelling out this theme, we will also discuss Irigaray’s use of the image of the mirror in relation to the theme of the relationships between women, itself central to the social-symbolic practice of entrustment.

Irigaray sides with Lacan and agrees that language is phallocentric, but she departs from him in questioning the extent to which language has been confined to phallic parameters. Echoing Derrida’s critique, Irigaray decries language as satisfying the “economy of the logos.” In language, the phallus is taken as the central signifier, and, in the name of “metaphysical closure and coherence”, women are defined as different and excluded from language as subjects. But the original act of taking the phallus as the paradigm is forgotten, hidden under a false

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121 For a discussion of Irigaray’s understanding of the imaginary in connection with Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard, see Whitford, Luce Irigaray, op. cit., pp.54-55.
neutrality and universality. This is what Irigaray calls the "sexualisation of discourse", or "sexual indifference". One could restate this process in terms of the mirror imagery: the matter of which the mirror is made is women's (or, the mother's) body (in that men look at women's body and decide it is different from theirs because it is lacking) but women's (the mother's) body is not reflected in the mirror. In that sense, Irigaray recalls one aspect of Beauvoir's *Second Sex* that we have discussed above: women serve as mirror to men.

For Irigaray, this false neutrality of language has several consequences for women. Firstly, it means that women cannot translate or represent their own relationship to their body and to the mother. They have no imaginary of their own. They thus experience themselves "only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) 'subject' to reflect himself, to copy himself." The phallocentric symbolic reserves for women the position of the hysteric in language since women cannot assume their own discourse and constantly seek the approval of the other. One could elaborate on this and contend that both hysterics and the psychoanalytic discourse which analyses them are constructions of the phallocentric symbolic.

Secondly, the phallocentric symbolic also creates a problem which could be referred to as "the equalisation of women" and which could, once again, be formulated using the mirror image – in the existing symbolic, women mirror one another. Woman acquires value – that is, a position in language - only in relation to an outside, transcendental "Golden Standard" (the phallus as signifier of desire). Therefore women are all equal objects waiting to be given value by men in a

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123 Irigaray, *Speculum*, op. cit., p.28.
124 Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, op. cit., pp.73, 74.
125 ibid., p.30.
126 Irigaray, *Speculum*, op. cit., pp. 68, 72. On hysteria, see Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, op. cit., p.35. The analysis of hysteria has been central to the development of the theory of sexual difference in Italy, as Chapter III will show. In chapter IV, we will also see how Irigaray’s description of hysteria has also been used by entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists to describe the position of the emancipated woman who constantly seeks the approval of men by assimilating to their models, discourses and language.
127 David Macey has also remarked that psychoanalysis and hysteria are inseparable. See Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, op. cit, p.200.
relationship of symbolic exchange. They have no value of their own. There is no exchange between women which is not mediated by men. Hence Irigaray’s contention (itself very influential for Italian feminism) that in the existing symbolic, relationships between women do not exist, and that the differences between women cannot be represented. As the following chapters will show, this analysis, which conflates equality with equivalence, has been recuperated to attack theories of emancipation in Italy.

\textit{The mother as totem.}

The third consequence of the “sexual indifference” of the symbolic order regards women’s relationship to the mother. Luce Irigaray here contests the Freudian and Lacanian notion that subjectivity demands that the imaginary link with the (m)other be severed. In that way, the mother is exploited as an unacknowledged means to achieve identity. In the preceding part, we have seen how, in Lacan’s construction of the Imaginary, the mother functions as a mirror where the child may capture the image of an illusionary unity and coherence.

Irigaray historicises Freud’s Oedipus complex and its Lacanian structural adaptation as theoretical translations of the course of development one has to follow in order to be a social actor in a patriarchal symbolic system. She proposes the following alternative to Freud’s interpretation of the Oedipus complex: the desire to kill the father becomes a desire to eliminate the one who has artificially severed the bond with the mother in order “to take over the power of creating any world.” This is reflected in terms of phylogeny. Irigaray indeed suggests the possibility of a matrilineal pre-historic civilisation, and Clytemnestra, Oreste and Electra here replace Oedipus as the guiding myths. Patriarchal civilisation is thus

130 Irigaray, \textit{This Sex Which Is Not One}, op. cit., p.73. The same contention is to be found in Luisa Muraro’s \textit{L’ordine simbolico della madre}, analysed in Chapter IV.
132 ibid., pp.15-19.
“sacrificial” since it is based on the unrecognised murder of the mother by the father who would have replaced the desire for the origin ("umbilical link") by that for the phallus. One could argue that, in Irigaray’s writings, Lacan implicitly stands for this “father” who interprets the umbilical desire as a desire for the phallus. Such a substitution would place Irigaray closer to Lacan than originally anticipated since Irigaray also describes desire, in a way, as being “beyond the phallus”. Unlike Lacan, Irigaray nonetheless seeks to symbolise this desire beyond the phallus, that is jouissance and the feminine. We shall come back to this point when discussing Irigaray’s re-working of the Lacanian concept of desire below.

For the moment, let us focus on the alleged necessity to sever the link with the mother as the cause of the difficulty and even impossibility of a symbolised link between mother and daughter. Unlike the little boy, who compensates for the loss of the mother by identifying with the phallus in language, Irigaray stresses that there is nothing with which women can offset this loss. That is the reason why the little girl enters the symbolic order as hole, lack, fault, “castration”. In Irigaray’s eyes, the lack of social differentiation between women (that is, the fact that women mirror one another) and the expectation that women eventually take their mother’s place (women mirror their mother) thus explain the difficulty many women encounter in the relationship with their mother.

It is clear that on the issues of symbolic order (which is inherently masculine), of phallocratic denial of relationships between women, and of the severed link with the mother, Irigaray, “Psych & Po”, entrustment and il pensiero

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133 on the notion of the “sacrificial”, see Irigaray’s essay “Women, the Sacred and Money” in Sexes and Genealogies, op. cit., pp.82-83.
134 Irigaray, Le corps-à-corps avec la mère, op. cit., p.25.
135 Irigaray points out that in Western culture, motherhood is glorified when it involves a male child not a female. She provides a psychoanalytical explanation – the valuation of motherhood is a social translation of male narcissism, since it helps re-assert the power of the phallus. Man “[values] woman in so far as he values himself – in her role as mother, correlative of his fatherhood, proof of his potency” (Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, op. cit., p.63).
136 Irigaray, Speculum, op. cit., p.83. In psychoanalysis, the person who suffers from melancholia designates does not accept, does not represent to him or herself the loss of the loved object. Language thus constructs women as both hysterics and melancholics (Speculum, op. cit., p.68).
theorists share common ground. All seek a “Revolution of the Symbolic.”\footnote{This is “Psych & Po”’s own expression (see Duchen, Feminism in France, op. cit., p.85). See also No.42-43 of des femmes en mouvement hebdo (1981), “Psych & Po”’s own periodical, entirely dedicated to this issue of homosexuality.} However, “Psych & Po” and entrustment theorists go a step further than Irigaray or other exponents of il pensiero in devising a precise political practice based on women’s alterity. The social-symbolic practice of entrustment aims to symbolise the mother-daughter relationship via a network of social relationships between women (once again, let us stress that this does not necessarily involve lesbianism). In Italy, the sacrifice and exploitation of the mother have also proven to be very influential themes for il pensiero as a whole. Entrustment and il pensiero are viewed as combating the sexual indifference of social discourse via the recognition, that is the payment of a “symbolic debt”, of the part played by the (Symbolic) Mother in the construction of subjectivity. I will come back to these themes in Chapters IV and V. It is in the latter chapter that I will question the capacity of entrustment not so much to recognise the work of the mother but to make the mother speak. There, I will also point to a divergence which seems to exist within il pensiero, namely between those who wish to pay a “symbolic debt” to the actual mother (Luisa Muraro) and those who insist on the existence of a mother who remains symbolic (Lia Cigarini). For the time being, let me turn to the more constructive side of Irigaray’s work which has inspired entrustment theorists to construct “female genealogies”.

3. “Specul(aris)ation”.

We have seen how Irigaray uses the imagery of the mirror in different ways in order to show that both imaginary and symbolic orders bear the masculine mark. The third use that Irigaray makes of the mirror is that of exhorting women to engage in a work of “specul(aris)ation”.\footnote{Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, op. cit., pp.154-155.} On the one hand, women have to start from the language at hand and imagine other possibilities denied by the existing...
language ("speculation"); on the other hand, they need to find a mirror/language for
themselves ("specularisation"). Finding a new language is an enterprise which is
fundamentally political, as a change in the symbolic order is inextricably linked to a
change in the social order. It is this political aspect of Irigaray’s work that has been
pursued in Italy where the new feminine language devised is that of entrustment.
Some exponents of il pensiero della differenza sessuale consider entrustment as
having given women words with which a symbolic return to the mother is made possible.\textsuperscript{140}

Examples of “speculation”, that is of the work upon the existing language,
can be found in Irigaray’s notion of “parler femme” (speaking-as-a-woman) and in
her tactical use of mimesis. Very briefly, for a “parler femme”, women must
emphasise what has been marginalised in language in order to show up its
unconscious. This involves playing on polysemy and disrupting syntax.\textsuperscript{141} “Psych
& Po” also proceeds to a polysemic work on language and on syntax. Contrary to
the dialogical practice of entrustment, “Psych & Po” concentrates on writing as a
way to “undermine the function of language as a tool for the naming and ordering
of experience by masculinity”.\textsuperscript{142} More influential in Italy has been the strategy of
mimesis. It is centred around the deliberate acting out of the representations of
woman in discourse, but in a manner which is exaggerated so as to “convert a form
of subordination into an affirmation and thus to begin to thwart it”.\textsuperscript{143} Mimesis
turns passivity into activity in order to produce sexual difference in discourse.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{140} Adalgisa Giorgio, “Writing the Mother-Daughter Relationship: Psychoanalysis, Culture and
Literary Criticism” in A. Giorgio (ed.), Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother
\textsuperscript{141} On the notion of “parler-femme”, see “Power of Discourse and Subordination of the Feminine”,
“When Our Lips Speak Together”, in This Sex Which Is Not One; “The Three Genders” in Sexes and
Genealogies, and “Women’s Discourse and Men’s Discourse”, in Je, Tu, Nous. The work on
language has often attracted the accusation that Irigaray’s project amounts to “a retreat into
aesthetics” which involves “the trappings of old ‘feminine’ lyricism” (see Christine Fauré as quoted
in Fuss, Essentially Speaking, op. cit., p.56). I contest this interpretation to contend that there is a
more actively political side to Irigaray, as the Italian emphasis on her theme of female genealogies
show.
\textsuperscript{142} Duchen, Feminism in France, op. cit., p.35. One must note the close association of “Psych &
Po” and Hélène Cixous’ notion of “écriture feminine” (feminine writing).
\textsuperscript{143} For example, see Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, op. cit., p.76.
\textsuperscript{144} In the next chapter, we will see how, in Italy, the notion of mimesis can primarily associated with
the work on feminine hysteria, carried out in the 70s, partly under the influence of “Psych & Po”.
Chapter IV will show how a sort of mimetic definition of woman as “the living being who has
In addition to this necessary speculative work on the existing language, women must create a language of their own ("specularisation"). For Irigaray, this can only be done by establishing "female genealogies". As emphasised in Chapter I, Irigaray does not understanding "genealogy" in a Nietzschean or Foucauldian sense. For her, "genealogy" refers to the "descent" or "lineage" from a point of origin (the mother). The female genealogies that are to be created would need to be centred along vertical and horizontal axes. These two axes also structure the relationship of entrustment.

The horizontal axis of female genealogies.

The horizontal dimension, which Irigaray calls a place "among women", "among sisters", or a "social entity of women" could be conceived in terms of consciousness-raising. On the one hand, it is aimed at making each woman conscious of the false neutrality of reality and of her experience as a condition shared by all women. On the other, it is destined to establish a feminine counterbalance in the form of "new values that correspond to their creative capacity". The horizontal dimension of female genealogies is nonetheless different from Anglo-Saxon consciousness-raising since the latter takes language to be a means of communication, of expressing rather than constituting subjectivity and women's oppression. I think this divergence also explains why French language in the form of self-alienation" filtered through to the seminal text of the theory of sexual difference in Italy (Adriana Cavarero, "Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference", in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (eds.), The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory [London and New York: Routledge, 1993], p.199). Chapter VI will finally compare Irigaray's strategic use of mimesis to Cavarero's notion of "conceptual theft".

In Chapter I, we have seen how Foucault described the genealogical method as being opposed to the search for origin. In Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche, Irigaray interprets Nietzsche's denigration of origin as a fundamental ressentiment for maternal creativity (Luce Irigaray, Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche, transl. Gillian C. Gill [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], p.34).


This reference to women's experience also conjures the problems of universalisation mentioned in Chapter I. Entrustment theorists also refer to women's common experience of symbolic exploitation (This Sex Which Is Not One, op. cit., pp.66-67) which forms the basis of all other types of exploitation. We shall come back to this objection of overlooking other differences such as race and class when dealing with the critical examination of entrustment in Chapter V.

Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, op. cit., p.67.
materialist feminists have often denounced Irigaray for ignoring the social construction of the “feminine” and for advocating a kind of pan-sexualism which strongly verges on naturalism.\(^{149}\)

The horizontal axis of female genealogies thus supports strategic separatism aimed at developing a social system that recognises sexual difference. This preliminary and temporary essentialism is indeed practised with a view of re-entering a society where the two sexes could occupy the position of subjects. The productive communication between two subjects of different sexes is, in Irigaray's lexicon, called “love”.\(^{150}\) Contra Lacan, Irigaray asserts that sexual relationships do not exist but could if we rethought the symbolic order. Those relationships of love form the main thrust of the series of lectures compiled in *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and inform much of Irigaray's later work.

"Psych & Po" and entrustment also stress the value of separatism as a temporary strategy. The latter indeed theorises a way of empowering women to participate in a mixed society. However, this concern for free mixed relationships as a goal of the practice of sexual difference is not always shared across *il pensiero*. For example, Muraro declares: “I recognise and rejoice that the existence of female genealogies is conducive to freedom, even in the relations between the sexes, but I consider it an effect, not an end; I assign the dignity of being an end only to female freedom and whatever is indispensable to attain it.”\(^{151}\) Therefore, the ethical dimension of the relationship between the sexes, central to Irigaray's later work, is less evident in the theory of sexual difference in Italy. In that respect, entrustment and *il pensiero* are sometimes much more separatist. Although they posit separatism as a strategy and not as an aim in itself, I think that ultimately what some *pensiero* theorists work towards is a society which is better for women, “whatever is indispensable to attain it”. This disagreement might also explain why the influence of Irigaray's thought (especially her more recent work) on Italian

\(^{149}\) Monique Plaza, “Phallomorphic Power and the Psychology of Woman”, op. cit., p.9.


feminism is today declining. We shall turn to these pressing issues in the last three chapters of the thesis.

The vertical axis of female genealogies.

It is to Irigaray’s conceptualisation of the vertical axis of female genealogies that I would like to return for the moment. While the horizontal axis is the axis of equality between women (that is, their equal belonging into the feminine gender), the vertical axis is that which allows them to express their disparity. The vertical axis is linked to the efforts to reclaim pre-Oedipal attachment with the mother in order to symbolise it. The maternal genealogy would challenge the patriarchal, phallocentric symbolic since it would put an end to women’s specular confusion (women would no longer mirror one another or the mother). In other words, women need symbolic mediation in order for them to sublimate their drives and transcend the illusory realm of the imaginary.

In some of Irigaray’s writings, the need for symbolic mediation is linked to the theme of the divine, which seems to reappear in interesting ways within Italian feminism. The vertical axis of female genealogies can be interpreted as an axis which gives women a God. The conception of God held by Irigaray is very different from the judgmental, punishing, Judeo-Christian God created in the image of man. Irigaray rather thinks of God as a projection or principle linking perfection, fulfilment and becoming. She writes: “To become means fulfilling the wholeness that we are capable of being.” God is thus a concept created by the

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152 One might want to note that, for Irigaray, “gender constitutes the irreducible differentiation that occurs on the inside of ‘the human race’” (Sexes and Genealogies, op. cit., p.170) before race, class, age and other varying features of an individual’s identity. Again, Irigaray is strongly Lacanian in her conception of sexual difference at the basis of identity and subjectivity.


154 Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, op. cit., p.64.
human mind and which has no end point. I find in these kinds of formulations not only an echo of Beauvoir's existentialist call for transcendence, but also a resonance with the social-symbolic practice of entrustment whose aim, as said, is "female freedom", that is the capacity to express feminine sexual difference socially. This also has implications for the type of feminine self envisaged by il pensiero theorists. In the following chapters, we will see how sexual difference does not refer to an essence but rather to a project or a process. It is therefore an identity which registers change and does not achieve closure.

A contentious return to the mother.

A study of Irigaray's use of the metaphor of the mirror has enabled the identification of the main themes that Italian feminists inherit from her work. In addition to a critique of the male imaginary which informs psychoanalysis, Italian feminists share Irigaray's assessment of the symbolic as an order where men only are able to occupy the position of subjects of desire. Because language is phallocentric, women are denied a relation to their origin. Thus, the symbolic foundations of our culture are built on the impossibility of a proper genealogy between women. But this situation needs not be so. Women could have a language of their own if genealogies between women were constructed. As we shall see in Chapter IV, the theorists of entrustment follow the guidelines set out by Irigaray in order to construct relationships between women which would translate their common belonging to the female sex, while respecting the differences separating them.

I would like to conclude my discussion of Irigaray with some of the objections raised in relation to her project of symbolising the pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother, since the same reservations could be raised in relation to the strategies of "Psych & Po" and il pensiero. Lacanian feminists have implicitly accused Irigaray of misinterpreting Lacan's theories on at least four points. Firstly, Irigaray is often blamed for locking women outside language and

155 ibid., p. 61.
history, and for arguing that women have another essence. I think this objection is entirely invalid. Irigaray contends that the problem lies in the fact that women are prevented from acceding language as subjects and remain prisoners in language (where they function as lack). Irigaray would certainly not disagree with her critic Jacqueline Rose when the latter notes that “If woman is defined as other it is because the definition produces her as other, and not because she has another essence”. In addition, Irigaray argues for women to search for an alternative by starting from this same phallic language (“speculation”), not from a fictitious “outside”. As we shall see in Chapter IV, this is an exhortation that il pensiero theorists follow.

The second Lacanian objection usually sees Irigaray as refusing the Lacanian split subject, whose desire is formed by this loss of origin. As an answer, I would like to mention the way in which Irigaray envisages the reciprocal relationship between imaginary and symbolic orders. I believe that, here again, Irigaray is closer to Lacan than her critics realise. Irigaray’s understanding of the imaginary-symbolic relationship appears to follow a shift in Lacan’s writings. As Rose points out in relation to Lacan’s earlier texts, unity is assigned to the Imaginary, whereas in his later texts, “There is no longer imaginary ‘unity’ and then symbolic difference or exchange, but rather an indictment of the symbolic for the imaginary unity which its most persistent myths continue to promote”. For Irigaray as for Lacan, the imaginary informs the symbolic and the latter is responsible for strengthening the unconscious hold of the former. The imaginary and the symbolic are hence not temporal stages in the teleological psycho-sexual development of the individual. They are co-existing elements which are never irremediably overcome. Thus, when Irigaray suggests that we should return to the mother-daughter relationship, she does not suggest that we return to a pre-social psychic organisation but argues for a

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157 As mentioned before, Fuss argues that it is Lacan who re-essentialises woman as “not-all”. See her *Essentially Speaking*, op. cit., p.12.

158 Rose in *Feminine Sexuality*, op. cit., p.56.

159 ibid., p.55.

160 ibid., p.47.
remodelling of the symbolic where the phallus is not the *sole* signifier of desire. It is in the *symbolic* that the intervention of female genealogies will be crucial in letting an alternative imaginary appear. Thus, Irigaray does not necessarily abandons the Lacanian idea of the decentered subject, but rather argues for a subject which is not *solely* signified in relation to the phallus. I will contend later that entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists also follow Irigaray on that point.

The third objection regards this concept of desire which, contra Lacan, can be signified. It is true that, for Lacan, signifying female jouissance would indeed be very dangerous due to the close association of desire to the Real, the (m)Other and death. Irigaray does not insist on the domination of the Real and of the death-drive. Rather, she argues for a different allocation of the life and death instincts in culture, one where women would not inherit death. For that, women must become subjects of desire. Margaret Whitford expresses this idea very clearly: “Women’s ‘nature’ has been constructed by a particular symbolic organisation, in which they are ‘used’ for the representation and sublimation of men’s death drives, but are unable to sublimate or represent their own”. 161 This change is brought about by a conscious and thus political work on the symbolic.

One could be suspicious of any attempt to make the unconscious conscious and to insist, as the members of “Psych & Po” do, on the necessity of individual analyses for women to be freed from the unconscious hold that “phallocracy” have on their behaviour. As said, Irigaray distrusts this strategy and one can easily see why. Psychoanalytic relationships aimed at “freeing” women from the grips of phallocracy raises questions of power within the relationships between women. Who is to decide when one is “freed” – the analysand or the analyst (Antoinette Fouque, in “Psych & Po”’s case)? Irigaray openly criticises Fouque’s excessive and dubious fidelity to the Lacanian psychanalytic practice. 162 Indeed, as the analyst of many women in the group, Fouque’s ability to read their unconscious desires and phantasies is accepted and undisputed. Her personal grip on “Psych & Po”, her intolerance of dissidents and her quasi-Messianic status call forth the

comparison with Lacan (Fouque's own analyst). In Chapter V, we will ask whether
the social-symbolic practice is not too close to Lacanian psychoanalytic practice for
the potential abuse of power from the *affidataria* to be contained.

The final objection usually raised against Irigaray, which I believe is the most
persistent, concerns the fact that the mother to whom women return is already
constituted as a subject.\(^{163}\) She thus bears the rules of the existing symbolic and has
had to comply with them in order to take her place in the symbolic system of
exchange. Irigaray is well aware of this problem since she herself explains the bad
relationships between women on the fact that they all compete for the symbolic
place reserved to the mother in patriarchy. Irigaray has always stressed the
difficulty in bringing forth the feminine in a system which is based on its erasure
(hence the strategy of "speculating" with the existing language). As for "*Psych &
Po*" theorists, they would again likely stress the usefulness of psychoanalytic
therapies within the group as a supplement to this work on language. We will return
to the question of the "phallic" mother (and to the "phallic" inspirational woman)
who bears the norms and prejudices of the society she lives in Chapter V. I shall
contend that entrustment theorists are equally wary of a dangerous return to a
phallic mother. Nevertheless, because they exclusively focus on sexual difference
as an ontological difference, they ignore the fact that, even if the *affidataria*'s
discourse is not phallic, it might still bear the dominant racist, homophobic or class
norms of contemporary society. Thus, the question of oppressive power contained
within these relationships between women is overshadowed.

**Concluding remarks:**

The above discussions of Beauvoir, Lacan, Irigaray and "*Psych & Po*" has
shed light on the theory of sexual difference as elaborated in France, as favourably
received within some Anglo-American feminist circles and as vehemently rejected
by Christine Delphy. Firstly, I have used Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* to re-

\(^{163}\) Mitchell in *Feminine Sexuality*, op. cit., p.23.
open the debate between equality and difference. I have examined the ways in which materialist feminists such as Delphy have used the egalitarian and anti-essentialist aspects of Beauvoir’s influential classic as a weapon against difference feminists in the 1970s. *The Second Sex* has also been read here in a way which accounts for the specificity of woman’s oppression and which indirectly reconnects it with Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference.

Secondly, I have tried to show the psychoanalytic origin of Irigaray’s “poststructuralist rewriting” by examining Lacan’s influence on the French feminism of difference that Delphy labels as anti-feminist. In Section II of this chapter, I have spelled out the Lacanian understanding of the subject, of the other and of the structural role of language. I have also shown the limits and potential that Lacanian thought presents for feminism.

The third part of the chapter has concentrated on the French feminists specifically targeted by Delphy’s article, namely “Psych & Po” and Irigaray. We have advanced the former’s controversial role within the history of the *MLF* as a major reason behind Delphy’s rejection. We have also analysed its complex relationship with Irigaray. Irigaray’s critique of the homosexual imaginary and symbolic together with her invitation to construct a language in which women would be reflected as subjects have been extensively discussed.

It is now time to see how French and Anglo-American feminist theory has influenced the development of Italian feminism. The next chapter will familiarise us with the Italian background to the specific development taken by the theory of sexual difference in Italy and will take us up to the point when the social-symbolic practice of entrustment is elaborated in 1983. Irigaray, “Psych & Po” as well as some important features of Anglo-American feminism will reappear in the discussion. However, I will endeavour to retrace the specific course that the Italian theory of sexual difference takes from its first formulations in the late 1960s to the invention of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment in 1983. Let us hence turn to this fascinating period in the history of Italian feminism.
Chapter III
Equality and Difference: the Italian Context

Introduction: the “waves” of Italian feminism?

The history of Italian feminism shares some general characteristics with the development of feminism in the Anglo-American and the French contexts. Equality and difference are still two central concepts, and one can identify a displacement from an egalitarian to a difference perspective, where many of the shifting definitions of both equality and difference already encountered in the previous chapters resurface. However, Italian feminism could also provide a strong case study to contest any reconstruction of feminist history in terms of a transparent debate between defenders of equality and subsequent supporters of difference. The Italian feminist historian Luisa Passerini has argued that the two processes of equality and difference “are always interconnected but perhaps not so synchronised as they have been in the Italian case [...] where] the dialectical relationship between equality and difference with regard to gender is particularly evident not only on the theoretical level but also historically.” Similarly, Italian feminism could also serve as a good example to question a sharp and repeatedly stressed dualism opposing an Anglo-American approach to a continental tradition. As it will become clear from the historical reconstruction here, Italian feminism heavily borrows and adapts theories put forward by both Anglophone and French feminists.

The task of this chapter is thus to reconstruct a history of feminism in Italy. In Chapter I, I have argued that accounting for the history of feminism in terms of successive waves presents the risk, amongst others, of giving the crude impression of a smooth and linear development of feminist theory and practice. This is particularly true if one wants to account for the specificity of the Italian context. In the last 140 years, Italian history has been anything but “smooth and linear”. Italy has moved from a nation of small ducalities and principalities to a unified democracy (1870). It has known a period of fascist rule (1922-1944); a
bitter post-war ideological battle between the far left and the remainder of the far right; one of the quickest and most important economic boom in Europe (mid-1950s to mid-1960s); a long-lasting social movement of protests (1968-1973), home-grown terrorism (1973-1980) and finally, a traumatic anti-corruption political purge at the beginning of the 1990s.\textsuperscript{2} Relating the history of the Italian feminism in terms of “waves” would obscure the influence that these historical events, specific to the Italian case, have had upon women and upon feminism itself. This would fail to account for the consecutive and sometimes simultaneous opportunities and difficulties that Italian feminism has had to contend with.

Some feminist commentators have thus attempted to analyse the socio-cultural specificity of Italian feminism by identifying distinct historical periods. For example, Gisela Kaplan has identified four distinct epochs in the history of Italian feminism – the first stretching from the Unification to the rise of Mussolini (1870-1920); the second covering the fascist dictatorship and the end of the war (1922-1946); the third including post-war Italy (1946-1968), and the final relating to the student protests and the advent of “new wave” feminism.\textsuperscript{3} However such an approach is limiting for the more theoretical purpose of tracing the origins of the theory of sexual difference that I wish to pursue in this third chapter of my thesis.

In this chapter then, I will trace the vicissitudes of the move which has led to the formulation of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and to \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale}. From 1968 onwards, heterogeneity characterises Italian feminism. The feminist movement is splintered into different groups which often have conflicting ideological positions. Debates within Italian feminism are thus fierce but encouraged and they contribute to the richness and vivacity of feminist theory. Whilst Chapter IV will exclusively focus on entrustment and on \textit{il pensiero}, this chapter traces the theoretical debates which progressively lead some feminist groups to choose entrustment as the social and symbolic practice constructing the maternal symbolic. For this particular task, I

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{2} For a historical account of these events which does not solely concentrate on feminism, see Christopher Duggan, \textit{A Concise History of Italy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Gisela Kaplan, \textit{Contemporary Western European Feminism} (London: Allen and Unwin, 1992), pp.232-258. For another breakdown of Italian feminism into historical periods, see Susan
\end{itemize}
will not consider solely the history of Italian feminism in terms of either the equality vs. difference debate or successive historical stages. I will also relate the theoretical move which eventually leads to entrustment and to *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* in terms of a theoretical and practical shift from an analysis of sexual relationships between the sexes to a study of the relationships between/amongst women.

The first section of this chapter thus concentrates on Italian feminism’s analysis of the relationships between men and women. It records the existence, in Italy, of an egalitarian tradition. We have already come across some of its theoretical features in Chapter I and we will seek here to identify some specific cultural and historical characteristics which have marked the Italian fight for gender equality. The second section of this chapter deals in more detail with the development of the difference perspective by the group *DEMAU* (“Demystification of Authority”), by *Rivolta Femminile* and by the radical feminist Carla Lonzi. From our point of view, the period described in this second section is one of transition. Not only do we find, in post-1968 Italy, the emergence of a gynocentric perspective which seeks to re-value feminine sexual difference positively and above the masculine gender. Italian feminism also gradually evolves from a focus on the relationships between the sexes to an analysis of the relationships amongst women thanks to the emerging practice of “autocoscienza” and to the growing demands for separatism. The third section of this chapter records the shift provoked by the “Practice of the Unconscious”. It is here that the meeting of a few Italian feminists with the French group “*Psych & Po*” completes the definite theoretical move from the analysis of sexual relations to an analysis of the relationships between/amongst women. It is also here that the language and perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis makes its entrance on the Italian feminist scene. It is this concluding section which will allow an evaluation of the legacy left by Italian feminism in the 1970s for the future theorists of entrustment.

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Section I. The relationships between the sexes and the emergence of Italian feminism.

Gisela Kaplan claims that Italy’s democratic tradition “emanating from the Renaissance cities of the north, revived by the freedom fighters of the Risorgimento […] and evidenced in the participatory principles of the workers’ movements of the late 19th and 20th centuries” has often been undermined by an opposite but simultaneous current of machismo “steeped in violence, spanning the rural Mafias and fascism, surfacing regularly as a reactionary force throughout the post-war”. As the following discussion shows, this has meant that, in terms of the analysis of the relationships between the sexes, equality and difference have often co-existed either to advance the cause of women or to hamper it.

I will here consider the emergence of Italian feminism from the birth of the Italian State (1870) to the commencement of the women’s movement (1968). I believe that, in order to convey the specificity of the Italian context, one has to consider the “forces” which have shaped the “Woman Question” and have influenced the development of feminism since Italy’s unification. We will therefore examine, in turn, the impact that republicanism, the Church, fascism and socialism (the PCI and syndicalism) have had on the budding of Italian feminism. We will also consider the characteristics which have endured and which can still be found, in one way or another, in the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and in il pensiero della differenza sessuale.

1. Republicanism and unification: women as “mothers of the nation”.

Like elsewhere, the egalitarian movement in Italy can be dated back to the end of the nineteenth century. Italian egalitarianism is rooted in the moral and secular republicanism of Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-72), a central figure in Italy’s patriotic fight for unification (Risorgimento). In that respect, Mazzini’s defence of women’s civic equality is closer to Wollstonecraft’s than it is to John Stuart

4 ibid., p.230.
Mill’s. Mazzini initiates the fight for gender equality by arguing that the process of the Risorgimento, if it is to be complete, must include women. Like the English Liberals have done before him, Mazzini stresses that women are part of humanity, and he appeals to utility in order to contend that the building of a nation requires educated and virtuous citizens. Equality is here again a civic notion to be translated practically by a rise in education and a fight against illiteracy amongst women.

Typically, the republican understanding of equality involves rights but also, and maybe principally in the case of women, duties towards the nation. Mazzini defines women as “the mothers of the nation”, a status which, like in Rousseau, requires them to be confined to the private sphere, that realm of morality un tarnished by the corrupting influence of public life. Therefore, Mazzini’s conception of the nation modelled on the family fails to challenge the sexual division of labour and difference becomes interpreted not as straightforward inferiority but as complementarity. The shortcomings of Mazzinian republicanism are reflected in the Civil Code of the newly unified Italy – women are still economically, politically and legally dependent on their father or husband.

The urgency of unification is also felt by Mazzini’s contemporary women republicans (such as Sara Nathan, Carlotta Benettini, Anita Garibaldi) who prioritise it as their chief concern. Nonetheless, one of these women, Cristina del Belgiojoso, attempts to combine the question of feminism within what is perceived as the more pressing and worthy cause of the Risorgimento. In 1866, Cristina del Belgiojoso publishes her Scritto sulla condizione della donna (Writing on the Condition of Woman), attempting to analyse the specificity of women’s situation.

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5 Some feminist historians have described the feminism of this period as a “feminism of duties” (“feminismo dei doveri”). See, for example, Roberta Fossati’s review of Franca Pieroni Bortolotti’s Alle origini del movimento femminile in Italia (1848-1892) in Aida Ribeiro and Ferdinanda Vigiani (eds.), Cento titoli: guida ragionata al feminismo degli anni Settanta (Ferrara: Luciana Tufani Editrice, 1998), p.32.

6 Strong echoes of this pro-family and nationalist discourse can be found in France. See Karen Offen’s article, mentioned in Chapter 11 (“Defining Feminism: a Comparative Historical Approach” in Signs 14.1 (1988): 144).


8 Kaplan, Contemporary Western European Feminism, op. cit., p.231.
2. The Catholic Church and fascism.

The second “force” to have an effect on the emergence and on the development of Italian feminism is represented by the Vatican. Stressing the importance of the Church as a central feature in Italian political and cultural life has almost become cliché. However, when it comes to issues relating to gender and directly affecting women, this commonplace certainly holds some truth. Though seriously undermined by the Risorgimento, the Church manages to maintain its influence and authority over Italian political affairs, through an involvement in everyday life, local initiatives and associations. Hence, the position of the Church on the nature and role of women still retains its social and political significance. Little variation marks the pre-1968 position of the Church on the nature and role of women. Here again, sexual difference is conceptualised in terms of complementarity. Women are portrayed in essentialist terms as quasi-Saintly or as sinful temptresses. The tension between these two feminine stereotypes produces an ambiguity in the Papal pronouncements about women’s naturally determined role as mothers. On the one hand, motherhood is praised as embodying women’s perfect traits. On the other, good mothering is presented as being under constant threat from women’s sinful disposition. Thus, motherhood either represents woman’s rightful destiny as well as her means of fulfilment, or a responsibility to be taught and dutifully accepted. The pronouncements on motherhood, the affirmation of the sanctity and irrevocability of marriage, as well as the condemnation of non-procreative sex form a long-lasting obstacle during the fight, in the 1960s and 1970s, for the legalisation of contraception, abortion and divorce (three laws which, as we shall see shortly, mark the advent of a women’s movement in Italy).

The Church’s influence on Italian feminism and on gender is intensified by the fact that there has existed, since unification, a catholic feminist movement. In

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10 ibid., p.8. Italian unification had meant the loss of the vast majority of the Papal territories and the confiscation of Rome as capital. Arguably, the decline of the Church’s power had been made worse by the Pope’s refusal to recognise the new Italian State, and by the threats of excommunication he directed to all citizens willing to participate in political life.
11 The dogma of the “Immaculate Conception” is pronounced by Pius IX in 1864. See Caldwell, Italian Family Matters, op. cit., p.10.
12 ibid., p.21.
a first instance, it aims at a greater involvement in the life of the Church on the part of women, and campaigns for women to join the workplace.\textsuperscript{13} To what it calls a “feminism of vindication” (that is, the liberal feminism of claiming rights) it opposes the aforementioned “feminism of services” (based on women’s so-called natural “social vocation” to care for others and to contribute to the life of the community). The defence of this “feminism of service” is inherently essentialist and utilitarian. A series of associations are created by a variety of catholic women to rethink the interaction between women and the public sphere. These remain under the suspicious surveillance of the Vatican.\textsuperscript{14} The presence of this religious form of feminism in Italy in the first half of the 20th century, and in a revived form after WWII,\textsuperscript{15} not only allows the communication between catholic and secular feminists but also probably triggers an interest for religious themes amongst some sections of Italian feminism. To this day, some important exponents of \textit{il pensiero} remain very interested in the relationship between women, ecclesiastical institutions and the divine.\textsuperscript{16}

From the First World War, a reinforced understanding of difference as complementarity and destiny marks a quieter period for Italian feminism.\textsuperscript{17} In the 1920s, the fascist regime strengthens the women’s vital roles as wives and mothers.\textsuperscript{18} A series of conservative pieces of legislation such as maternity rights and restrictions on working mothers are voted. However, the faltering economy of Italy prevents the total confinement of women in their roles as wives and mothers,

\textsuperscript{13} Paola Gaiotti De Biase, \textit{Le origini del movimento cattolico femminile} (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1963), pp.96-97.
\textsuperscript{14} One could mention, for example, the constitution of the \textit{Fascio Femminile Democratico-Cristiano} (1901), the \textit{Federazione Femminile} (1905), the \textit{Unione fra le Donne Cattoliche} (1909). Amongst the prominent activists, one finds Adelaide Coari, Antonietta Giacomelli, Adele Colombo, Angiolina Dotti and Pierina Corbetta. See De Biase, \textit{Le origini del movimento cattolico femminile}, op. cit., p.170.
\textsuperscript{15} For example, soon after WWII, the \textit{Centro Italiano Femminile} is founded by conservative catholic women previously active in the Resistance. It stresses women’s place and role within family life and it manages to attract a large membership. See Kaplan, \textit{Contemporary Western European Feminism}, op. cit., p.240.
\textsuperscript{16} For works on the transcendental by Luisa Muraro, see my Chapter II, n.153.
\textsuperscript{17} One should point out a difference between the Anglophone and the Continental contexts here. As it is the case in France, Italian feminism enters a more subdued period at the onset of WWI without having won the vote for women (they are denied enfranchisement in 1912).
\textsuperscript{18} In 1929, Mussolini and the Vatican sign the Lateran Concordat. It restores the pre-unification prominence of the Church in political affairs and confirms the indissolubility of the family as well as the rule of the husband over his wife and children. See Kaplan, \textit{Contemporary Western European Feminism}, op. cit., p.234. On the complex relationships between women and fascism, with which Italian feminism has had difficulties to come to terms, see Victoria de Grazia, \textit{How Fascism Ruled Women. Italy: 1922-1945} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
and it cannot afford to lose the large (unskilled and cheap) female workforce. In addition, the participation of a high number of women in the Resistance movement during the fascist period keeps feminists' emancipationist hopes alive and places women in a good position to demand (as well as obtain) enfranchisement after the Second World War.

3. The Italian Left and the “Woman Question”.

The third influence that Italian feminism has always felt is that of the Left. As Bianca Beccalli writes, “Despite some disagreement and tensions, feminism and socialism have never been in conflict in Italy, as they were in other industrialised countries at the end of the C19th.”

It is true that, within the post-unification Italian Left, one also finds the familiar effort to associate the “Woman Question” with that of class and to encourage women to assimilate to the worker’s fight against capitalism. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the question of gender equality is subsumed by class equality and Marxist analysis fails to tackle the specific oppression suffered by women within capitalism and within the proletarian family. The Italian Socialist Party of Turati thus refuses to fight for women’s enfranchisement.

However, while some women within the party (such as Anna Kuliscioff) press for equality in the terms Marx had envisaged, others, like Anna Maria Mozzoni, already argue for considering the question of emancipation independently from that of class, and point to the necessary step of extending rights to women. Mozzoni, who notably pushes for the right to divorce and for the right to vote, founds La lega promotrice degli interessi femminili (“The league for the promotion of women’s interests”) and is considered by some commentators as the forerunner of the fight for liberation. In an attempt to study the specific condition of women and in order to promote their specific interests, other grass-root organisations or journals are created at this time. As

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20 Kaplan, Contemporary Western European Feminism, op. cit., p.232. See also Franca Pieroni Bortolotti (ed.), Anna Maria Mozzoni. La liberazione della donna (Milan: Mazzotta, 1975).
21 For example, Gualberta Adelaide Beccari founds the journal La Donna, still distributed today.
the rest of this chapter and the remainder of this thesis will show, Italian feminism could, in general, still be defined as a network of women’s groups and periodicals.

Another feature already apparent in the years following Italian unification is the enduring link between feminism and syndicalism. This has been explained in terms of Italy’s late industrialisation, of the importance of agriculture and of the weakness of the industrial working class. All these factors have produced a type of socialism with a much more heterogeneous class composition than elsewhere in Europe.22 The workforce is indeed composed at that time of a small number of high-skilled workers and a mass of young unskilled workers. Trade Unions tend to fight for mass of unskilled workers, which include most women. Another special characteristic of the Italian unions lies in the recruitment of intellectuals from outside, some of whom are female schoolteachers (“maestrine socialiste”). The unions thus offer a contact between socialism and feminism and an opportunity for women to access positions of relative influence within the unions’ hierarchy. Hence, the Italian unions are, at this time, unknowingly feminist. In addition, the encounter between women and the unions probably gives Italian feminism one of its enduring strategies of mass (often violent) demonstrations, its high political awareness at grass-root level, and its openness towards foreign feminist theorists (notably those of Rosa Luxembourg, Clara Zetkin and Aleksandra Kollontaj). 23

Working women also form their own organisations to demand improvement of working conditions and wage increases. For example, textile women workers create the Società delle Sorelle del Lavoro (“Union of Sisters of Work”) in Emilia in 1889. On a more national level, the Unione delle Donne Italiane (“National Women’s Union” [Rome]), the Associazione Nazionale delle Donne (“National Women’s Association” [Milan]), the Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane (“National Council of Italian Women”) and the Comitato Nazionale per il Voto alle Donne (“National Committee for Women’s Suffrage”) are established around the same time. See Kaplan, Contemporary Western European Feminism, op. cit., p.232.

22 Beccalli, “The Modern Woman’s Movement in Italy”, op. cit., p.153. This distinguishes the Italian from the British context. In the latter, the class system is more pervasive. In the British context, feminism develops first and foremost from a middle-class perspective and, for a long time, a certain hostility characterises the relations between middle and working-class feminists. As the fights for divorce and abortion show, Italian women from different class backgrounds often unite in mass demonstration in order to fight for what is seen as essential rights. Class could also be considered as an index of variation between British and American feminisms, which this thesis associates under the label of “Anglophone” or “Anglo-American feminism”. In the United-States, the class system is less pre-determined, more flexible and therefore less easy to define. On the issue of class and the different influence this category has had on American, British and Italian feminism, see Bassnett, Feminist Experiences, op. cit.

23 Bassnett identifies violence as one of the characteristics of Italian feminism. For her, violence escalates as Italian feminism develops. Violence culminates in the phenomenon of female
The end of the Second World War provides an opportunity to re-launch women’s fight for equality as women expect to be rewarded politically for the active part they have played in the Resistance. The right to vote is secured nationally in 1948. It is also at that time that gender equality is written into the Constitution and that the Unione delle Donne Italiane (Union of Italian Women or UDI) is formed. It is sometimes argued that the UDI is established and financed by the PCI because of a fear that newly enfranchised women would vote for more conservative parties. However, its members are originally from all parties and the UDI retains the freedom to set its own agenda. The UDI’s outlook still espouses an egalitarian perspective, pushes for legal reform (the UDI is indeed instrumental in the fight for the legalisation of divorce and abortion), and focuses on providing practical aid and support for women in the shape of services ("assistenziali") such as day-care centres and communal laundries.

Yet again, women find themselves caught, so to say, between the devil and the deep blue sea – the devil being the Christian Democrats whose power depends too much on the Church to be of a real help for the advancement of legal equality, and the deep blue sea being the strong Left which is at best ambivalent about emancipatory politics. The PCI still insists on the emancipatory opportunity that joining the workforce offers to women, despite its leader’s opinion that the “Woman Question” is not a single-class or a single-party issue but is closely linked to the process of democratisation as a whole. Palmiro Togliatti, who headed the PCI from 1944 to 1964, is indeed instrumental in granting women an influential position within the PCI. Nevertheless, the role of women within the family and the specific nature of female oppression still

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24 Again, a number of organisations such as the Gruppi di Difesa della Donna ("Groups for the Defence of Women") are created. On the role of women within the Resistance, see E. Scroppo, Donna, privato e politico (Milan: Mazzotta, 1979).
25 See Kaplan, Contemporary Western European Feminism, op. cit., p.239.
26 Kaplan, Contemporary Western European Feminism, op. cit., p.240. For a history of the UDI, see M. Michetti, M. Repetto and L. Viviani (eds.), Udi, laboratorio delle donne (Rome, 1984).
remain largely unanalysed.\footnote{Lesley Caldwell, “Italian Feminism: Some Considerations” in Z.G.Baránski and S.W.Vinall (eds.), \textit{Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History} (London: MacMillan, 1991), p.99.} In addition, the priority of the post-war years is believed to lie in reconstruction, not in the advancement of women’s cause. Therefore, the majority of the misogynist laws current under fascism are left untouched until the 1960s. The advances of these years are again made thanks to the privileged relationship women maintain with trade unions. Such progress regards maternity leave, childcare provision, equal pay (written in the Constitution in 1956 but still to be applied), and equal working conditions. Once these issues are formally addressed, the Left considers the “Woman Question” to be resolved.

\textbf{Conclusion.}

As in the Anglophone context then, first wave feminism in Italy still understands equality in legal and economical terms. When difference is theorised, it stands to mean complementarity or inferiority. This is the case for two of the three forces which influence the emergence of an egalitarian perspective within Italian feminism (namely, republicanism and the Church). As for the Left, it seems to deny difference altogether and theorises the achievement of equality in terms of assimilation (to the proletariat).

A study of these formative years is instructive because it shows that, despite a lack of co-ordination and of a coherent political agenda, and despite a strong definition of women as mothers or workers, there exists in Italy “a long standing political culture in which women [are] active.”\footnote{Lesley Caldwell, “Italian Feminism: Some Considerations” in Z.G.Baránski and S.W.Vinall (eds.), \textit{Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History} (London: MacMillan, 1991), p.99.} The post-unification treatment of the “questione femminile” ("Woman Question") also brings a number of idiosyncrasies that will follow Italian feminism through to the creation of entrusted and to the elaboration of \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale}. Firstly, we have seen how equality and difference have always been connected. Secondly, republicanism, the Church, fascism, and the Left establish, in those years, their long-lasting influence. Thirdly, women organise themselves in multiple organisations and create their own journals. Through their political
involvement at a grass-root level alongside men, women acquire a precious practical and theoretical knowledge of politics. Fourthly, from very early on, Italian feminism is receptive to foreign feminist theory. We shall see how these characteristics reappear once the women’s movement is formed at the end of the 1960s.

Section II. The birth of the women’s movement and the revaluation of sexual difference.

It is not until the mid-1960s that we can talk about an autonomous feminist movement in Italy. Although feminism exists before this date, it is still ignored by women and by the political process at large. Even the small women’s groups mentioned above are either controlled by a political party or striving to get included in the established political institutions. The end of the 1960s and the long subsequent years of social unrest shaking Italian society articulate a critique of authority and of accepted forms of political life with which women engage. The women’s movement thus emerges from a broader movement of protests. Its activists are women who have grown up during the so-called “economic-miracle” (c.1955-1965). They are part of the first generation of emancipated women - they can vote and they are the first to have benefited massively from secondary and/or higher education, later but more quickly than in other capitalist countries.

The years between 1968 and 1983 demonstrate another characteristic of feminism particular to the Italian context – this period is a period of the so-called “double-militancy”. Feminists simultaneously fight from within political institutions or parties (for an advance in legislation) and from within autonomous and extra-parliamentary women’s groups (for the development of a specific consciousness). In that way, equality and difference still form two simultaneous facets of Italian feminism. Indeed it is thanks to their topical engagement with institutional politics that women inscribe equality within the law. Three specific

28 Kaplan, Contemporary Western European Feminism, op. cit., p.41.
laws - that on divorce (1970), on the lifting of the ban on advertising contraception (1971) and the law on abortion (1978) - are particularly important in the history of the Italian women's movement. These have acted as a rallying cry for women in all sections of Italian society. They are the result of many years of mass demonstrations and lobbying on the part of women.\(^{30}\) Finally, they coincide with a critique of the family which is elaborated by other sections of society in these years of social unrest.

The social movement of protests at the end of the 1960s also change the nature of Italian politics. It is often said that, because of the strength of regional identities and of the late unification (a unification which has often been experienced as imposed), Italians have always been suspicious of the capacity of the state to provide for its citizens. Indeed, some historical commentators even explain the rise of the Mafia in the South, or the original appeal of Mussolini by the fact that they offered services and responded to needs when and where the state had failed to do so.\(^{31}\) Without falling into stereotypes, I think it is fair to maintain that the long years of protests initiated in 1968 probably exacerbate this tendency, provoking, in their wake, a shift in the balance of power. At this point, the importance of grass-root political activism becomes re-enforced and this opens new avenues for women, not only outside the political institutions of the state, but also outside the traditional parties of the Left. Frustrated by a process of discrimination prevailing in a party like the PCI - openly sympathetic to women's cause but tacitly preventing the access to influential positions within its own hierarchy - many feminists are initially attracted by the New Left. However, like their counterparts in Anglophone countries or on the Continent, a vast number of these same feminists are soon disillusioned by the overt sexism widespread amongst students and workers' groups.\(^{32}\) The "new feminism" of the late 1960s hence becomes autonomous and concentrates on constructing its own feminist tradition (both by building on its past and by drawing on Anglophone and French theories). The feminist movement also splits up in hundreds of

\(^{30}\) Massive street demonstrations are also a feature of American and French feminism in the 1970s. In the U.K however, the women's movement grows steadily in the 1970s but without those massive street rallies.

\(^{31}\) For example, see Kaplan, Contemporary Western European Feminism, op. cit., p. 244.

\(^{32}\) For a personal account of the form which sexism took within those student groups, See Paola Bono, "Looking Back, Looking Forward: Looking at Italian Feminism/s", in Anna Bull, Hanna...
collectives, tailoring their analysis to specific issues. This group diversity is still a characteristic of feminism in Italy today. It has produced a rich and diverse framework for debate. The rest of this chapter will trace a particular genealogy of the theory of sexual difference in Italy and deals with the theoretical production of a few very influential collectives.

1. **The emergence of an Italian theory of sexual difference.**

The emergence of a theory of sexual difference in Italy finds its antecedents in the formation of a particular women’s group in 1966. The “Demystification of Authority” group (immediately known under the acronym DEMAU) is the first feminist collective to gain complete independence from any political party or organisation. The creation of DEMAU marks a turning point in the history of Italian feminism hitherto narrated. With the Manifesto that the group publishes in 1966, Italian feminism progressively turns its back on egalitarian politics to look towards a politics of difference. Four years after the creation of DEMAU, the influential Carla Lonzi forms Rivolta Femminile (“Feminine Revolt”) which further elaborates many of the themes that the DEMAU Manifesto has formulated succinctly. Let us now turn to the critique of society that DEMAU, Rivolta Femminile and Carla Lonzi engage in.

In a first instance, DEMAU, Rivolta Femminile and Carla Lonzi contest the masculinist construction of the myth of woman. This involves rejecting essentialist descriptions advanced to legitimise women’s unjust treatment and

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34 Rivolta Femminile will later become Lotta Femminile, the women’s branch of the Red Brigades. For the debate around feminist involvement in terrorism, see Bono and Kemp (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought*, op. cit., pp.284-309.
position within society,\textsuperscript{35} and insisting on the social construction of sexual difference as inferiority.\textsuperscript{36} In that respect, Hegel’s assumption of an \textit{a priori} passivity which naturally confines women to the family and denies them access to the realm of transcendence and knowledge is a principal target of Carla Lonzi’s \textit{Sputiamo su Hegel [Let’s Spit on Hegel]} (1974). In addition, refuting masculinist constructions of woman also requires contesting the equation between difference and complementarity. In a similar way as that used by radical feminists in the Anglophone context, sexuality forms one of the central tools of this assault on complementarity as a “myth” used by man to justify his own power and to deny woman autonomy.\textsuperscript{37} In \textit{La donna clitoridea e donna la vaginale [Clitoral Woman and Vaginal Woman]} (1974), Lonzi argues that sexual intercourse is modelled on the penis as the organ used both for the attainment of sexual pleasure and for reproduction.\textsuperscript{38} This image imposes a paradigmatic sexuality where procreation and pleasure coincide and where the vagina acquires its primacy over the clitoris.\textsuperscript{39} As a result, women’s pleasure is not only more difficult to attain. More importantly, the idea that women depend on men for the attainment of their pleasure and on their laws (contraception, abortion and sterilisation) for the regulation of their reproductive powers is enforced.\textsuperscript{40}

The second innovation that \textit{DEMAU, Rivolta Femminile} and Carla Lonzi make to the feminist discourse of these years lies in the uncompromising rejection of the ideology of emancipation. Equality is here equated negatively with a pact made between men in order to assimilate women to the existing system of masculine values while pretending that they participate in society on a

\textsuperscript{35} Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile, p.22, reproduced and translated in Bono and Kemp (eds.), \textit{Italian Feminist Thought}, op. cit., (40). All the numbers in parenthesis refer to Bono and Kemp’s translation.


\textsuperscript{37} Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile, op. cit., p.15 (37).

\textsuperscript{38} Like Irigaray, Lonzi observes that, for Freud, “the relationship between male and female is not a relationship between two sexes but a relationship between one sex and its absence.” See \textit{Let’s Spit on Hegel}, p.52.

\textsuperscript{39} Lonzi, \textit{La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale}, op. cit., p.77.

\textsuperscript{40} ibid., p.78. The debate over vaginal orgasm is also a feature of American feminism in these years. See Bassnett, \textit{Feminist Experiences}, op.cit., p.28.
par with them. However the concept of equality is not altogether abandoned in those years. The type of “juridical equality” (equality of rights) is contrasted to equality as a “philosophical principle” which recognises and respects the difference between the sexes. For contemporary Italian feminism in general (and this includes *il pensiero*), equality is no longer conceived as the goal of feminism but as its effect.

In those years, the rejection of equality as assimilation principally involves an attempt to dissociate the category of sex from that of class. Because of the historical association of feminism and the Italian Left, this attempt is of greater significance for the evolution of feminism in Italy than it is in the Anglophone or the French context. In the 1973, Lonzi declares: “I decided to write *Let’s Spit on Hegel* after having been shocked to realise that nearly all Italian feminists were giving more legitimacy to class struggle than to their own oppression.” Like some feminists active in the Anglophone context, DEMAU, *Rivolta Femminile* and Lonzi here attack the dominant Marxist analysis of the “Woman Question” as economically reductionist, as confounding capitalism with patriarchy and as having a narrow conception of production, one which excludes women’s specific participation. In this way, these first Italian gynocentric feminists demarcate the family, sex-roles and the sexual division of labour as new areas of enquiry.

2. **Reassessing all values:** “*autocoscienza*, separatism and “*deculturalizzazione*”.

The rejection of the existing definitions of sexual difference and the understanding of equality as assimilation will leave a long lasting legacy for the theorists of entrustment and of *il pensiero*. Like some of their Anglophone counterparts, Italian gynocentric feminists, at that time, press for a re-assessment of society’s values and of feminine sexual difference. The refusal to define

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43 Carla Lonzi, quoted in Anna Ribeiro and Ferdinanda Vigliani (eds.), *Cento Titoli*, op. cit., p.65 [my translation].
44 Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel*, op. cit., p.29 (43).
women in relation to men incites separatism. In the earlier DEMAU Manifesto, separatism simply takes the form of a search for a new ideological autonomy, one where women would be both objects and subjects of the "Woman Question".\textsuperscript{46} For Rivolta Femminile and Lonzi, separatism involves a more radical critique and a practice called "deculturalizzazione" ("deculturalisation"). "Deculturalisation" is a process of "unlearning" patriarchal values in order to create new ones.\textsuperscript{47}

The practice of consciousness-raising, that Carla Lonzi imports from the United-States and introduces to Italian feminism as "autocoscienza", has a central role to play in this process of "deculturalisation". Like its American equivalent, the practice of "autocoscienza" refers to the discussion of women's shared experiences (which in Italy is called "the political practice of starting from oneself" ["la pratica del partire da sé"]). It is also aimed at bringing to consciousness the unconscious aspects of oppression. However, unlike the English phrase "consciousness-raising", the term "autocoscienza" also suggests "something of an auto-induced, self-determined, or self-directed process of achieving consciousness."\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, we shall see how another aspect of "autocoscienza" lies in expressing women's own individual and collective "sense of existence", independently of previous masculinist pronouncements.\textsuperscript{49} From our point of view, "autocoscienza" is the key political practice which starts to suggest that women's liberation depends on the analysis and on the practice of relationships between women (later called "la pratica delle relazioni tra donne") within women-only groups. I will return to this when dealing with the encounter between "Psych & Po" and some Italian feminists.

Alongside "autocoscienza" practised within women-only groups, Lonzi gives other examples of "deculturalisation". Like Adrienne Rich in the Anglophone context, Lonzi argues that maternity has been used by patriarchy as a foundation stone of women's oppression but she simultaneously points out that "it has been for us an important source of thoughts and feelings, the circumstance

\textsuperscript{46} DEMAU Manifesto, op.cit.
\textsuperscript{47} Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile, op. cit., p.22 (40).
\textsuperscript{48} Teresa de Lauretis, "The Essence of the Triangle, or Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain" in Differences 1 (Summer 1989): 19.
\textsuperscript{49} Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile, op. cit., p.15 (37).
of a special initiation". For Lonzi, this experience of maternity, to use Rich's own expression, as that which provokes specific emotions independently of patriarchal norms, indicates the bond between women and youngsters (and, controversially, between mothers and sons). What women need to reject is not maternity per se but the myth of maternal love that men have used to control and channel those "feelings of joy, pleasure and playfulness" that a "woman, at the fullest time of her life, experiences quite genuinely, in a natural exchange with the young." In accordance with the contemporary hippie movement, Carla Lonzi thus wishes to free love from the confines of the family so that the greater alliance between women and the young in their common battle against patriarchal authority can find full expression.

Another example of "deculturalisation" is that linked to the distinction between the vaginal and the clitoral woman. The former is a woman "who is captive and measures her pleasure with that of the patriarch's." The latter "is the woman, who hasn't given in to the emotional temptation of an integration with the other and has expressed herself in a non-coital sexuality." Lonzi does accept that there is no "purely" vaginal or "purely" clitoral woman, but these figures serve to measure the extent to which patriarchal ideology has reached into women's consciousness. She also acknowledges that some "emancipated" women do experience clitoral pleasure in sexual relationships with men. However, these women do not realise that their own sexual pleasure and self-affirmation are independent of men.

In La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale, Lonzi also supports the call for a sexual education which would encourage auto-eroticism and homosexual contact as a way to free women from the imposed norm of hetero-sexual, reproductive sexuality. As we shall shortly see, the search for difference in lesbian sexuality will be a hypothesis considered by the Italian groups engaged in the "Practice of the Unconscious".

Before addressing the positive re-evaluation of sexual difference that is made during those years of Italian feminism, I would like to mention a few difficulties already apparent at this point. Firstly, the whole project of refusing all

50 Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel, op. cit., p.42 (50).
51 ibid., p.42 (50).
52 ibid., p.42 (50).
53 Lonzi, La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale, op. cit., p.80 [my translation].
54 ibid., p.80 [my translation].
existing values is highly problematic. Unlike the later groups engaged in the "Practice of the Unconscious", DEMAU, *Rivolta Femminile* and Carla Lonzi seem to underestimate the hold which the existing culture exercises on our psyche, something which complicates the possibility of change even if it doesn’t rule it out. These feminists appear overly confident of the efficacy and sufficiency of consciousness-raising as a means of "deculturalisation". This is similar to the reserve Monique Plaza expressed in relation to Irigaray's projected change in the symbolic, a critique which will also be made, in Italy, to the theorists of entrustment. It could be argued that the absence of an analysis of the complex relationships between women and their culture is the price Carla Lonzi pays for "deculturalising" herself from theorists like Freud. Had she truly engaged and used the tools offered by psychoanalysis, like Irigaray and the theorists of entrustment will do, her analysis might have gained in insight.

The difficulty of the process of stepping outside one's culture in order to criticise it is apparent in Lonzi’s own attempt at theoretical "deculturalisation" from Marx, Freud and Hegel. For example, she seeks to reject Hegelian dialectic because it excludes women and because it does not apply to the relationships between the sexes. As Patricia Jagentowicz Mills notices, "beyond [Lonzi's] vehement dismissal of Hegel, she finds in his work a formula for the destruction of patriarchal society: the revolutionary alliance of women and young males" against the community of patriarchs. This ambivalent use of Hegel's philosophy can be explained by the theoretical agenda informing *Let's Spit on Hegel*. As mentioned earlier, it is Marx's theory of revolution which Lonzi rejects here. For her, the problem inherent in Marx comes from his appropriation of the Hegelian dialectic. Therefore, while Lonzi denounces Hegel's sexist bias,
she still retains his alliance of mothers to their sons. This is problematic since the alliance between mother and son seems to re-propose the familiar glorification of the mother-to-son relationship, a relationship which is already very potent in Italy, and which has overshadowed the link between mothers and daughters that entrustment will seek to revive. The revolutionary potential that Lonzi finds in the son appears questionable – “It is not the son that has made us into slaves but the father”, she asserts. How can Lonzi ignore the fact that the son is also brought up in a patriarchal culture which promises him domination?

In addition to its near impossibility, Carla Lonzi’s gesture of “deculturalisation” further ignores the emotional complexity which link women to their culture. Firstly, it overlooks women’s complicity in shaping the very culture that has marginalised them. Furthermore, the practice of “autocoscienza” subjects women to a certain degree of universalisation. Women have experienced their oppression in many different ways and degrees (depending on factors such as social class, age, race, and ability). The responses to this oppression have thus been similarly diverse. The homogenisation of women as an oppressed group is one of the problems that the theorists of entrustment will seek to address. They will be looking for a way out of what they will call a “subaltern symbolic”, a symbolic which defines women only as housewives, raped women or women who have experienced abortion.

One must emphasise, as a partial response to these first points of criticisms, that this oversimplifying account of women’s relations to society is also due to the nature of DEMAU, Rivolta Femminile and Lonzi’s writings. These are meant to be polemical and provocative pieces of feminist propaganda, written at a time that many envisage as the dawn of a revolution. Carla Lonzi’s autobiographical works are more attentive to the complexity of the relationship linking women to society. That said, questions related to Lonzi’s essentialist pronouncements remain and it is to these that I now wish to turn.

60 Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel, op. cit., p.42 (50).
3. **The meaning of sexual difference.**

The texts published by *DEMAU, Rivolta Femminile* and by Carla Lonzi mark a turning point in Italian feminism because they all re-evaluate sexual difference positively. We will now conclude our discussion of gynocentric feminism in Italy by trying to establish the content of this new definition.

Undeniably, there exists in *DEMAU, Rivolta Femminile* and Carla Lonzi’s writings strong tendencies towards an essentialist definition of sexual difference. For Lonzi, sexual difference is “the basic difference of humankind.”63 The *DEMAU Manifesto* appeals for a re-evaluation of sexual difference and for “a conscious evaluation of [women’s] own essential values,” and one acquires the impression that these authentic feminine values are to be searched for under the layers of patriarchy. This is a line of enquiry that Lonzi herself pursues with the practice of “autocoscienza”. The purpose of “autocoscienza” is to return to an authentic part of the feminine subject, hidden under but uncontaminated by centuries of patriarchal rule. Bono and Kemp stress that “autocoscienza” is “a process of the discovery and (re)construction of the self.”64 At times, Lonzi seems to hold a conception of “autocoscienza” which is more one-dimensional. She declares that “What must be changed is not the way [woman] is but the way she sees herself”.65 “Autocoscienza” is indeed about the discovery of the self but not always about its reconstruction, since the essential self is hidden beneath that coat of “feminine myth” which requires demystification. In Chapter IV and V, we shall see how entrustment theorists and exponents of *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, argue that feminine sexual difference has to be both discovered (in the gaps of the existing symbolic order) and created. I will argue that this conception of sexual difference is more dynamic and registers the possibility of change.

Secondly, in their critique of patriarchy as a society based on the seizure of power, the feminists discussed here do not challenge but merely reverse the dichotomy which associates man with power and which presents women as

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64 Bono and Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought*, op. cit., p.9 [my translation].
victims. This forms the premise of Lonzi’s rejection of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and of Marx’s historical materialism. Lonzi argues that the value of the master-slave dialectic extends only to the dynamics of the differences between men since it treats sexual difference as natural and eternal, and “does not foresee the liberation of woman, the great oppressed of patriarchal civilisation.” The dialectic cannot explain sexual difference because “On the level of woman-man relationship, there is no solution which eliminates the other, thus the goal of seizing power is emptied of meaning.” Therefore, Lonzi concludes, the dialectic loses its validity in a non-patriarchal society where transcendence is not measured according to the seizure of power. Hence, “The Phenomenology of Spirit is a phenomenology of the patriarchal spirit” where everything is assessed in relation to power. For Lonzi, power is explicitly linked to the masculine self.

Lonzi offers a restricted definition of power. In her eyes, power is solely negative. It is in the sole possession of men (only a few emancipated women participate in power by joining political institutions and assimilating to male norms). It is an instrument which men use to keep women subjected, and it is also ideologically pervasive. Indeed, it secures women’s tacit consent to patriarchy and masks their real interests. The type of power that Lonzi criticises even has the perverse effect of luring women into believing that the present political system actively works towards their emancipation by conceding them more and more rights. In Lonzi’s scheme, “existing as a woman does not imply

65 Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel, op. cit., p.50 (57).
67 Manifesto di Rivolta Femminile, op. cit., p.20 [my translation].
68 Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel, op. cit., p.23 (44).
69 Ibid., p.23 [my translation].
70 It is along the same terms that Lonzi rejects historical materialism as missing the “emotional key” with which to explain the passage to private property. Historical materialism ignores the fact that, in all times, man has considered woman as a sexual object to be dominated and as a springboard for higher deeds [Sputiamo, p.36 (47)].
71 Lonzi thus theorises power in the same three dimensions as Stephen Lukes. It is linked to institutional politics (the first two dimensions of decision-making and agenda-setting), and to ideology (the third-dimension of interests shaping). See Stephen Lukes, Power: A Radical View (London: MacMillan, 1978). I will come back to Lukes’s discussion of power. I will also complement it by using Michel Foucault’s conceptualisation of power as productive, relational and ubiquitous in Chapter V when I will assess the theory of power on which entrustment and il pensiero rest.
72 Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel, op. cit., p.26 (41).
participation in male power, but calls into question the very concept of power”. Thus, women are presented as the natural antithesis to male power, as its victims who are subjected to it in equal measure and in identical ways.

As we shall see in Chapter IV, entrustment theorists will identify serious problems in this pejorative conceptualisation of power, as well as in this universalisation of women as victims and sisters in oppression. Indeed, showing women as powerless and therefore virtuous is problematic. It implies that it is difficult for women to get out of their powerless situation without the help of somebody who not only has power (thus, in Lonzi’s system, a man), but who has more power than the oppressors. This jeopardises both the possibility of woman’s liberation and the viability of separatism. Admittedly, Lonzi would not find this problematic because she aims at refusing the accession to a society whose standard is the possession of power. Nonetheless, one has to ask whether she really does envisage two distinct forms of society, which would not communicate at all. She does not seem to when she asserts that “the feminist movement is itself the means and the end of any basic transformation of humankind”. How then, would the powerless convince the powerful to give up their power, “to start again with women as subject”, especially when Rivolta Femminile vows not to communicate with men? Chapter IV will explain how entrustment theorists will develop a positive notion of authority. This particular notion of authority will be used to contest the type of power that Lonzi is herself criticising and, at the same time, to represent feminine sexual difference as free (that is, not defined in relation to a male frame of reference). Chapter V will criticise the dichotomy that entrustment and il pensiero theorists establish between a negative form of power (regulating relationships between the sexes) and a positive type of authority (prevailing in significant relationships between women). We will thus see, in the coming chapters, that the problems linked to

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73 ibid., p.26 (41).
74 Anna Yeatmann, “Feminism and Power” in M.L. Shanley and U.Narayan (eds.), Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). This is also a problem which entrustment theorists will address by emphasising relationships between women as a source of empowerment and liberty. We will come back to this point in Chapter IV when dealing with the concept of female freedom.
75 DEMAU equally reject the “fight for the supremacy over the male (an inverted dictatorship – a new matriarchy)”, see DEMAU Manifesto, op. cit.
76 Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel, op. cit., p.52 (59) [my emphasis].
77 ibid., p.52 (59).
the conceptualisation of power will not easily (if at all) disappear from Italian feminism. They resurface, in a more refined form, in the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and in the writings of many of the exponents of il pensiero.

Thirdly, the problem of essentialism also reappears, in a more explicit form, when Lonzi establishes a correspondence between a specific form of sexuality and a specific form of subjectivity. Clitoral sexuality becomes an affirmation of one's sex, a return to some authentic mode of being, before man imposes his form of sexual intercourse. In terms which would be closer to the Anglophone context, the clitoral woman is, for Lonzi, "woman-identified" and the vaginal is "male-identified". In this sense, Lonzi seems to confirm that anatomy is destiny (the vaginal woman is, by definition, an alienated woman). The insights that presented reproductive and heterosexual sexuality as imposed and constrictive (something which later theorists such as Butler in the U.S. and Bianca Pomeranzi in Italy will confirm), are lost by this implied essentialism which falls back into well-known dichotomies (clitoral woman/vaginal woman, activity/passivity, liberation/oppression, difference/identity, etc.). It also confines women, once again, to a specific sexual expression, replacing one constructive norm by another. The correspondence between an alternative form of sexuality and the search for a specific form of feminine subjectivity is a theme which can be also found in Irigaray's discussion of the two lips. As I have argued in Chapter II, Irigaray however uses the two lips as an image or metaphor for plausible alternatives to a male model of subjectivity. In addition, her suggestion that women is "neither one, nor two" goes against substituting one norm of sexual behaviour for another, since woman's sexuality is multiple and polymorphous and thus difficult to define.

Despite these objections that a commentator upon gynocentric feminism must surely acknowledge, the essentialism present in the theories exposed above is not as straightforward as this critique may suggest. In DEMAU, Rivolta Femminile and Lonzi's writings, there is a tension between an essentialist and a historicist account of sexual difference. Like DEMAU, Lonzi indeed defines feminine sexual difference in terms of woman's historical position, that is "her millenial absence from history". I have already mentioned the problems of

78 Lonzi, Sputiamo su Hegel, p.27 (41).
presenting women as innocent victims of a patriarchal culture which was
established or reinforced without their contribution and which was thus imposed
on them. However, it is nonetheless interesting to find Lonzi conceptualising
gender in terms of women’s present position since it suggests that this definition
is related to a specific context and hence subject to change. Indeed, in the
preceding passage, Lonzi asserts that “Difference is an existential principle
which concerns the modes of being human, the peculiarity of one’s own
experiences, goals, possibilities, and one’s sense of existence in a given situation
one wants to create for oneself.” The word “existential” is certainly not
innocent. As in Beauvoir, it suggests transcendence from the mere biological and
positive anatomical distinctions between the sexes, self-definition according to a
life-plan, the possibility for change and for allowing differences (in “experience,
goals and possibilities”) between women to be expressed.

This productive tension between conceiving sexual difference as the “basic
difference” of humankind, while insisting that it is also historically constructed
(by men) but must become a self-defined, evolving and individual project is still
part of the way il pensiero della differenza sessuale defines sexual difference
today. Il pensiero and entrustment theorists still “stress process rather than
essence, namely a difference which is constructed and subject to change.” However, whilst Carla Lonzi tends to place the origin of this basic difference in a
form of biological essentialism (that of the clitoral woman), or in a specific
psychology (women’s psyche as not pervaded by power, violence and death),
entrustment and il pensiero theorists locate the source of this difference in the
particular relationship that women have with the mother. Chapter IV will explain
this point in more detail. In Chapter V, we will assess whether this important
difference between Lonzi and later exponents of il pensiero erase all the
difficulties that the former’s theses imply.

79 ibid., p.27 (41).
Conclusion: the legacy of gynocentric feminism in Italy.

Despite many problematic aspects of her work (some of which will be long lasting for Italian feminism), Carla Lonzi remains a central figure in the history of Italian feminism. Together with DEMAU and Rivolta Femminile, she is the first theorist to rescue feminine sexual difference from definitions of inferiority and complementarity. She also formulates long-lasting themes which will become leitmotifs of Italian feminist theory – maternity, political and ideological autonomy, equality as assimilation and the search for a subjectivity for women via a redefinition of their difference.

Crucially for us, the impact of “autocoscienza”, as the first specifically feminist political practice, is stronger and more significant for Italian feminism than it is in the Anglo-American or French context. This practice announces a shift away from an analysis of the relationships between the sexes to a study of the relationships between women. The practice and analysis of the relationships between women is indeed central to the later practice of entrustment and it is this theme that pensiero della differenza sessuale also recuperates for the elaboration of a maternal symbolic. We will now focus on the passage from gynocentric feminism to entrustment and il pensiero that another feminist political practice of the 1970s – namely, “Practice of the Unconscious”- initiates.

Section III. The “Practice of the Unconscious” and the relationships between women.

A significant part of the feminists active during the years of “autocoscienza” and “deculturalizzazione” are aware of some of the limits of such political practices. In particular, they highlight the psychological hold that the very culture criticised has upon them, their ambiguous relationship to men (both as objects and accomplices of oppression), and the practical inefficiency of

“autocoscienza”.\textsuperscript{82} In 1972, a few of these feminists, notably those based in Milan, meet members of “Psych & Po”, by then known as MLF déposé.\textsuperscript{83} This contact proves to be crucial in the development of the feminism of sexual difference in Italy, and marks a turning point for the theorists who will elaborate the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. From then on, one can say that the source of influence for Italian feminism shifts from America to France. The meeting with “Psych & Po” inspires not only the creation of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective (from which the social-symbolic practice of entrustment will originate). It also re-introduces the conceptual tools (Marxism and, above all, psychoanalysis) that Carla Lonzi had previously rejected. Let us close this chapter with an analysis of the effects the meeting with French feminists has on the genesis of the theory of sexual difference in Italy.

1. \textbf{The use of psychoanalysis}

The heterogeneity of the “new feminism” which develops in Italy at the end of the 1960s is a sign of its richness.\textsuperscript{84} Bitter debates within and amongst the groups born out of the advent of the Italian women’s movement are a common and welcomed practice. This seemingly contradictory character of Italian feminism reflects the complexity of women’s relationship to their society, a theme which is openly explored after the meeting with “Psych & Po”. From 1972, Italian feminist theory becomes more refined and reflects on the contradiction central to feminism itself: “The fact that what unites women is also

\textsuperscript{82} On the discrepancy between the attainment of self-consciousness within the small group and the women’s movement’s attempt to enforce change outside the small groups, see Sottosopra 2 (1973).


\textsuperscript{84} As we will see in the following chapters, it is not until 1983 and the invention of entrustment that debates within Italian feminism will acquire a more polarised aspect. On the one hand, we will find those groups explicitly or implicitly sympathetic to entrustment (like Diotima, the Centro Culturale Virginia Woolf B for instance), and on the other, those feminists who strongly oppose it (like Adriana Cavarero, the Centro Documentazione Donna di Firenze, Silvia Vegetti Finzi, Nadia Fusini and Lea Melandri).
what women seek to overcome – namely their marginalisation.”

It is a paradox which will accompany Luce Irigaray, the exponents of entrustment, and the theorists of *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* in Italy, in their attempt to create a female subjectivity using a language, a knowledge which is precisely built upon its erasure. It is also the paradox which, from the 1970s onwards, the new “Practice of the Unconscious” seeks to address.

The meeting with “Psych & Po” generates the tools for the feminism of sexual difference to re-assess the efficiency of theoretical separatism, as it is practised at the time by the likes of Carla Lonzi, *Rivolta Femminile* and *DEMAU*. Instead of a rejection of the very culture to which they belong, the Italian feminism of difference now concentrates on a “laborious transformation of culture”, bending the epistemological tools at hand. This allows the groups which openly engage in the so-called “Practice of the Unconscious” (groups named *La Practica dell’Inconscio* [1975] and *Gruppo Analisi* [1974]) to recuperate the insights of psychoanalysis. Documenting the “Practice of the Unconscious” in Italy is a complex task. “Pratica dell’inconscio e movimento delle donne” [“The Practice of the Unconscious and the Women’s Movement”] (1974) is the only text dealing with the principles of such a novel approach to sexual difference. The only other literature available is made up of notes compiled during the meetings of these groups. These remain largely unpublished to this date and are rarely available.

The “Practice of the Unconscious” engages with psychoanalysis in a critical way. Members of the two groups mentioned above are aware that many feminists are reluctant to use psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is considered to be a prescriptive and potentially patriarchal theory. It is seen to exclude the feminine body and to deny woman access to language and subjectivity.

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87 Alcune Femministe Milanesi, “Pratica dell’inconscio e movimento delle donne”, *L’erba voglio* 18/19 (October 1974- January 1975). I shall be quoting from the version which has been reproduced in Lea Melandri, *Una visceralità indicibile*, op. cit., pp.186-197. Parts of this article have also been translated in Bono and Kemp, op. cit., pp.83-93.
88 Lea Melandri, *Una visceralità indicibile*, op. cit., p.71. This announces the oral character of later practices such as entrustment.
89 “Pratica dell’inconscio e movimento delle donne”, op. cit., p.190.
perspective encountered in the last chapter, is coupled with a critique of transference. Transference is a reductive structure which leaves out social relationships. The relationships between women are believed to be the real site of change. Psychoanalysis is rejected because it is a form of knowledge which ultimately reflects the ideology of the bourgeois family and of capitalism in general.

The prescriptive side of psychoanalytic therapy is also viewed with suspicion. The authors of “Pratica dell’inconscio e movimento delle donne” point out that the removal of a precise kind of suffering that a patient seeks when entering treatment requires the adaptation to a type of society which has engendered this suffering in the first place. According to such a reading, one could say that the aim of psychoanalytic treatment is not to find a cure but to force individuals to adapt to the established order. For example: “a woman who undergoes analysis because she is frigid might find that this problem is resolved, but at the cost of being chained more forcibly and forever to the institutions of marriage-family-children.” Psychoanalytic therapy thus prevents an analysis of oppression and maintains the status quo.

However, the Milanese feminists who engage in the “Practice of the Unconscious” welcome Freud’s discovery of the unconscious as “signpost[ing] the liberation and the subversion of sexist society”. Like Mitchell and Chodorow in the Anglo-Saxon context, they believe feminists must take into account Freudian theory in order to shed light on the way in which patriarchy enjoys an unconscious hold. The potential of psychoanalysis is also valued for its attention upon the body and language, two existing components of “autocoscienza”. All psychoanalysis needs is a political adaptation which would render it useful to the feminist movement. The primary aim of the “Practice of the Unconscious” is therefore to apply psychoanalysis to feminist groups, and to look at the unconscious production which arises from collective discussions. The feminists involved in the “Practice of the Unconscious” thus make the leap that Mitchell, in Woman’s Estate, had refused – to conceive the consciousness-raising group as a platform for a type of group therapy (aimed at liberating oneself from

90 ibid., p.190.
92 ibid., p.189.
patriarchal ideology). Attention is focused upon the discrepancy between what a woman says in the group and her feelings which are betrayed by, for example, dreams, slips of the tongue, hesitations and body language.

Such a political adaptation to feminism's needs would also correct another fault of psychoanalysis. The authors of "Pratica dell'inconscio e movimento delle donne" criticise the analytic institution whereby the analyst occupies a position of power and prestige – on the one hand, he poses as the expert, and on the other, he appropriates what the patient reveals. Since the article responds to the double agenda both of refuting capitalism and a version of psychoanalysis which works within the bourgeois ideology, this process is referred to as "the capitalisation" or "privatisation" of knowledge. The extraction of the analytic practice from the bourgeois institution of psychoanalysis and its adoption within the women's movement is judged to remedy this problem of power. The authors assert (perhaps naively) that if the analytic technique is adopted within a group where positions between analysed and analysand constantly shift, a circulation of knowledge ensues. This would curb the potential of one individual to accumulate power. In the process of a collective analysis, both the change in the person analysed and in those who analyse this person are rendered visible because the unconscious analysed is a collective one.

Several difficulties that the "Practice of the Unconscious" will encounter are already laid out in this article and identified by the authors themselves. The project of "incorporating the analytical relationship into the movement" remains vague. Entrustment will inherit the "Practice of the Unconscious" and will attempt to further define and structure it. There are also problems raised at this point but left unresolved. For example, the authors admit that a woman may not want her analysis to enrich a person with whom she tends not to agree. There are also the questions of finding the meaning of somebody's wish to listen and of determining whether it is at all connected with a desire to occupy a position of

93 ibid., p.187.
95 See the section entitled "Some doubts".
power. As we will see in Chapter V, the latter two questions will also pose problems to the theorists of entrustment.

I would like to add several further points of reservation to the “Practice of the Unconscious” as it is elaborated in this early article. Firstly, could a practice which promotes the permutation of the positions occupied by analyst/analysand work? Might the insights gleaned by psychoanalytic therapy precisely be produced by the non-reciprocity between the analyst and the analysand, that is, by a power differential? One is bound to wonder whether the “Practice of the Unconscious” is still psychoanalytic in nature. As we shall see in the subsequent chapters, some of these questions will reappear in relation to entrustment. Secondly, the authors of this early article appear to ignore the fact that the analysis will use the same male language which constructs women’s alienation. Although there seems to be some traces of Lacanian theory in the conceptualisation of women as alienated in the symbolic, the authors do not confront this paradox thus risking to reinforce rather than challenge women’s alienated position in relation to language. Thirdly, one might question this possibility of collapsing the history of the individual into the history of the group. How far does the concept of a collective unconscious apply to women? Might the concept of the collective unconscious present a risk of universalisation or even essentialism? Fourthly, and as we have already seen with DEMAU and with Carla Lonzi, the problem of power is dangerously simplified. The power inherent in the psychoanalytic relationship is said to be erased once this relationship is introduced within a feminist group. Might there not be other forms of power (for instance, charismatic or authoritarian power) which reappear within collective analysis and influence its outcome? The example of Antoinette Fouque’s hold on “Psych & Po” might provide a good case-study of such power.96

Finally, Lea Melandri, who participated in the debate regarding the way to transform and to adapt the psychoanalytic practice to the women’s movement, recalls the existence of very different positions.97 Some feminists, mainly those of the group named “Practice of the Unconscious”, insisted on the fact that the

96 For Fouque’s role and powerful position within “Psych & Po”, see the article by Kaufmann-McCall that I have already used in Chapter II. Dorothy Kaufmann-McCall, “Politics of Difference: The Women’s Movement in France from May 1968 to Mitterand” in Signs 9.2 (1983): 282-293.

97 Lea Melandri, Una visceralità indicibile, op. cit, p.71.
analysis should be collective. "L'incontro di Vieux-Villez", op. cit., p.149.
99 "Pratica dell'inconscio e movimento delle donne", op. cit., p.192.

2. The relationships between women and the relationship with the mother.

Despite these difficulties, the “Practice of the Unconscious” nonetheless represents a leap forward in the development of an Italian theory of sexual difference. The earlier practice of “autocoscienza” had the advantage of disconnecting the “Woman Question” from class politics. It also created a common identity around which women could be mobilised. This kind of strategic essentialism is today still conceived as a vital primary step. However, the “search for identity” has often been confused with the “search for the identical”. By focusing on oppression, woman is still defined in terms of her conflicting relationship with man and, in the process, the contradictions arising from the relationships between women within the consciousness-raising groups is being overlooked in the name of political identity. Apart from promoting the use of psychoanalysis as a political practice, the other contribution “Psych & Po” makes to Italian feminism is the definite shift of analysis from the relationships between the sexes to those amongst women. Deciphering the psychological
content of the relationships between women is seen to be crucial task if one
wants to understand the relationships which exist between men and women. The
question no longer considers as a primary goal the explanations behind the
oppression of women, but rather the reasons as to why women do not rebel.

Thanks to the import of the psychoanalytic technique of listening to
somebody’s speech, certain behaviours (such as aggression and its violent
repression or silence) become subjects of analysis. The disavowed part of
women’s lives (such as the fear of solitude, rejection, the dependency on men,
the search for approval, and related fantasies) enrich the analysis of women’s
position in society. The dominant phantasy which comes to the fore is that of
acceptance/rejection, already identified during the meeting with the French
feminists of “Psych & Po”. The “Practice of the Unconscious” links this
phantasy to infantilism: “At the level of phantasy, this acceptance is that of the
child who, accepted by the mother, can say: I am good, I like myself, I am alive.
We have all discovered that, from an affective and also a creative point of view
[...], we have an infantile ‘I’.”

The discovery of infantilism, which permeates the collective unconscious,
thus ties the relationships between women to that with the mother. “Practising”
the unconscious reveals how the relationships between women re-enact this
relationship with the mother. One of the questions asked by the groups who
practice the unconscious is “how much of the mother is inscribed in the male
order?”. The phallic mother is not only advanced as a psychological
explanation as to why so many women refuse to embrace feminism. The phallic
mother also becomes an object of analysis in her own right. This is the case, for
example, in an article entitled “Madre mortifera” (“Deadly mother”) and
published by those members of DEMAU who had participated in the meetings
with “Psych & Po”. The authors of “Madre mortifera” contend that “the mother
is seen, in our culture, as deadly, because she is the negativity of the father; she is

100 “L’incontro di Vieux-Villez”, op. cit., p.149 [my translation]. It is interesting to note that, in
France, Fouque has also accused the MLF of infantilism. On this point see Rosi Braidotti,
101 “Pratica dell’inconscio e movimento delle donne”, op. cit., p.191.
This particular article is reprinted in Lea Melandri, Una visceralità indicibile, op. cit., pp.167-
171. I shall quote from the latter.
the negative which supports his law.”

As we have seen with Lacan, the mother is confined to the Real and associated with the death-drive – she threatens the autonomy and the identity of the male subject. The article talks about a “phallic monotony” or “sexual monism” to refer to what Irigaray calls the “hom(m)osexual economy”. Both culture and scientific discourse are incapable of conceiving woman independently from the phallus. Woman is either the phallic mother (who has the power to devour), or the masculine little girl (who experiences her sexuality in active terms). Therefore, male phantasies attribute power to the mother in so far as she is phallic, whilst men keep women oppressed in so far as they see them as castrated. For these feminists, this interpretation illustrates some strong characteristics of Italian culture, such as “omnipotent and exalted mothers, women who are particularly mute and subservient, virile parading, and endemic fascism”.

However, asking how much of the symbolic mother is inscribed in the patriarchal law also suggests that there is a part of the relationship with the mother, linked to the pre-oedipal phase and buried deeply in women’s unconscious, which can be recuperated to women’s advantage. As seen in

103 ibid., p.168. [my translation].
104 ibid., p.169 [my translation]. In Italian, “monotonia” can both mean “single tone” or “monotonous”.
105 Ibid., p. 169 [my translation]. “Madre mortifera” is written in response to an earlier article published in the same journal by the Italian psychoanalyst Elvio Fachinelli. The polemic between Fachinelli and the DEMAU members revolves around two correlated phantasies – the decrepit virility and the devouring, insatiable mother. Fachinelli attributes the resurfacing of the phantasy of the devouring mother to the rise of consumerism as a law which regulates late capitalist society. According to him, this rise of consumerism is psychologically translated into the phantasy of the devouring mother who does not allow for space in which virile development can occur [p.167]. Fachinelli sustains his argument by citing some sociological examples representative of late capitalist societies: the disappearance of the paternal figure, the correlated phenomenon and the growing importance of the relationship with the mother. Also common to Irigaray and the analysis made by the feminists of DEMAU is the lack of differentiation between woman and mother. The authors complain that, in Fachinelli’s article, women are not heard. Nothing is said of their relationships, of their actual experience of motherhood, of the relationship the mother has with her children which “cannot be reduced to the Lacanian axiom: what the mother desires is the phallus” [p.169], of the possibility women have of not becoming mothers. Therefore, women are used for theoretical elaboration but their actual experience is not considered. “Madre mortifera” thus shows that psychoanalytic concepts are not foreign to the emerging Italian feminism of difference, and this before the translation of Speculum and the explicit adoption of Irigaray’s more extensive critical analysis of psychoanalytical theory. It also demonstrates that, from early on, Lacanian tools are privileged. Fachinelli’s interpretation of the phantasies of the devouring mother and of the decline of male virility is indeed closer to Kleinian theory where the mother is experienced as both a good and a bad object, a phantasy which a particular type of external culture can re- evoke – “I have indeed asked myself […] what it is in an advanced and industrialised society that makes this image of the mother resurface” [p.169, my translation]. From early on then, I would argue that the direction taken by Italian feminism has favoured an immediately positive reception of Irigaray’s work.
Chapter II, the women of “Psych & Po” express this in the form of a primary homosexual relationship with the mother which is repeated in lesbianism. In Italy, the response to this proposal of defining sexual difference starting from sexual practice has been ambiguous and never openly welcomed. One could indeed see the problems that such a position might engender. Indeed, we have already encountered some of them in Carla Lonzi’s conceptualisation of a free female sexuality as clitoral. For example, positing sexual difference in terms of sexual practice seems to suggest that women are repressed homosexuals and that the key of women’s liberation lies in having a sexual relationship with another woman. This normative tendency is recognised by Lea Melandri, who herself took part in the meetings with the French women. She claims that homosexuality pre-existed the creation of the “Psych & Po”, and that it was therefore imposed, not retrieved.¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, lesbianism does not have to mean actual homosexuality. It could refer to a symbolic form, linked to relationships between women. Another of the Italian feminists who participated in the meeting with “Psych & Po” at Vieux-Villez (France), tries to distinguish between actual lesbianism (which she defines as a refusal to break with the mother, hence as a refusal of relationships with men) and symbolic lesbianism (which occurs when the primary relationship with the mother is broken by a relationship with man, that is itself subsequently renounced in a bid to return to the original bond with the mother).¹⁰⁷ This differentiation, as it is described here, is even more controversial. On the one hand, it seems to equate actual feminine homosexuality with infantilism, while presenting, on the other, symbolic lesbianism as mature subjectivity. It could be argued that this amounts to an uncritical acceptance of the Freudian heterosexual matrix, where mature development can only allow lesbianism in a symbolic form. Fortunately, these precise definitions of “actual” and “symbolic” lesbianism have never been pursued or developed in Italy. Nevertheless, it seems that the lesbianism which has been inherited by the theorists of entrustment and by il pensiero della differenza sessuale remains symbolic.¹⁰⁸ As Chapter V will

¹⁰⁷ “L’incontro di Vieux-Villez”, op. cit., p.152.
¹⁰⁸ The theorists of entrustment will indeed face some harsh criticism from the Italian Lesbian Union (Comitato Lesbico Italiano) for contributing to the invisibility and the marginalisation of lesbians within the feminist movement, and for refusing to define sexual difference erotically.
make clear, this has antagonised many lesbian feminists from entrustment and from il pensiero.

At this particular stage in the development of a theory of sexual difference in Italy, there is no mention of a Symbolic Mother or of a Symbolic Order of the Mother. Women's freedom is thought to result, almost automatically, from the relationships between women. Thus, engaging in these relationships and adopting psychoanalysis as a tool of investigation are conceived of as a political act. Italian feminists will evaluate the contribution of "Psych & Po" in the following terms – "The relationship of one woman to another is unthinkable in human culture. The female instrument which transforms the world is the relationships amongst women: this is the invention of the women of Psy&Po." Once again linking relationships amongst women with liberation appears reductive. It bypasses questions of power within the group. Some Italian feminists who have participated in the meetings with "Psych & Po" have expressed their unease at the acknowledged position of leader that Antoinette Fouque seemed to occupy within the French group. But, instead of being aware and addressing the fact that some women will fulfil a leading role within a women’s group, they declare that the “Practice of the Unconscious” refuses any leaders. Power between women is left unanalysed. The problems that are encountered in relationships between women are deemed to matter less than what can be gained.

**Conclusion: the mixed legacy of the 1970s.**

The 1970s open a number of “doors” for Italian feminism. Firstly, the political gains are the most obvious. Political activism during the 1970s is at the origins of a number of legislative advances. The laws on divorce, on contraception, on abortion, for which feminists first unite into a movement, are the result of a desire, on the part of women, to take their lives into their own hands. The common goal is to free women from the servitude of their anatomical

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For example, see “More silences than lies” reproduced and translated in Bono and Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought*, op. cit., pp.173-177.

destiny and from the "chains of the flesh". Demonstrations for legislative changes also provoke the implosion of the women's movement into small independent groups (a feature which still contributes to the rich feminist landscape today in Italy).

Simultaneously, it is in the 1970s that the conceptualisation of equality as assimilation and the rethinking of female sexual difference in positive terms occur. Both "autocoscienza" and the "Practice of the Unconscious", view sexual difference as containing the seeds of women's liberation. The theorists of entrustment will inherit these definitions of equality and difference. A third element of the legacy left by Italian feminism in the 1970s is its will to experiment with the invention of new practices linked to relationships between/amongst women (be it in the form of "autocoscienza" or of the "Practice of the Unconscious\(^\text{112}\)). As we will see, entrustment can be considered as a later form taken by this politics of relationships amongst/between women.

It is in terms of its contact with "Psych & Po" that I will assess the legacy left by the 1970s. From 1972 (the date of the meeting with "Psych & Po") Italian feminism becomes increasingly engaged with Lacanian psychoanalysis and directs its research for liberation towards the pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother. The "Practice of the Unconscious" also addresses the psychological hold that patriarchy has on women, and inaugurates an analysis which works at the margin of (male) language (slips of the tongue, body language, dreams). All these elements prepare for the good reception of Irigaray's work and are crucial to the successive practice of entrustment.

Nonetheless, those years of Italian feminism have also been described by entrustment feminists as the period of "static separatism" or "ideological feminism". Firstly, feminist discourse in the 1970s increasingly loses its ties with reality. Sexual difference functions as a ready-made discourse which does not really affect reality. Separatism reproduces the split between public and

\(^{110}\) "L'incontro di Vieux-Villez", op. cit., p.156.

\(^{111}\) Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, Sexual Difference, op. cit., p.127.

\(^{112}\) I have lacked the space to treat in detail another practice called the "Practice of Doing". It indicates that Italian feminism, in those years is not solely concerned with an increase in consciousness or an access to language. It also seeks to "create and transform" create female social spaces in order to transform the given social reality" (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, Sexual Difference, op. cit., p. 84). One such space is the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective.

\(^{113}\) Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, Sexual Difference, op. cit., p.84.
private that earlier feminists have criticised – women feel a sense of belonging within the enclosed space of the consciousness-raising groups, but when back in the public world, they feel alienated once again. They have to cope with a sort of schizophrenia – a desire to participate in society (called in Italy “a wish to win” [“voglia di vincere”]) and a feeling of estrangement (“estraneità”) when they try to do so. Secondly, feminism in the 1970s presupposes a perfect identity between women. Here, sexual difference is promoted as a universal identity, and means not only equality but also uniformity between women. Elements of universalisation and essentialism are present both in the practices of “autocoscienza” and of the Unconscious. Finally, the question of power between women remains bypassed.

Teresa de Lauretis summarises the issues at stake:

the experience of a harsh and protracted separateness, of social-symbolic defeat – in the impossibility for women to achieve what Lonzi called “philosophical equality” and to gain self-representation in the established symbolic order – may be just what enabled the subjects of that experience to reach the present-day critical understanding of their own different subjecthood (the theory of sexual difference) and to attempt to define the modes of its possible existence, the ways of living it out in the practice of every day life (the practice of sexual difference).114

In the following chapter, we will see how both those positive and negative elements, already present in the 1970s, re-emerge in the subsequent elaboration of the theory of sexual difference in Italy that the creation of entrustment partly but significantly represents.

Chapter IV
The Italian Theory of Sexual Difference and the Social-Symbolic Practice of Entrustment: Evaluating the Specificity of Contemporary Italian Feminism.

Introduction

Through a discussion of diverse practices, the preceding chapter has related how post-1968 Italian feminism progressively concentrated on the relationships amongst women, the feminist use of psychoanalysis and the figure of the mother. These themes are given an important place in the present chapter, which deals with contemporary Italian feminism. In this fourth chapter, I will defend the central contention of this thesis – namely, that contemporary Italian feminism owes its originality to two factors. The social-symbolic practice of entrustment ("affidamento") is the first source of distinctiveness. Entrustment, as a unique practice of sexual difference, has given the theory of sexual difference its “Italian” characteristic. Entrustment has also directly contributed to the subsequent hegemony achieved by the theory of sexual difference amongst a majority of feminist groups. Such a hegemony forms the second source of originality of contemporary Italian feminism. As we will now see, a vast majority of feminist groups have responded to il pensiero’s critique of the monosexual social-symbolic order and its call to sexualise social relationships by creating a female symbolic centred on the figure of the mother. This chapter will, all in all, take up the claim, made in Chapter I, that the polarising debates that followed the invention of entrustment in 1983, and the subsequent influence achieved by il pensiero confer to Italian feminism not only its “Italian”, but also its “contemporary” character.

However, I would like to reiterate an important point made in the Introduction: entrustment was not and is not embraced by Italian feminism as a whole. This chapter deals with some of its principal exponents – mainly, the feminists of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective (La Libreria delle Donne di Milano), some of the members of the philosophical community of Diotima
(Verona), and of the Cultural Centre Virginia Woolf B (Rome) and certain political activists of the former Communist Party (PCI). Nevertheless, it can be argued that entrustment characterises Italian feminism because it has prompted the development of *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, and because it has helped polarise the debate in Italy. Whether argued for, or disputed, the social-symbolic practice of entrustment has *never* been ignored and has been at the centre of theoretical and political arguments.¹

In treating the social-symbolic practice of entrustment, I will have to confront three interconnected questions. Firstly, how and why was the theory of sexual difference in Italy initially developed through entrustment? Secondly, what are the features of this social-symbolic practice? Thirdly, in what ways can entrustment and the symbolic order it generates be understood to give the Italian version of the theory of sexual difference its specific characteristic? These are interrogations which will accompany my argument throughout this chapter.

The first part of this chapter will concentrate on the elaboration of entrustment which arose out of a *political practice* (that of the relationships between women developed during the 70s). Whilst recording the influence of Irigaray, I will use the exposition of the critique of the male symbolic order to concentrate on the pivotal link between theory and practice. This link is an idiosyncratic feature of entrustment, and of Italian feminism in general. The second part of the chapter will explain the mechanisms and aims behind a relationship of entrustment in order to argue that this social-symbolic practice has given the theory of sexual difference in Italy its specific and hegemonic character. The third part will concentrate on the figure of the mother, central to entrustment and to other exponents of *il pensiero*. This will set the scene for the next chapter which exclusively concentrates on a critical assessment of entrustment and *il pensiero della differenza sessuale.*

Section 1. Linking theory to practice: the practice of the relationships between women and the critique of the symbolic order.

It is difficult to name the feminists responsible for the elaboration of entrustment. This social-symbolic practice was first outlined in the famous Green edition of the periodical *Sottosopra*, entitled “More Women Than Men” (“Più donne che uomini”) and published in January 1983. The pamphlet was signed by the so-called Group n.4 of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective. Since its creation in 1975, the *Liberia delle Donne di Milano* has operated a policy of anonymity (which is no longer strictly respected). However, later personal accounts of these fervent formative years within the Milanese feminist circles inform us that some of the members of the Group n.4 had already been part of the *Gruppo Analisi* encountered in the previous chapter. We will recall that *Gruppo Analisi* not only favoured the introduction of psychoanalysis into the women’s movement but also argued for practising individual analyses (involving two women at a time), something which arguably prefigures entrustment. Group n. 4 of the *Liberia delle Donne di Milano* was formed out of these encounters between different feminist collectives in Milan. The names of two of its most prominent members emerge - the lawyer Lia Cigarini and the philosopher Luisa Muraro.

Luisa Muraro is particularly important to this chapter because she provides the link between the *Liberia delle donne di Milano* and the philosophical community of *Diotima* (formed in the early 1980s in Verona), the main groups at the centre of *il pensiero*. It would be wrong to assume that all the members of *Diotima* also belong to the *Liberia* and that all automatically embrace the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Nevertheless, many of the theses advanced in the pamphlet “More Women Than Men” are pursued, in more philosophical terms, both in the collective books published by *Diotima*,

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2 *Sottosopra* literally means “upside down” or “topsy turvy”. The Green *Sottosopra* “Più donne che uomini” is now available from the *Liberia delle Donne di Milano*’s website: www.libreriadelledonne.it/pubblicazioni.htm. It has been partly reproduced and translated in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), pp.110-123. Unless otherwise stated, I shall be quoting from this translation.

3 For a personal testimony of feminist activity in Milan during those years, see Lea Melandri, *Una visceralità indicibile: la pratica dell’inconscio nel movimento delle donne* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000).
and in Luisa Muraro’s personal work. Therefore, if entrustment, as the constructive part of *il pensiero*, is not unanimously considered as the solution to women’s alienation, the critique of the existing male symbolic, on which this first part concentrates, is broadly shared by Italian feminists. It is widely indebted to Luce Irigaray’s work. As Mirna Cicioni argues “what made it possible for [“More women that men”] to have a great impact on Italian feminism, was first of all the fact that it formulated, in direct and accessible language, some insights influenced by the philosophical elaboration of Luce Irigaray.”

Undoubtedly, there is some truth in Cicioni’s assertion and I stress that the elaboration of entrustment has been vital both to the subsequent development and hegemony achieved by *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* in Italy. Nevertheless, my aim, in this first section of the chapter, is to demonstrate that the Italian theory of sexual difference owes its first point of originality to the connection between theory and practice. Entrustment emerged as a response to specific problems identified during the earlier practice of the relationships between women. Thus, this first section of the chapter will show how Irigarayan themes reappear in the critique of the symbolic order put forward by *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* as a whole. Yet, it will also endeavour to demonstrate that these common themes and concepts have often been elaborated independently of Irigaray at the end of the 1970s (that is, before the formulation of entrustment). The fact that entrustment and *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* have always been linked to political practices also explain why, when recuperated, Irigaray’s insights have been highly politicised.

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4 For example, Adriana Cavarero, the co-founder of *Diotima*, has always been critical of entrustment, even before she distanced herself from *Diotima* in the early 1990s. We shall come back to Cavarero’s critique of entrustment in the last chapter of this thesis.


1. The "wish to win", "estrangement" and the critique of the existing symbolic.

"More Women Than Men" opens by stating a concrete problem made evident by the practice of the relationships between women: women lack a positive experience of self-affirmation in social life. The practice of relationships between women point to a disparity, within women, between two contradictory feelings – namely, the “wish to win” ("voglia di vincere") and “estrangement” ("estraneità"). The “wish to win” refers to the desire women have to participate in society, or in the authors’ own words, to “the wish to be victorious over everything which makes us insecure, unstable, dependent, imitative.” However, this wish is tempered, or sometimes even blocked, by a feeling of estrangement, which “resists an entry into social games, doesn’t want to be there, is not there”. The question of estrangement had already arisen as early as 1976 in the discussions of the Libreria’s Group n.4. With the publication of “More Women Than Men”, Italian feminists formally shift their analysis away from the notion of discrimination, understood as only useful for identifying the external obstacles limiting women’s social participation. They now concentrate on the concept of estrangement, itself better suited to interrogate the additional psychological reasons for women’s marginalisation.

Estrangement is produced when a woman feels that, whilst she can participate in society, something of the desire that she wishes to translate socially is refused social representation. This “residue” of desire is female sexual difference. It is this central claim which brings “More Women Than Men” and Irigaray’s work closer. The “wish to win” and the sense of estrangement are considered here as consequences not as causes of women’s weak desire. There is no existing social language with which women can represent and translate their desire in reality without assimilating to the male model. This is what causes the contradiction between the “wish to win” and “estrangement”. Let us see why.

8 ibid., p.113.
9 “More Women Than Men” contains an appendix entitled “You see that you want to win” ("Vedi che vuoi vincere") which comprises extracts of the notes resulting from the 1976 discussions. The appendix is not reproduced in Bono and Kemp’s Reader.
The male symbolic and the "indecent sexual difference".

Following its early formulation in "More Women Than Men", such a critique of the existing symbolic as an "asexual model [which is] interposed between body and language", forcing women to live their gendered subjectivity as a split identity, is echoed throughout Italy. One can follow the acknowledged similarity between this critique and Luce Irigaray's along two axes: the attack on the false-neutrality of Western thought and language, and the impossibility of establishing female genealogies. These two axes of Irigaray's thought have already been analysed in Chapter II. Therefore, we will now concentrate on their formulation within the Italian context.

At the forefront of il pensiero's challenge to "discover" sexual difference by unmasking the false neutrality of language, thought and the subject at their base is the work produced by the philosophical community Diotima. Their analysis of the existing symbolic order is carried out in a more philosophical language than that used in "More Women Than Men". Hence, Irigaray's imprint is more directly noticeable in Diotima's texts. For example, Adriana Cavarero's contribution to Diotima's first collective work strongly echoes Irigaray's "Power of Discourse, Subordination of the Feminine" (This Sex Which Is Not One). In "Towards A Theory of Sexual Difference", Cavarero recuperates the Irigarayan account of the "sexualisation of discourse". She describes the "monstrosity" of a masculine subject who defines himself and the other according to the criteria he has himself established. Woman, as that "other", is both necessary to the construction of the masculine subject and forsaken at the margins of language and knowledge. The masculine subject thus acquires a signifying value which is

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11 This is the title of an early article by Alessandra Bocchetti. See A. Bocchetti, "L'indecente differenza" in A. Bocchetti, Che vuole una donna? (Milan: La Tartaruga Edizioni, 1991), pp.23-39. This article has been translated in Bono and Kemp (eds.), Italian Feminist Thought, op. cit., pp.148-159.
13 This expression is borrowed from the title of the first collective essay published by Diotima. See "La differenza sessuale: da scoprire e da produrre" in Diotima, Il pensiero della differenza sessuale (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987).
14 This is Cavarero's own expression.
assumed to be neutral and in effect becomes universal in its designation of the other sex.\textsuperscript{15}

Cavarero and the other exponents of \textit{il pensiero} identify the same implied problems in the “monstrous” subject of language and knowledge. We have already discussed them in Chapter II, in relation to Luce Irigaray’s critique of the monosexual symbolic. Let us briefly return to these difficulties caused by such monstrosity, using Cavarero’s inaugural essay, written for Diotima. Firstly, the neutral-universal harbours the masculine sex. Men and Woman are not interchangeable. Secondly, feminine sexual difference is included, assimilated, and not viewed as an ontological category in its own right.\textsuperscript{16} Thirdly, the discourses of knowledge are incapable of thinking sexual difference in its ontological duality. Finally, woman is denied subjectivity, the position of enunciation or self-definition because she is alienated \textit{from} language and \textit{in} language.\textsuperscript{17} Woman is alienated \textit{from} language because Man takes possession of the position of enunciation by forcing Woman outside language. Woman is a constitutive outside necessary for Man to position himself as subject. Therefore, woman is, “after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation.”\textsuperscript{18} Hence, her alienation \textit{in} language. The unsymbolised feminine difference thus becomes a source of estrangement (“More Women Than Men”), an “indecency”\textsuperscript{19} (since it exceeds the accepted terms of discourse), or a “passion”\textsuperscript{20} (as it designates a psychological which has a corporeal cause).

\textit{Female genealogies: the relationships between women and the relationship with the mother.}

The second axis that entrustment theorists, \textit{il pensiero} thinkers and Luce Irigaray share is that linked to female genealogies. The fact that the male
symbolic also invades and codifies relationships between women, thus preventing these relationships from being free, is an additional explanation for women's estranged position. Like Irigaray, entrustment and il pensiero theorists also read equality as the equalisation of women in relation to an external phallic golden standard. As we have seen in chapter II, it is because women are all defined in relation to men that they are considered to be the same, functioning as objects not subjects of exchange. This theme runs through "More Women Than Men" and Sexual Difference, a subsequent work published by the Libreria delle Donne di Milano. According to this view, the differences between/amongst women lose their positive potential and women only experience them as threatening.

We shall see shortly how entrustment is aimed at recuperating the potential of differential relationships amongst women. Disparity is indeed the main pivotal and contentious point of entrustment. My present concern is to stress that, here again, it is possible to identify, in the discussions which led to the elaboration of entrustment, a contemporary conceptualisation and tension between equality as equalisation and an equation of difference with crushing inequality. In that respect, it is worth mentioning the collective pamphlet which preceded the pivotal "More Women Than Men" – namely, the so-called "Yellow Catalogue" of the Sottosopra periodical, entitled "Le madri di tutte noi" ("The mothers of us all"). Published in 1982 by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective in conjunction with the Libreria delle Donne di Parma, it provoked the discussions which led the future theorists of entrustment to privilege disparity over equality. The Yellow Catalogue dealt with individual interpretations of literary works written by women. The rationale that motivated the discussions summarised in the "The mother of us all" was to read women writers, not as forgotten contributors to human culture, but as indicators of a female language in tune with women’s experience. With hindsight, the Yellow Sottosopra can also be considered as an early search for a "genealogy of women". The political practice

21 Libreria delle Donne di Milano, Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e le vicende di un gruppo di donne (Turin: Rosenberg and Sellier, 1987), translated by Teresa de Lauretis as Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.112. I shall be quoting from this translation. In this same work, the feminists of the Milan Women's Bookstore even go further and contend that women's politics has always been a struggle against man's interference in women's relationships between themselves and between themselves and the world (Sexual Difference, p.148)

22 ibid., p.121.
experimented in 1982 required women to name their favourite women writers (which they called “the mothers of us all”). Not all women chose the same authors as their favourite. This result was expected. However, the realisation that the same author chosen as one woman’s favourite occasioned such dislike in another woman came as a real surprise. This prompted endless arguments about individual choices. In addition, the women who were more certain about their preference were viewed as “authoritarian mothers” trying to impose their point of view on others. The way out of the practical cul-de-sac was indicated when one woman in the group declared, in a moment of frustration: “We say that the writers are our mothers, but the real mothers are here among us, because we are not all equal here.”

Sexual Difference describes how this statement (which occurred in the course of 1981) came both as a shock and as a relief – “by mentioning the disparity present in our relationship […] having released our minds from subjection to a neutral symbolic, we had released the symbolic power of the maternal figure.” Reflecting back on this pivotal moment, Luisa Muraro notes that the next step was to create (and not simply to search for) female genealogies, “linking up with a theme that Luce Irigaray was already elaborating”.

The archetypal relationship where women are both equal and different, and where differences between women could be productive, is the pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother. In conjunction with Irigaray, “Psych & Po” and the “Practice of the Unconscious”, Italian theorists of sexual difference consider the mother-daughter relationship to be a particular area of symbolic devastation.

Again, masculine norms prevail to break the autonomy of the relationship between mother and daughter, thus using it to the advantage of the existing order.

23 For an account of the discussions surrounding the Yellow Catalogue of Sottosopra, see Sexual Difference, op. cit., pp.108-113.
24 ibid., p.111
25 Luisa Muraro, “L’amore come pratica politica: l’esempio dell’amore per la madre” in Paola Bono (ed.), Questioni di teoria feminista (Milan: Tartaruga, 1993), trans. as “Love as a Political Practice: the Example of the Love for the Mother” in Bull, Diamond and Marsh (eds.), Feminisms and Women’s Movements in Contemporary Europe, op. cit., p.82. I am using this translation. Luisa Muraro has been a major force behind both the Yellow and the Green Sottosopra and has translated all of Irigaray’s works published in Italian.
27 It would of course be absurd for Italian feminists to ignore the fact that Italian culture virtually puts the mother on a pedestal. But culture glorifies a mother who is constructed by men, the one who raises sons, not daughters. Again she is a commodity in the exchanges between men. That is why Alessandra Bocchetti, for instance, distinguishes between the maternal (the symbolic
In “More Women Than Men”, the authors attribute the refusal to accept disparities amongst women and the consequential symbolic insignificance of the mother-daughter relationship to “the obliteration of the mother in our society.”\(^{28}\) This resonates with Irigaray’s theme of symbolic matricide. Whilst the theme of female genealogies was already at the centre of the Yellow Catalogue, the concept of symbolic matricide only features as a passing comment in “More Women Than Men”. It has been developed more amply, in the years following the elaboration of entrustment, by the two leading figures of the philosophical community of Diotima – namely, Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero.\(^{29}\)

I will have the occasion of dealing with Cavarero’s work more specifically in Chapter VI. I will also be returning to Muraro’s own conceptualisation of matricide and of the Symbolic Order of the Mother in Section III of this chapter. For the moment, I will just indicate that, although their critique is conducted in different ways, both Cavarero and Muraro view Western philosophy as the theoretical tool that Man uses to usurp the maternal potential to give life. Cavarero, whose thought bears the acknowledged influence of Hannah Arendt’s philosophy, argues that Man finds refuge in the philosophy of death so as to evade the fact that his life depends upon the birth given by a woman’s body. By emphasising death, Western philosophy occludes female genealogy in general and the work of the mother in particular. Muraro, for her part, criticises the propensity of a certain dominating branch of philosophy and of psychoanalysis for positioning the mother in between the subject and his/her symbolic independence.\(^{30}\) The mother is thus reduced to nature, to the reality above which


\(^{29}\) For the forgetting of the mother in pedagogy, see Anna Maria Plussi, “Significatività/visibilità del femminile: logos della pedagogia” and Elvia Franco, “L’affidamento nel rapporto pedagogico”, in Diotima, Il pensiero della differenza sessuale, op. cit. For the theme of the “obliteration of the mother” treated in relation to ethics, see Diana Sartori, “Tu devi: un ordine materno” in Diotima, Oltre l’uguaglianza. Le radici femminili dell’autorità (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1995).

it is necessary to rise if symbolic independence is to be achieved. For both Cavarero and Muraro, Man is able to conceal the work of the mother and give symbolic birth to himself, independently of the mother, by taking control of philosophy and of language. We will later see how Muraro contends that the mother gives the infant language as well as life, and that she is the true source of symbolic independence. We will also explain the important role that the mother plays in Cavarero’s philosophy by examining her Arendtian conceptualisation of natality.

2. The practice of sexual difference

The critique put forward by Diotima, although subsequent and more philosophical than the one found in “More Women Than Men”, is useful for highlighting the affinity it bears with Irigaray’s work. Diotima’s texts also show that the critique of the existing symbolic is unanimously embraced by the exponents of il pensiero della differenza sessuale, even if entrustment is not supported by all Italian feminists. Nevertheless, relying on Diotima’s philosophical elaborations rather than on that of “More Women Than Men” (a pamphlet which is the result of discussions starting as early as 1976) risks occluding the distinctive development followed by the theory of sexual difference in Italy. Its origins are not merely philosophical or theoretical but primarily political. They lie in the practice of the relationships between/amongst women, which started in the 1970s with autocoscienza and the “Practice of the Unconscious”, and gave rise to entrustment in the 1980s. In the history of Italian feminism, especially after the 1970s, insisting on the relationships between women has not been a matter of simple organisation, a way of bringing women together. Rather, it has been “the site, the ‘setting’, where women’s subjectivity can come into being […] a form of politics where the means and the ends, the subject and the object of change are not separate but coincide.”

When studying feminism in general and Italian feminism in particular, it is hence useful to bear in mind the strong link between theoretical contentions and the historical context in which they were elaborated. The theorists of entrustment constantly remind their readers of the historical and cultural specificity which has determined the outcome of their work: “We see the necessity of entrustment because it appeared to us, but we cannot demonstrate it fully because our view is necessarily partial. To admit this does not weaken our arguments. It means that our arguments have been dictated in part [by] events that are not under our control but somehow favourable to us.”32

A certain conception of history underlies this remark. First of all, history does not appear to be totally outside our control since it is possible to alter its course through the conscious choice of appropriate practices (“autocoscienza” and the “Practice of the Unconscious” in the 1970s, entrustment in the last two decades). Secondly, political activism, that is human intervention in the course of history, is about the dialectical relationship between theory and practice. What entrustment theorists and sexual difference thinkers elaborate is indeed a praxis, a theory bound up by a practice. This is the feature which gives il pensiero della differenza sessuale its first specific character, and which has allowed the feminists discussed here to move beyond Irigaray’s insights and methods to develop their own. For example, Ida Dominijanni remarks that it is in political practices adopted through the years by the women’s movement that one can identify the theoretical moves.33 Lia Cigarini, for her part, conceives of theory as a practice put into words, as a way of narrating experience.34 When dealing with the Symbolic Order of the Mother, we shall see that Luisa Muraro also thinks of theory as “the words which make us see what is”,35 that is, as what makes experience “sayable”. It is because of its adherence to context that Muraro has likened the language born out of the relationship between women to that of the

32 Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Sexual Difference, op.cit., p.150.
34 Lia Cigarini, La politica del desiderio, op. cit., p.152.
35 Luisa Muraro, L’ordine simbolico della madre, op. cit., p.45 [my translation].
mother (whose relationship with the child, “creates” the world, that is makes it possible to be “spoken”). In addition, we may point out that it is thanks to a practice (the symbolic debt), that the Symbolic Order of the Mother is created.

The connection between theory and practice can also explain the epithet of “social-symbolic” used to describe the practice of entrustment. The use of the Lacanian concept of the “symbolic”, that the exponents of entrustment and of il pensiero inherit from Irigaray, “Psych & Po” and the “Practice of the Unconscious”, shifts slightly. However, it is still a question of tackling women’s alienation in language, but transforming the symbolic also requires the right material conditions – those established by another practice of relationships between women, that of entrustment. The symbolic thus becomes the level of culture related to the interpretation of human experience and [...] to codified mediations. It is impossible to perceive or modify without a coming to consciousness, a decoding of written texts and of social behaviours which seem, but are not, spontaneous or natural. Its perception and modification also require a political practice. 36

The symbolic and the social thus becomes indistinguishable and give birth to the notion of the “social-symbolic”, which also appears, at a later date, in Irigaray’s writings. 37 The “social-symbolic” designates the circular relationship and interaction between symbolic and social factors in attributing meaning to phenomenological reality, thus determining the form of sexual identities, the shape of social norms, as well as the way in which these are lived psychologically.

37 See for example, Luce Irigaray, Le temps de la différence: pour une révolution pacifique (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1989). This particular text was originally published in Italian as Il tempo della differenza, Per una rivoluzione pacifica (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1989). It is the result of a series of conferences given by Irigaray at the invitation of the PCI and of the Women’s Research Centre in Sicily between 1986 and 1989. The concept of the social-symbolic is also widely used by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective in Sexual Difference, op. cit. It is difficult and of little interest to establish whether the concept of the social-symbolic originates with Irigaray or with the Libreria delle Donne di Milano. What the common use of this concept indicates is the fact that the communication of ideas between Irigaray and il pensiero feminists has been a two-way exchange.
What does the notion of the social-symbolic mean for feminist political activism? To a certain extent, it aims to tackle the dilemma faced by the theory of sexual difference, that of constructing a female symbolic order when the only language available is that which is based on the erasure of sexual difference. The notion of the social-symbolic takes feminist political activity beyond a work on language and points to social relationships between women as a way of modifying the order of signification. As we shall see, entrustment relationships set the material (social) conditions for an intervention in the symbolic. Relationships of entrustment have, in themselves, a capacity to challenge the social-symbolic hegemony and to re-structure the order of representation so that the latter can include feminine sexual difference and thus permit women access to subjectivity. We will now turn to consider the features which distinguish entrustment from earlier forms of relationships between women, and which give it this restructuring capacity.

Section II. Constructing a female symbolic: the structure of entrustment.

Like Irigaray, the authors of “More Women Than Men” believe that we have to “sexualise social relationships” and establish a “common world of women”. Group n.4 warns that this involves a simultaneous work of reflection and one involving a political practice. We have just seen here how the work of reflection, carried out within separatist groups such as the Libreria but also within the philosophical community of Diotima, involves discovering sexual difference beyond the pretence of neutrality defended by the existing social-symbolic.

This part of the chapter will engage with the more constructive side of il pensiero della difference sessuale taking entrustment as the example of a practice meant to sexualise social relationships and create female genealogies. I will explain the mechanism of such a social-symbolic practice of entrustment while identifying its original elements. In the previous section, the connection between

39 ibid., p.119. “A common world of women” is also an essay by Adrienne Rich. It appears as an appendix to “More Women Than Men”. The necessity for such a creation implies that, in the existing society, a common world of women does not exist at present. As we shall see in the next chapter, the exponents of entrustment have been criticised by lesbian feminists on this point.
theory and practice was treated as the first distinctive characteristic of the Italian theory of sexual difference. I will here concentrate on additional points of originality displayed by entrustment: the attempt to go beyond deconstruction/critique; the centrality of disparity; the particular conception of desire, necessity, realism and freedom that entrustment and il pensiero hold. I will leave a last original feature of entrustment, that is, the conception of authority that it expresses and sustains, for the concluding part of the chapter which deals with the Symbolic Order of the Mother that both entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale seek to create.

1. The “wish to win” and “estrangement”: the starting definition of sexual difference.

As “More Women Than Men” details, the practice of sexual difference starts within separatist groups, via an analysis of the concrete effects that the erasure or hiding of sexual difference has on women.41 It is this “diagnosis” which is to be transformed into a critique of the present society, and which must generate social change. Practically speaking, beginning with estrangement (and its contradiction with the “wish to win”) means that it is not the emancipated women who pave the way to liberation but those women who actively agonise within the existing social-symbolic - the estranged, silent women, those suffering from hysteria and other forms of neurosis.42 Nevertheless, the aim is not to stress irrationality and emotionality as essential components of some eternal woman’s nature.43 The strategy adopted by the exponents of il pensiero in general is to start from the present social-symbolic situation of women and transform the passive and oppressive experience of

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41 ibid., p.118.
42 The work on hysteria has been central to Italian feminism from the 1970 onwards. Some feminists have reclaimed the term “hysteria” from its psychoanalytic use in order to describe a particular positioning in relation to the mother. See Luisa Muraro and Zulma Paggi, “Come, quando, perché Anna O. si è trasformata in Bertha Pappenheim” in Lucy Freeman, La storia di Anna O. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), and Luisa Muraro, L’ordine simbolico della madre, op. cit., especially ch.4. For a critique of such a use of hysteria, see Angela Putino, Amiche mie isteriche (Naples: Cronopio, 1998). Putino’s critique will feature in my Chapter V.
43 This intention is denied as early as 1976, in “Il tempo, i mezzi, i luoghi”, Sottosopra, Milan, 1976.
Il pensiero attempts to take the theory of sexual difference beyond the residues left in the symbolic because this strategy tends to portray woman as though she were in between two languages – a language in which she feels alienated, and a missing language. Estrangement is that which must be transformed to arrive at an autonomous definition of sexual difference. Muraro describes this constant and relentless search for self-definition as "the strength of the wish, the strength of desire, that is to say an absolute and unconditioned 'positive'". We will come back to the specific understanding of desire that Italian feminists adopt. For the moment, let us see how this desire for affirmation and self-definition manifests itself in the texts published by the exponents of il pensiero.

As Diotima's texts and "More Women Than Men" show, the search for the possibility of woman's self-definition and self-representation does not lead to an underlying, fixed and eternal feminine essence. This self-definition is rather a process which starts from the re-signification of the present social, symbolic and historical position occupied by women in patriarchal society (the position of "alienation" and "separateness" for Cavarero, or that of "estrangement" for the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective). Precisely, the first collective essay published by Diotima points out that their project involves the discovery of sexual difference (in the gaps left open by the existing social-symbolic) and its production. Woman's self-definition cannot but be multiple, forever challenged and "re-constructed". Some Italian feminists have remarked that such a

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44 For another example of this strategy, see Wanda Tommasi. In "La tentazione del neutro" in Diotima, Il pensiero della differenza sessuale, op. cit. Tommasi works on the potential offered by the category of the neutral. She points out that the meaning of the word neutral has considerably shifted from its original Greek sense of "neither this, nor that" (né-uter), where equal worth is given to the two propositions. If taken in its original sense and then confronted to the biased symbolic, the neutral simultaneously hides and refers to something which has been erased, that is, in Tommasi's interpretation, the asymmetry between the sexes. Being "tempted by the neutral" is thus a preliminary move. It means acknowledging that the neutral becomes the trace of what has been cancelled. "It brings women to the threshold: they listen out for the traces of the cancellation of their self in language, in writing, so as to speak with a new language, one which is not neutral, but aware of these silences. This language thus speaks starting from sexual difference." (p.96, my translation). One could also venture on a political reading of Tommasi's words: I do not think it must be read as an acceptance of the fight for liberal "neutral" rights as a first preliminary step which needs to be overcome. Rather, I believe that it could be a call to supplement the fight for rights by an analysis of their biased foundation.

45 This difficulty is acknowledged by Wanda Tommasi, ibid.

46 Luisa Muraro, "Love as a Political Practice", op. cit., p.80.

47 ibid., p.203.

48 On this point, see "La differenza sessuale. Da scoprire e da produrre" in Diotima, Il pensiero della differenza sessuale, op. cit., p.37
deconstructive approach which stresses multiplicity and change has been favoured by philosophical critiques of the humanist subject. On this point, Alessandra Bocchetti maintains that women have long been subjects of the 20th century because they have always experienced subjectivity as fragmentation. She exhorts women to use this knowledge of fragmentation to their advantage. In Chapter V, we will come back to these questions and to the accusation of essentialism which has hindered the diffusion of contemporary Italian feminism in the Anglophone context. At present, let us turn to the social-symbolic practice of entrustment as a specific and original way to go beyond deconstruction and to restructure the order of representation so that feminine sexual difference can be expressed and included.

2. Entrustment and disparity.

Disparity is the main element of entrustment which makes it both an original and a contentious social-symbolic practice. A relationship of entrustment is modelled on the mother-daughter relationship. It is established when a woman experiences a desire to act in a society without paying the price of assimilation to a male model that denies her the expression of her feminine sexual difference. She thus finds another woman (who is sometimes called in Italian the affidante or affidataria \(^{51}\)) with “something more” (“un di più”). She chooses the affidataria as an authoritative figure and entrusts her desire to her. The “something more” that the affidataria displays socially can take many forms: for

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50 Chapter I describes how in the 1980s – that is, at the time when the first texts about contemporary Italian feminism were being published in English - the discrediting accusation of “essentialism” was widely used against a variety of different feminist strands. I suggest that, as has been the case for the initial reception of Irigaray’s texts, this Anglo-Saxon climate of suspicion of any theory stressing sexual difference has prevented a fair examination of il pensiero della differenza sessuale. The first texts in English to allude to entrustment were: Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, Liberazione della Donna: Feminism in Italy (Middletown: Weysleyan University Press, 1986) and Judith Adler Hellman, Journeys Among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987). The articles by Teresa de Lauretis in Differences and Mirna Cicioni in Australian Feminist Studies were both published in 1989, and the translation, by de Lauretis, of Non crederci avere dei diritti appeared in 1990.

51 See, respectively, Adalgisa Giorgio, “Mothers and Daughters in Italian Feminism”, op. cit., p.185, and Lia Cigarini, La politica del desiderio, op. cit., p.159. I shall be using the latter term of “affidataria” throughout my discussion.
example, she can have more talent, more power, more prestige, more charm. However, the constant characteristic is that the woman whom one chooses as affidataria has found ways of signifying, in a masculine society, the fact that she is a woman.

For entrustment theorists, “signifying the fact that one is woman” means expressing a particular desire in society without imitating men or depending on them for approval. It is a vague definition (and one which is bound to cause problems, as we shall see in Chapter V). Nevertheless, I believe that the area of obscurity is intended to avoid setting normative criteria for women’s actions. The “something more” could also be read in the light of one of the definitions of woman that Adriana Cavarero offers in the influential essay mentioned above. Woman is defined as man plus an irreducible sexual difference that, because it cannot be represented in the existing symbolic, is experienced as a “minus” (the neutral-universal man minus the masculine gender). This is certainly a position which is shared by the Libreria delle Donne di Milano.

The affidataria’s role is to recognise the entrustee’s needs and desire as well as to aid this desire’s application. Because the woman chosen is not just a mirror, the attention given to the entrustee must aim at the latter’s symbolic independence. It is thus a relationship based not on symmetry (an identity entrustee-affidataria) but one structured on imbalance. A relationship of entrustment does not try to erase the disparity between the two women it involves; instead, it aims to preserve and exploit it. Cultivating disparity amongst women allows value to circulate. This is a new idea which contrasts with the politics of emancipation (where women want to access society in the hope of sharing men’s value). In Italian feminism, value is hence sexualised. Entrustment theorists contend that women are the only ones who are able to give value to women, and this is, as we shall later see, what constitutes the basis of a new feminine symbolic. Entrustment is controversially hierarchical, but hierarchy is here given the positive connotation of a real difference which is productive and

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54 Alessandra Bocchetti, “Le donne con le donne possono” in Che vuole una donna?, op. cit. We will here recognise the influence of the concept of the “woman-identified woman”, partly developed by Adrienne Rich.
empowering *because* it is acknowledged.\(^{55}\) Disparity, in a relationship of entrustment, is also linked to a specific context. One chooses to entrust oneself to a woman in a *given* social situation where a *particular* capacity of the *affidataria* will help the entrustee develop and express a *specific* desire. The same *affidataria* can in turn become an entrustee in another situation so that the positions of authority are said to constantly shift. The same woman can simultaneously be, in two different relationships, an *affidataria* and an entrustee. We will see that this provision seeks to avoid the mutation of authority into domination.

When compared to earlier practices of relationships between women ("*autocoscienza*, "Practice of the Unconscious"), entrustment draws part of its originality from the fact that it is applied *socially*. Although it designates a relationship between two women, the context in which this desire is meaningful is one where both women *and* men act. This also affects the nature of the disparity between women. The *affidataria*’s greater capacity must be shown in public (and not in a private relationship) in order to counter the risk of domination. Entrustment yields "a material link [...] which can allow the communication of things which have been forced into silence or distorted in individual confrontation with male society."\(^{56}\) That is the reason why entrustment is not only a symbolic but a *social-symbolic* practice. It is a new form of feminist political activism based on *individual*, rather than *collective* action. Ida Dominijanni reports the reasons for such a conception of political activism: "A collective mediation presupposes common needs. Our political practice of *affidamento*, instead, has always reflected each individual woman’s reality and needs."\(^{57}\) Unlike 1970s separatist practices, entrustment thus fights against universalisation and aims at providing for a social-symbolic representation of individual differences amongst women.\(^{58}\)


\(^{56}\) ibid., p.121.

\(^{57}\) Ida Domnijanni quoted in Mirna Cicioni, “‘Love and Respect, Together’”, op. cit., p.77.

\(^{58}\) It is to emphasise this fact that that Lia Cigarini distinguishes between separatism ("*separatismo*”) and separation ("*separazione*”). "Separatism" (the type that was deemed “static” at the end of the 70s) designates an autonomous, and self-sufficient community of women. "Separation" refers to a social situation where women entrust themselves to other women in the view of acting out their desires in a mixed society. Similarly, Cigarini distinguishes between "partition" ("*partizione*"), linked to separatism, and "partiality" ("*parzialità*"), that is, the fact that women do not claim to have a universal point of view, one which applies to men as well). On these linguistic distinctions, see Lia Cigarini, *La politica del desiderio*, op. cit., pp.146, 147, 179.
3. **Desire, necessity and realism.**

Apart from the centrality of disparity, the social-symbolic practice of entrustment can also be considered original and specific to Italian feminism for its understanding of the concept of desire. As we have explored, entrustment attempts to seal the gap between the “wish to win” and the feeling of estrangement.\(^{59}\) A relationship of entrustment could be described as a gendered relationship which mediates an inner disparity (between “wish to win” and “estrangement”) and an external disparity (between the entrustee and the world).\(^{60}\) Entrustment goes a step further than the practice of “autocoscienza” — in addition to a revaluation of feminine sexual difference within separatist groups, entrustment addresses the problem women still have in translating the experience, value, and knowledge of being women in society. Indeed, the task of the affidataria, in a relationship of entrustment, is to open up a creative relationship between her entrustee and social reality. She helps the latter to formulate or clarify her desires, to come to terms with her contradictory feelings (for example, her own insecurities on the one hand, and her aspirations on the other). The growth of the entrustee is possible only where she can translate her desires socially, and when she feels that the social-symbolic order recognises the existence of feminine sexual difference.

In other words, entrustment pays more attention to the form (which we will refer to as a “structure” when dealing with the Symbolic Mother) rather than the content of desire: it teaches women how to desire, not what to desire. It is said to position women in the economy of the “for oneself”, also called “the politics of putting oneself at the centre” (“la politica del mettersi al centro”).\(^{61}\) Although

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It is also worth mentioning here that the rejection of universalisation lies at the basis of another linguistic distinction between “rappresentanza” and “rappresentazione”. In English, a single word, that of “representation”, covers up the distinction. “Rappresentanza” refers to political representation, while “rappresentazione” gives the idea of theatrical representation, performance. Towards the middle of the 1980s, the debate on political representation raged across Italian feminism. We shall come back to this debate in Chapter V with a discussion of the Communist Women’s Charter (“La carta delle donne”) a (failed) attempt to introduce feminine sexual difference into institutional politics.


\(^{60}\) In chapter V, we shall see that this dialectical understanding of entrustment can be problematic for any theory of subjectivity.

\(^{61}\) The politics of “putting one self at the centre” (“la politica del mettersi al centro”) is often discussed by Alessandra Bocchetti. For example, see A Bocchetti, “Per se, per me” in *Che vuole
seeking to convey socially the specificity of women's experience, entrustment theorists stand against any traditional representations of women as primary carers, or any utilitarian arguments in favour of women's emancipation. Learning how to want is learning how to put one's own desires first (that is, to find a social-symbolic place for oneself in the world). Hence the individualist basis of the relationship of entrustment mentioned above. Even if the affidataria fails to give enough attention to the entrustee, the fact that the latter recognises the value of the former occasions the contract between the self and the self, whereby a woman learns to understand and express what she wants. Female desire, whose weakness was identified as being a major problem in woman's alienation, is thus enhanced and brought to bear upon reality.

Thus, the concepts of desire, necessity and realism are, in the opinion of entrustment and il pensiero theorists, inextricably linked. The contradiction between the "wish to win" and estrangement creates a situation which is referred to as one of necessity. Here, necessity describes the fact that there is only one way out of this contradiction, namely finding a female mediation which will help the entrustee to understand and express her desires socially. Entering a relationship of entrustment is a choice (one chooses a particular woman to whom one entrusts) and a contingency (some women may well wish to stay well out of any relationship of entrustment). However, it becomes a necessity if one wants her desires to be expressed socially without conforming to male models. Hence, the paradoxical formula of "choosing necessity", a leitmotiv used by many sexual difference theorists in Italy. In Luisa Muraro's words, "choosing necessity" means "assum[ing] at the social-symbolic level, the fact of being born a woman and [this is where entrustment becomes paramount] the responsibility of making sense of such a fact." Using such a philosophically charged term as "necessity" in unusual ways indicates that the dominant social-symbolic order requires one to forget one's feminine sexual difference in order to assimilate to the existing

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62 The link between desire, necessity and realism is the object of Diotima, Mettere al mondo il mondo: oggetto e oggettività alla luce della differenza sessuale (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1990). In particular, see the essays on Rahel Vernhagen (by Adriana Cavarero), on Theresa of Avila (by Diana Sarton), and on Simone Weil (by Wanda Tommasi).
63 Lia Cigarini, La politica del desiderio, op. cit., p. 152.
64 Luisa Muraro and Alessandra Bocchetti, "La nostra questione con il potere" in A. Bocchetti, Che vuole una donna?, op. cit., p. 106. [my translation and my addition].
society. In this context, choosing not to ignore the phenomenological fact that we are born women means "choosing necessity".

Expressing one's desires socially requires a certain awareness of the contextual demands of a social situation and, at the same time, a capacity to somehow transcend these demands. Within the vocabulary used by il pensiero della difference sessuale, this dual capacity is referred to as "feminine realism". The interaction between two women in the relationship of entrustment thus aims at achieving a level of "feminine realism". Lia Cigarini explains: "In relation to the initial project, the measure is given by the limits, the constant adjustments and displacements that the given reality imposes." 65 This attention to the exigencies of reality is problematic for feminist theory. In Chapter V, we will see how the Italian version of "realism" risks being interpreted as a conservative adaptation to the given reality, or as a way to re-propose a correspondence between the subject and the view the subject has of reality. For the moment, I would like to point out that this understanding of realism is linked to several preoccupations - the constant concern to tie theory to a political practice, the effort to carve a place for women from within the existing social-symbolic (and not from some utopian outside), and the attempt to go beyond the usual dichotomous choice between exclusion and assimilation. We shall come back to "feminine realism" with Muraro's notion of the "Realistic-symbolic order" in Section III of this chapter, and with Cavarero's In Spite of Plato in Chapter VI.

Such perceptions of necessity and realism require a brief return to the notion of desire upheld by entrustment theorists. The aim is re-working on the symbolic structure of desire so that desire is not, as it is in the Lacanian scheme already challenged by Irigaray, confined to an unsymbolisable and dangerous realm (the Real), associated with the death-drive and with being a woman. Here, entrustment is close to Irigaray's project in that it too challenges the use of woman for the sublimation and representation of the male death-drive, a use which leaves women's own desire outside symbolic translation. Entrustment theorists and exponents of il pensiero della differenza sessuale believe that a social intervention (that is the empowering relationships set up between two women) can have a restructuring effect on the order of representation and can

65 Lia Cigarini, La politica del desiderio, op. cit., p.141.
make sexual difference “appear” on the social-symbolic level. It is a question of “liberating [female] desire so that it can act on society”.\textsuperscript{66} Female desire or “wish to win”, can be defined as a desire to signify sexual difference both symbolically and socially, not in relation to Man (as a lack) but starting from the experience of women. It is a desire to know and to express feminine specificity in action, starting from the circumstance of one woman’s life.\textsuperscript{67} As we have explained above, the impossibility to symbolise their relation to their origin (the mother) within the existing symbolic denies women the position of subject. Female desire arises out of this impossibility. Entrustment “liberates” desire because it re-enacts, on a social-symbolic plane, the birth scene and thus symbolises women’s relationship to their origin. Just as the daughter physically entered the world with the help of her mother, the entrustee accesses society as a subject thanks to another woman’s mediation.\textsuperscript{68} We shall come back to this parallel in Section III of this chapter, since it is taken up and further developed by members of \textit{Diotima} and by Luisa Muraro. For the moment, let us turn to the idiosyncratic notion of freedom developed by entrustment theorists.

4. Entrustment and female freedom.

There are several ways in which the concept of freedom appears within the writings of entrustment theorists and of some exponents of \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale}. Firstly, freedom refers to the practice of the free relationships between women as new forms of political association able to represent the mother-daughter relationship on a social level. Freedom is connected to the genealogy between women that the social-symbolic practice of entrustment is purported to create. “Genealogy” is here conceived in Irigarayan terms and structured along the same horizontal and vertical axes described in Chapter II. The horizontal axis of the genealogy created through entrustment is

\textsuperscript{66} ibid, p.141 [my translation and my alteration].
\textsuperscript{67} For example, this idea is expressed in Luisa Muraro, “Love as a Political Practice”, op. cit., or in Angela Putino, “Libertà femminile e desiderio”, in Bono (ed.), \textit{Questioni di teoria femminista}, op. cit. See also, Cicioni, “Love and Respect, Together”, op. cit., p. 73.
\textsuperscript{68} Adalgisa Giorgio, “Writing the Mother-Daughter Relationship: Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Literary Criticism” in Giorgio (ed.), \textit{Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother}
manifest in the fact that women seek the help of other women in order to participate in many areas of public life. Therefore, the relationships of entrustment diffuse feminine presence in male society. When compared to previous practices of relationships between women, entrustment thus represents a step forward since it takes the expression of sexual difference outside the “autocoscienza” groups of the 1970s, and beyond Adrienne Rich’s separatist vision of the “common world of women”.69

Freedom is also related to the vertical axis of entrustment. The verticality of entrusting relationships produces freedom by making the qualities displayed by the various inspirational women chosen as affidatarie circulate in society. It is this verticality, this support sought in another woman with something more (“un di più”), which allows the social translation of the entrustee’s desires, while remaining outside the masculine frame of reference.70 The vertical axis of the genealogy puts women, not men or their laws, at the origin of their freedom.71

This has lead some Italian feminists to distinguish between “the politics for women” (“la politica per le donne”) and “women’s politics” (“la politica delle donne”). The former starts from what women lack, from the condition of injustice and inequality that demands reparation via the acquisition of rights. The criteria of judgement is Man and the goal is to achieve equality with men by asking them to concede more rights. It is grounded on a “subaltern symbolic”, which requires the mass-identification with the suffering of some women (those who have experienced abortion, rape and physical abuse for example).72 The latter form of politics – women’s politics – starts from what women have (their “di più”), and rather than formal equality, aims at the free social inscription of the individual woman’s desire.73


69 It is for that reason that entrustment theorists have described their social-symbolic practice as “diffuse feminism” and contrasted it to the “static separatism” of the 1970s autocoscienza groups.

70 This is the basic difference between “rappresentanza” and “rappresentazione” found in footnote 58.


72 ibid., p.103.

73 On the distinction between “politica per le donne” and “politica delle donne”, see Alessandra Bocchetti in Bono (ed.), Questioni di teoria femminista, op. cit. This distinction implicitly informs one of Muraro’s recent articles, published in the new online periodical issued by Diotima. See Luisa Muraro, “L’enjeu du féminisme” in Per amore del mondo 1 (27 February 2004), available at www.diotimafilsofe.it/riv_online.php.
Entrustment theorists have thus rejected the liberal notion of negative freedom - guaranteed by a set of individual rights which protects one from the interference of others.\(^74\) However, entrustment theorists’ conception of freedom remains grounded, to a certain extent, in liberal discourse. Indeed, entrustment is a practice based on the individual’s desires that she chooses for herself. It is a freedom which is both negative (freedom from interference of men, freedom from the crushing ideal of equality)\(^75\) and positive. It is a question of providing the individual with the freedom to fulfil these desires, not by means of rights but by means of symbolic support. Moreover, entrustment is often described as a “social contract between women” (albeit voluntarily and explicitly chosen) involving an obligation (towards women only).\(^76\)

Finally, the liberal notion of contract implies that the freedom attained through relationships of entrustment necessarily involve an obligation. It is because freedom is relational (the trustee gains freedom thanks to the affidataria’s symbolic and practical assistance) that it involves an obligation to pay a “symbolic debt”, a notion which is shared within il pensiero. It could be defined as finding ways to “make the force and the valorisation taken from women circulate in society”.\(^77\) In entrustment, the payment of this debt must be more than a private, verbal expression of gratitude. It must be public and the content of a political project, in order for women’s social achievements not to be considered exceptions, or the results of favours granted by men.\(^78\) Paying the symbolic debt thus helps building the genealogy of women, and making women enter society as agents. A certain amount of obligation lies with the affidataria too. The notion of contract also stresses the formality of the relationship of entrustment: the desire to be carried out and what will happen in the relationship between the entrustee and her affidataria must be clearly explained. It is thanks

\(^74\) Lia Cigarini, La politica del desiderio, op. cit., p.159. On the distinction between negative and positive freedom, see Isaiah Berlin, Four Essays on Liberty (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

\(^75\) On this freedom from the ideological grip of patriarchy, I would like to mention the controversial claim, made in 1996 by the Libreria delle Donne di Milano, that patriarchy had “ended”. This fall of patriarchy is intended as a decline of its symbolic power for women, its capacity to represent reality and women by taking Man as model. On this point see Sottosopra (January 1996) and the discussion of this claim in Letizia Paolozzi and Alberto Leiss, Un paese sottosopra: una voce del femminismo italiano (Milan: Pratiche Editrice, 1999), pp.131-152.

\(^76\) On entrustment as a “social contract between women”, a notion principally developed by the lawyer Lia Cigarini, see her Politica del desiderio, op. cit., pp.140, 146, 158, 167, 181.

\(^77\) ibid., p.166.
to such an understanding of freedom that entrustment links private to common interest.

In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Luce Irigaray laments the lack, in our culture, of female ceremonies. Entrustment could be seen as a sort of female ceremony. 79 Through the formal relationship of entrustment, female sexual difference is produced and made visible in social reality. Entrustment is a social-symbolic practice which is original for its efforts to go beyond critique, towards reconstruction. It also marks a departure from the former separatist practices grounded in a discourse of equality and sisterhood since entrustment offers a positive interpretation of disparities between women. Finally, the connection between desire, necessity and realism as well as the specific definition of freedom all affirm the original character taken, via entrustment, by *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*. Entrustment puts new value on the mother-daughter relationship. It therefore has an even more important consequence – allowing women to return to the mother, and to create a symbolic order of their own. It is to the elaboration of the symbolic order of the Mother that this chapter will now turn.

**Section III. Entrustment and the Symbolic Order of the Mother.**

Most of this chapter has described entrustment as the first political practice seeking the subversion of the existing symbolic order by constructing a network of empowering relationships between disparate women. Entrustment is thus an original application of the theory of sexual difference, one which has directly inspired the later formulations of *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*. My objective, in this third section of the chapter, is to go beyond the original formulations of “More Women Than Men”. In particular, I will here focus on the role and place that *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* reserves for the mother in the new female symbolic order. It thus deals with the second assertion of this

79 ibid., p.148.
thesis – namely, that entrustment is the practice which has given contemporary Italian feminism its original characteristic because it has contributed to the development and theoretical hegemony of il pensiero della differenza sessuale.

This section will firstly return to the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother which stands at the basis of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Secondly, I will examine the figure of the mother to explain why she is instrumental in the creation of a symbolic order which can accommodate feminine sexual difference. Finally, I will analyse the notion of authority generated by this figure.

1. “Putting the world into the world"\(^{80}\): the relationship with the mother.

One manifestation of the vertical axis structuring female genealogies is to be found in the practical work carried out by the Libreria delle Donne di Milano. The Libreria is a bookstore which gathers works of theory and fiction written by women of different times and places. It is aimed at creating what the pamphlet “More Women Than Men” calls a “strong precedent”\(^{81}\) - a historical and intellectual community and tradition of women.\(^{82}\) Contained in the social-symbolic practice of entrustment is another interpretation of the verticality of female genealogy, one which does not refer to a historical lineage, but rather to a symbolic descent. Indeed, at the basis of the genealogy created by entrustment stands the re-enactment and the re-potentialisation of the mother-daughter relationship, independent of the male symbolic.\(^{83}\)

As said above, entrustment, as a practice of sexual difference, is concerned with “sexualising all social relation down to their foundation [...] at the time

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\(^{80}\) “Putting the World Into the World” is also the title of another collective work by the philosophical community of Diotima. See Diotima, Mettere al mondo il mondo, op. cit.


\(^{82}\) This search for a “strong precedent” is what motivated the work behind the Yellow catalogue of Sottosopra, analysed earlier in this chapter. Identifying women as “mothers of us all” seems to be at odds with the refusal to call an affidataria a Symbolic Mother, and points to the difficulty in keeping the affidataria, the real mother and the Symbolic Mother confined to their respective roles. This point will be developed in the next chapter.

\(^{83}\) In “More Women Than Men”, it is expressed in the following way: “In order to struggle against patriarchal society we must give real strength within our relationships to that ancient relationship in which there could be, fused together, love and esteem for another woman” (p. 122).
[when] sexual difference receives its first interpretation", that is, in the pre-oedipal period. Entrustment has inherited from its diverse sources of inspiration (Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, "Psych & Po", the “Practice of the Unconscious”) the conviction that the relationship with the mother is the foundation of all relationships between women and that these relationships involve both equality and disparity.

This original relationship with the mother has been the focus of Diotima and, more particularly, of Luisa Muraro. Muraro starts from the premise that language creates reality by attributing meaning to it. Speaking is literally, "putting the world into the world". In the preceding sections, we have seen how Italian feminists argue that, although sexual difference is a phenomenological truth, it is denied symbolic representation. By using the expression of "putting the world into the world", which itself evokes maternal scenes of birth, Muraro and Diotima suggest that it is a question of giving symbolic weight to the fact of being born a woman from and with the help another woman. In entrustment, this is presented as entering the social world by means of a female mediation.

Il pensiero della differenza sessuale thus looks to the pre-oedipal for the existence of another reality, another language contained at the margins of the existing symbolic. In L'ordine simbolico della madre, Muraro deepens this thesis to propound the mother as the giver of both life and language. Unlike Julia Kristeva who also stresses the existence of a pre-symbolic language, Luisa Muraro does not say what form this particular language takes, whether it is a semiotic or semantic language. Nonetheless, Muraro argues that it is through language that women attribute symbolic meaning to reality according to an experience of reality that they share with their mother.

The contention that the mother is both the giver of life and language has tremendous implications for the understanding of feminine subjectivity shared by entrustment theorists and il pensiero della differenza sessuale. Firstly, the Lacanian belief that subjectivity requires one to sever the pre-Oedipal link with the mother is challenged. Muraro historicises the Oedipus Complex as characteristic of a patriarchal society. Following Adrienne Rich, Muraro believes that the Lacanian Paternal Metaphor is not so much a paternal metaphor

\[^{84}\text{ibid., pp.144 and 145 [my emphasis].}\]
\[^{85}\text{Muraro, L'ordine simbolico della madre, op. cit., p.45.}\]
as a patriarchal metaphor aimed at appropriating the mother's symbolic power.\textsuperscript{86} It is because women have to cut their link with the pre-oedipal that they lose the symbolic connection with the mother, hence forgetting the maternal genealogy. The patriarchal symbolic is a state of "symbolic disorder"\textsuperscript{87} which nurtures difficult, or sometimes impossible, relationships between mothers and daughters. In fact, Muraro depicts the feminist project as the reinterpretation of our relationship with the mother.\textsuperscript{88}

Secondly, putting the mother at the origin of our life and language suggests that subjectivity is given, independently of the father, by the relationship one has with the mother. Female subjectivity is then taken away by the subsequent imposition of the patriarchal symbolic. Retrieving the maternal origins of subjectivity is the aim of such practices of relationships between women as entrustment.

Thirdly, the type of female subjectivity envisaged by entrustment theorists, Diotima philosophers and Luisa Muraro is relational. Muraro writes that the "creation of the world" is by attribution of symbolic meaning to the lived experience of a subject in relation with the one whom has given her life. The subject is therefore distinct from the mother but not from the relationship she has with her.\textsuperscript{89} Muraro seems to conceive of the child in the mother-child relationship as an already constituted "subject". This assertion stands in sharp contrast to the Lacanian schema, analysed in Chapter 11, in which the subject is only formed through becoming a signifier in language. For Lacanians, there is no subject prior to signification.

We shall come back to this point in Chapters V and VI with Cavarero's own account of the relational self. For the moment, I wish to remark that positioning the mother as the origin of life and language has a fourth implication which is epistemological in nature. Along with most exponents of \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale}, Luisa Muraro argues that our first and most important knowledge comes from the contact with our mother. As noted above, learning how to speak is to attribute symbolic meaning to the world around us. The

\textsuperscript{86} ibid., p.46.
\textsuperscript{87} Muraro in Bull, Diamond and Marsh, \textit{Feminisms and Women's Movements in Contemporary Europe}, op. cit., p.82.
\textsuperscript{88} ibid., p.83.
\textsuperscript{89} Muraro, \textit{L'ordine simbolico della madre}, op. cit., p.57.
criteria of truth lies in the experience and perception of reality which the mother-child couplet shares and which thus creates a common language. Therefore, for Muraro, this truth is not to be found in objective, abstract, universal and eternal metaphysical forms or laws. Nor is this truth totally subjective: instead, it depends on the experience one has of reality, but this is a mutual experience thus an interpretation of reality that one shares with the mother.\textsuperscript{90} Thinking of the mother as both the giver of life and language requires, for Muraro, this “epistemological move”.\textsuperscript{91} It explores a notion of truth which transcends the dichotomous opposition between self and other, objectivity and subjectivity, and it gives rise to a notion of a “realistic symbolic”.\textsuperscript{92} Muraro refers to this as the “interpretation of experience with the help of a mediation imposed by experience itself”.\textsuperscript{93}

2. \textbf{A symbol, not a metaphor: entrustment, \textit{il pensiero del} differentia sessuale and the status of the mother.}

\textit{Il pensiero} theorists thus contend that if we put a woman at the origin of our social relationships, the force of this discarded feminine symbolic might be retrieved. For this to happen, we must abandon the illusion of a solipsistic self which gives birth to itself by severing the link with the mother.\textsuperscript{94} On the contrary, we must actively seek relationships with other women in order to give these relationships symbolic, and hence political significance. This is to be done, of course, through the practice of entrustment.\textsuperscript{95} As I will also argue in the next two

\textsuperscript{90} On the discussion of the three types of truth, see Alain Naze, “A propos de \textit{L'ordre symbolique de la mère} de Luisa Muraro” in \textit{Per amore del mondo} 1 (27 February 2004), periodical of the philosophical community of Diotima, available only at www.diotimafilsofe.it/riv_online.php.

\textsuperscript{91} Luisa Muraro, \textit{L'ordine simbolico della madre}, op. cit., p.65. It seems to me that, although Adriana Cavarero has been very critical of entrustment as we shall see in chapter VI, the same epistemological move is at stake in her work on natality. As we shall see, entrustment and Cavarero’s work bear more similarities than Cavarero would be comfortable to acknowledge.

\textsuperscript{92} Luisa Muraro, \textit{L'ordine simbolico della madre}, op. cit., p.19. Although she never uses the actual notion of “realistic symbolic”, the connection between real and symbolic is also proposed by Annamaria Piussi, “Era là dall’inizio” in Diotima. \textit{Il cielo stellato dentro di noi}, op. cit., p.24.

\textsuperscript{93} Luisa Muraro, \textit{L'ordine simbolico della madre}, op. cit., p.94.

\textsuperscript{94} This call to renounce to a “symbolic independence” has been further elaborated by other members of \textit{Diotima}. It re-appears as the “impersonal perspective” in Chiara Zamboni’s “Simone Weil: dare corpo al pensiero”, and as “mystical ecstasy” in Diana Sartori’s “Perché Teresa”. See Diotima. \textit{Mettere al mondo il mondo}, op. cit, pp.48,32.

\textsuperscript{95} Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, \textit{Sexual difference}, op. cit., p.148.
chapters, entrustment is best considered as part of a common but plural Italian strategy of “practising” significant relationships between women. We have already referred to the practical work carried out in places such as the Libreria delle donne di Milano. Luisa Muraro also talks of the need to learn how to “love” our real mother because the ambivalence or even hatred often marring such relationships is the result of an existing symbolic which discards the role of the mother and which only values the mother-son relation. In order to love her, women need to “narrate the mother” [“raccontare la madre”], that is, “transform the relationship with the mother, whatever affects and emotions which constitute it, into a matter for reflection. [Women have to] translate this relationship into knowledge and life, having as a direction the principle of gratitude.” It seems that the old practice of consciousness-raising in women’s groups is still useful in this respect, but it is no longer a question of simply becoming conscious of the psychological hold that patriarchy detains, or of being aware of the identical suffering of women.

To understand how the feminine symbolic can be re-activated, one has to grasp the nature of this “restoration” or “re-enactment” of the pre-oedipal mother-daughter relationship. It is not a question of “regressing” to the pre-Oedipal. Neither is it a matter of substituting the mother with another woman. Both entrustment theorists and Luisa Muraro insist that they are talking of the mother symbolically, not metaphorically. Indeed, one cannot speak of the mother metaphorically because no flesh-and-blood woman can replace the real mother. A metaphorical use of the mother still robs the real mother of the recognition she deserves, and an alternative symbolic remains impossible.

Throughout my explanation of the mechanisms of entrustment, I have purposely referred to the woman to whom one decides to entrust her desires as affidataria, since the affidataria is not a “Symbolic Mother”. Lia Cigarini repeatedly points out that “there aren’t, amongst us, Symbolic Mothers in flesh and blood, because the Symbolic Mother is a figure of a symbolic order, not a

96 Muraro in Diotima, Il cielo stellato dentro di noi, op. cit., pp.16 and 18 [my translation].
97 Ida Dominijanni, for one, stresses the usefulness of considering the practices of autocoscienza and of entrustment as connected and complementary. See Ida Dominijanni in Lia Cigarini, La politica del desiderio, op. cit., p.20.
Having the real mother as the model of all relationships of entrustment is said to prevent the risk of putting too much psychological power in the hands of either the affidataria or her entrustee. In Chapter V, we will come back to consider this point critically.

Entrustment and il pensiero theorists often point out that the Symbolic Mother is a figure of symbolic exchange between two women who want to translate their feminine sexual difference socially. The Symbolic Mother is thus a structure of subjectivity expressed through a language that women speak together, and through which they confer meaning to reality according to their common experience of it. Entrustment relationships also "re-present" the relationship with the mother in the more literal sense of "presenting anew", of "re-thinking and re-symbolising" the mother-daughter relationship as a source of social-symbolic strength. The Symbolic Order of the Mother can thus be conceived as the order of significant relationships between women which restructure representation so that feminine sexual difference can be included.

Therefore the Symbolic Mother is a relation, a language which acts as a bridge between the real mother and younger generations. The Symbolic Mother places women in a maternal continuum, whereby the relationship of the daughter with her mother recreates the relationship between the latter and her own mother, and so on and so forth. This symbolic lineage places the meaning of sexual difference genealogically. It stresses that all women are daughters, and that all are born of a woman's body. The daughter "is at the same time the centre and the end of the maternal continuum (except if she want to reopen this continuum by becoming a mother herself), while [the son] stands outside it, [...] from the moment that the mother comes to know his sex." Therefore, the maternal continuum does not confer an identity to women in biologically deterministic terms (the capacity to be mothers), but by necessity (through the

99 Lia Cigarini, op. cit., p.141 [my translation].
100 ibid., p.171.
101 A. M. Piussi, "Era là dall'inizio", op. cit., p.28.
103 Muraro, L'ordine simbolico della madre, p.54 [my translation].
phenomenological fact that one is born a woman from a woman’s body). In addition, the maternal continuum also expresses differences between women. Understanding women as daughters is less normative because mothers and daughters are no longer identified. Their relationship becomes one of sameness and difference, but not one of rivalry. In Chapter VI, we shall see that the maternal continuum also plays a central role in Adriana Cavarero’s political philosophy.

The following chapter will partly concentrate on the complex distinction between the Symbolic and the real mother as the source of some of the criticisms addressed to entrustment and to *il pensiero*. We will identify, at the heart of *il pensiero*, an oscillation between theorising a Symbolic Mother which transcends the real mother (Lia Cigarini) and conceptualising a Symbolic Order of the Mother based on the gratitude that one has for the real mother (Luisa Muraro). 104 We will also return to this discussion of the maternal continuum in the following chapter. Finally, we will ask whether entrustment theorists ignore the possible degeneration of an empowering disparity into an abusive power. In this respect, a preliminary discussion of the notion of female authority is required.

3. **The Symbolic Mother and female authority.**

Chapter III examined the move towards a positive revaluation of sexual difference, which occurs in Italy at the end of the 1960s. We have seen how this move is initiated by a negative interpretation of the concept of authority, then called authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is that negative form of power, which, for Italian feminists of the time, is buried deep in men’s psyche and which is used to oppress all women in the same pervasive way. There are two factors which prompt entrustment theorists to reopen the subject of power and authority. Firstly, rescuing feminist theory and practice from the common identification of women as victims of male power is perceived as an urgent need. This notion of sisterhood in oppression has the disadvantage of purposely ignoring the potential qualities and strengths of women, thus limiting the prospects for their liberation.

104 Ida Dominijanni also makes this point in Cigarini, *La politica del desiderio*, op. cit., p.40 n.17.
It also puts women in a position where their sole recourse is to ask the oppressor to be generous enough to concede them rights.\textsuperscript{105} Secondly, from the meeting with “Psych & Po” and from the publication of the Yellow \textit{Sottosopra}, the question of power becomes a tacit issue within women’s groups. With the positing of disparity at the centre of entrustment, differences between women are redefined in a positive way. It is thus at the end of the 1980s that the question of authority takes centre stage for entrustment theorists and for exponents of \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale}.\textsuperscript{106}

It is against this background that authority becomes, for \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale} as a whole, a positive form of power.\textsuperscript{107} The originality of this new analysis comes from presenting authority as linked to the symbolic dimension of language. For Muraro and the members of Diotima, the mother and child speak together with authority on the basis of a shared experience of reality.\textsuperscript{108} In entrustment, authority is given to the language that two women speak together in a view of acting in society so as to make it correspond to their interpretation of reality (the symbolic).\textsuperscript{109} Therefore, the authority activated is \textit{relational} – it is not given by one flesh-and-blood woman in particular, it is not a zero-sum; it is rather dialogical and refers to a significant relationship between women. As such, authority is said to belong to the Symbolic Mother, that is to the figure which represents these significant relationships between disparate women. The authority of the Symbolic Mother is visible in a relationship of entrustment when a harmony, a dialectical relationship, is set up between the


\textsuperscript{106} Apart from Luisa Muraro’s \textit{L’ordine simbolico della madre}, there have been many works regarding the specific conception of authority in Italian feminism. For example see the aforementioned Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, \textit{Sexual Difference}; Diotima, \textit{Oltre l’uguaglianza}; Centro Virginia Woolf-B, “L’autorità femminile. Incontro con Lia Cigarini” in Lia Cigarini, \textit{La politica del desiderio}, op. cit.; or Alessandra Bocchetti, “Vincere cosa, vincere cosa”, op. cit. See also Ipazia, \textit{Autorità scientifica. Autorità femminile} (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992).

\textsuperscript{107} This is certainly what comes through Giannina Longobardi’s early analysis which argues that power can be used positively within relationships of entrustment. Giannina Longobardi, “Donne e potere”, in Diotima. \textit{Il pensiero della differenza sessuale}, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{108} Luisa Muraro, \textit{L’ordine simbolico della madre}, especially chapter IV.

\textsuperscript{109} On this point, see Chiara Zamboni, “Ordine simbolico, ordine sociale” in Diotima, \textit{Oltre l’uguaglianza}, op. cit.
entrustee's desires and reality. This authority helps identify desires and finds a way of translating them socially. For *il pensiero*, authority is thus linked to becoming a subject – being an actor and occupying a position of enunciation (*authority*). Indeed, the feminine subject is given birth by a network of these significant relationships between women. It is this network which creates authority. Authority thus refers to a capacity (to speak and to act in society) independently of the male frame of reference. When considered as a relationship which links a woman to her mentor, entrustment theorists employ authority in its Latin sense of *au-gere* (to make something/someone grow).

For *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, authority is also solely legitimate. In entrustment, it is consented to (by the women who has less) rather than taken (by the women who display the “something extra” central to entrustment), and refers to the capacity to direct circumstances and human relationships towards a positive outcome. This legitimisation is made explicit – we will recall how entrustment is conceived of as a social *contract* which includes a visible gesture of gratitude, a “symbolic debt”, to be paid publicly. Some entrustment theorists have distinguished “authority” [*autorità*] (which refers to a linguistic relationship called the Symbolic Mother) from “*autorevolezza*” (the type of authority bestowed on the affidataria by the entrustee). The particular quality for which the affidataria is chosen, together with her experience of social interaction, gives her words a certain weight, and it is this weight that is indicated by the word “*autorevolezza*”.

*Il pensiero* theorists often refer to Hannah Arendt and to her claim that the modernity has lost a sense of “authority”. Some commentators have identified some strong Arendtian tones in the articulation of a consensual and responsible political space developed by *il pensiero*. It is arguably this sense of the

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113 Tommasi, “Il lavoro del servo”, op. cit.
114 Anna Rosa Buttarelli, “Fare autorità, disfare potere” in Diotima, *Oltre l'uguaglianza*, op. cit.
117 On this point, I would like to mention an article by Linda M. G. Zerilli. Zerilli tries to glean an Arendtian conceptualisation of the political (as the shared interactive scene where individuals express their singularity) from the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's *Sexual Difference*. 177
Political which needs to be retrieved for contemporary institutional politics. I would thus argue that, although entrustment theorists have re-valued authority as a capacity form of power, they have still retained from the 1970s critique of authoritarianism, a conflictual conception of power. The novelty of il pensiero's theory of power is thus contained in the separation of authority (viewed positively) from power (viewed negatively), and in the attribution of the latter to the existing social-symbolic. Thus, power is still theorised as conflictual, imposed from the outside, aimed at keeping the status quo, and employed by an agent (Man) in order to govern. Although never analysed in Lukesian terms, it is possible to view its three dimensions (of decision-making, agenda setting and interest shaping) at work in what il pensiero targets as male politics. The political is here criticised as the fight to acquire that instrumental and oppressive power.

This somewhat limited conception of power and artificial separation of power from authority will be one of the main reservations that I will address to the social-practice of entrustment and develop in the following chapter. Although il pensiero elaborates the theme of authority in relational terms, its presentation of entrusting relationships seems to leave out the kinds of insights that we can glean from a Foucauldian analysis of power (as self-discipline and normalisation, power acting at the microphysical level and as the recuperation and resignification of norms).

Her aim is to use this in the service of a reconfiguration of rights and equality which does not relinquish claims to difference. See Linda M. Zerilli, "Refiguring Rights Through the Political Practice of Sexual Difference" in Differences 15.2 (2004): 54-90. Although I found in this article a very interesting reading of Sexual Difference and although Arendt is often mentioned by il pensiero theorists, I do not think it is possible to push the comparison between Arendt's conceptualisation of politics and il pensiero's too far. Indeed, the latter still works on the premise that women meet between women (that is, on the basis of "what" they are, not "who" they are). In Chapter VI, I will argue that Cavarero develops a "politics of uniqueness" which is much closer to Arendt than the politics of sexual difference favoured by the rest of il pensiero.

118 See, for example, Diana Sartori, "Tu devi, un'ordine materno", in Diotima. Oltre l'uguaglianza, op. cit.
119 See, for example, Zamboni, "Ordine simbolico, ordine sociale", op. cit.
120 Anna Rosa Buttarelli, "Dare autorità, disfare potere", in Diotima. Oltre l'uguaglianza, op. cit.
122 Luisa Muraro's preface to Diotima, Oltre l'uguaglianza, op. cit.
123 On Michel Foucault and power, see The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), esp. ch.2; "Truth and Power" in Colin Gordon (ed.), Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings (Brighton; Harvester, 1980); "The Subject and Power" in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).
Indeed, Luisa Muraro, in an interview with Alessandra Bocchetti, explicitly rejects Foucault’s theories, not because she deems them unhelpful, but because they belong to a discourse built on man’s experience and conventions and thus do not correspond to women. Luisa Muraro argues for an independent (separatist?) analysis of power. For this to happen, she contends, we have to analyse the symbolic tools created by the women’s movement, namely the practice of disparity amongst women.\textsuperscript{124} The impossibility of such theoretical separatism left aside,\textsuperscript{125} I think that this approach is bound to lead to an impoverished analysis, one which crudely creates a dualism between a negative form of power and a positive type of authority. This gives the sense that, whilst the negative form of power is assigned to men and institutional politics, productive authority characterises women’s politics. In Chapter V, I will argue that this is a politically motivated strategy to avoid accounting for power relationships within the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. The analysis of authority at work in the relationships between women is normative rather than descriptive. In the following chapter, I will also argue that, although Foucault’s theories are gender-blind,\textsuperscript{126} they can usefully offer a more complete analysis of the notion of power/authority currently missing from entrustment and il pensiero. We will see, in Chapter VI, that Adriana Cavarero adopts a different attitude towards Western male philosophical tradition, instead seeking to recover a feminist politics from her hermeneutic dialogue with major political thinkers (from Plato to Jacques Derrida). However, Cavarero retains this normative description of positive relationships between women.

**Conclusion**

This chapter on the social-symbolic practice of entrustment opened with three questions. My starting point was to ask how and why the theory of sexual difference developed, in Italy, through entrustment. From an analysis of “More

\textsuperscript{124} Alessandra Bocchetti, “Vincere cosa, vincere cosa”, op. cit., p.90.

\textsuperscript{125} This impossibility has been pointed out in relation to Christine Delphy (in Chapter II) and to Carla Lonzi (in chapter III).

\textsuperscript{126} On this point see Caroline Ramazoglu (ed.), *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).
Women Than Men”, the 1983 pamphlet which first detailed the social-symbolic practice of entrustment, I was able to conclude that the choice to adopt the theory of sexual difference in Italy was made because it corresponded to problems (those of “the wish to win” and “estrangement”) which had been identified in the previous practices of the relationships between women. From this, we have been able to highlight the strong practical nature of the theory of sexual difference – not only did it arise out of a political practice but it purported to have developed through another practice, that of entrustment. The first point of originality of the Italian version of sexual difference thus arose: entrustment sustains the link between theory and practice which has been characteristic of Italian feminism since its re-emergence in the late 1960s.

My second and third questions regarded those elements which justified my contention that entrustment is an original application of sexual difference. In the second part of the chapter, we found the reasons for its originality in the solutions entrustment presented to a “state of emergency”. Throughout this chapter, we have seen how il pensiero della differenza sessuale answered the call of entrustment theory to go beyond separatism and victimization, to develop the original insights of “More women then men”. In addition, entrustment is original for its atypical understanding of disparity, desire, necessity, realism and freedom, subsequently adopted and refined by il pensiero della differenza sessuale. The third section of the chapter added the figure of the Mother and her symbolic order, which implied a specific understanding of female subjectivity and of authority.

However, this description of the originality of entrustment also raises many critical points, which will form the back-bone of the following chapter. Chapter V will therefore give a more complete overview of contemporary Italian feminism. It will not only come back to the internal tensions within il pensiero della differenza sessuale. It will also be concerned with those feminists who have opposed the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and who have devised slightly different ways of arriving at the representation of feminine sexual difference on a social-symbolic plane. Finally, Chapter VI will deal with the most significant of these dissenting voices by offering an exegesis of Adriana Cavarero’s thought as both central to the development of il pensiero della differenza sessuale and as a fierce critic of entrustment.
Chapter V

Introduction:

Chapter IV has described several specific characteristics which bestow on the social-symbolic practice of entrustment its originality. Firstly, entrustment arose out of the political strategy of practising relationships between women. This not only places entrustment at the centre of the Italian feminist tradition. It also shows that the conclusions reached by entrustment theorists were attained, to some extent, independently of Irigaray’s influence. Secondly, Chapter IV has exposed entrustment as an attempt to go beyond the critique of the existing social-symbolic order, towards a positive search and reconstruction of feminine sexual difference. Thirdly, we have seen how the social-symbolic practice of entrustment is structured on a disparity between women and on a specific conception of desire, necessity, realism and freedom. Finally, Chapter IV has examined the maternal symbolic order that entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale seek to create.

This fifth chapter returns to a point repeatedly emphasised during my study of contemporary Italian feminism. I have indeed stressed that entrustment characterises the feminism of sexual difference in Italy not because it is a social-symbolic practice which is embraced unanimously, but because it has polarised feminist debates between its defenders and its detractors. My presentation of entrustment has thus raised a number of contentious issues for further discussion. Here, I will concentrate on the controversial aspects of entrustment and take my analysis outside the sole feminist collectives at the forefront of il pensiero. In particular, I will assess how some Italian feminists have developed a more critical engagement with entrustment and il pensiero, while keeping the common goal of creating feminine sexual difference by focussing on the figure of the mother. Through a discussion of debates internal to contemporary Italian
feminism, I will develop a critical assessment of entrustment, and of the maternal symbolic that it seeks to create.

In particular, I will focus on two themes that have been at the forefront of many objections directed at entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists. The first section of this fifth chapter will return to the question of disparity between women, a questionable notion which structures entrustment and which is still at the centre of the maternal symbolic order envisaged by the likes of *Diotima*. I will assess the claim that the social-symbolic practice of entrustment creates situations where abusive power relations may thrive. Is entrustment an empowering practice or is it a practice of repressive power? I will also evaluate the way in which entrustment and *il pensiero* exponents theorise the relationship between disparity, authority and power. What theory of power lies at the basis of entrustment and *il pensiero*? The second section of this chapter will reconsider the new conceptualisation of the feminine subject that arises from entrustment, and from the conception of the maternal symbolic order, taking up its theoretical significance and implications for sexual difference. It is also in this second section that we will expose this feminine subject to the contested charges of essentialism. In the process, we will return to the discussion of essentialism initiated in Chapter I and to some of the feminist theorists discussed there.

Section I. Authority and power in entrustment and *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*:

In our earlier discussion, the central notion of disparity, which structures entrusting relationships, has been introduced as the major source of both originality and controversy. Rather than being crushing, disparity is presented as empowering and productive, allowing the entrustee to express a particular desire in social reality. Entrustment's initially positive use of the difference between women, first exposed in "More Women Than Men", is taken up by *il pensiero* theorists later and developed into the notion of authority.

In section I of the chapter, I will focus on the relationship between authority and power in entrustment and *il pensiero*. I will begin by assessing, in a first part, the relation between disparity, authority and power in entrustment via
an analysis of the psychoanalytic concept of transference. I will also return to the distinction between the *affidataria*, the real mother and the Symbolic Mother. We shall see how entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists rely on this distinction in order to counter the accusation that entrustment is a practice of repressive power. In the second part of Section 1, I will elaborate my own critique of entrustment by using the psychoanalytic concepts of counter-transference and the imaginary, which entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists do not explore sufficiently. I will conclude Section 1 by evaluating the conceptualisation of power and authority offered by entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists in order to see whether it can respond to its critics.

1. Disparity, authority and power.

Entrustment theorists are very cautious not to qualify the nature of the “something extra” that the *affidataria* displays socially and for which she is chosen by her entrustee. They are similarly careful not to specify the content of the desire that the entrustee seeks to express socially. Indeed, entrustment is not about defining what “Woman” is or should be, or what she should or should not desire. It is rather designed as a *relationship* allowing women to offer symbolic and practical support to one another on the basis that they all suffer from the existing monosexual symbolic order. Thanks to the disparity which constructs it, the practice of entrustment is believed to express and use the individual disparities which exist between women in a positive manner.

Entrustment theorists nonetheless provide some guidelines for the *affidataria* to follow. This provision is made so that the relationship is one of entrustment and not of repressive power, and so that differences amongst women are respected. We have encountered these rules when describing the mechanism of entrustment. Let us briefly record the main ones. First of all, the role of the *affidataria* is to respect and cultivate the asymmetry that separates her from her entrustee. She should be the one to adapt herself to the desires of the entrustee (and not the other way around). Secondly, the *affidataria* must realise that the added value for which she is chosen is not absolute but linked to a specific social context. The permutation of the roles of *affidataria* and entrustee in relationships

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between women is also said to prevent one single woman enjoying a privileged and powerful status. As seen in Chapter IV, the authority activated by entrusting relationships is presented as relational and not as the instrument of a particular agent. *Il pensiero* as a whole links authority to significant relationships between disparate women which themselves create the Symbolic order of the Mother. Finally, the *affidataria*’s specific advice and qualities expressed in a relationship of entrustment are said to matter less than the entrustee’s decision to enter into such a relationship. What is paramount is the *action* of contracting with a person of the same sex who has also been faced with the desire to enter social life from within a female frame of reference. It is the coming to consciousness of one’s need to take another woman as a mediation for the social expression of one’s desire which is decisive.

One can see how such guidelines, if respected, allow the two women to gain from a relationship of entrustment. On the one hand, the *affidataria* gets her specific quality recognised and valued by another woman, outside the male frame of reference. On the other hand, the entrustee can use the *affidataria*’s specific quality in order to bring her desire to bear on social reality. However, one could wonder whether the mere existence of these numerous guidelines, increased over the years, do not betray a disavowed fear that abusive power could always be lurking in relationships of entrustment? Let us now turn to examine this question in more detail.

*Entrustment, psychoanalysis and transference.*

One could argue that entrustment relationships will always be threatened by an invasion of repressive power because they are structured on a psychoanalytic model. The closeness of entrustment and psychoanalysis has indeed been one reason why several Italian feminists have always remained suspicious towards entrustment.¹ I have retraced the genealogy of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment in Chapters II and III and have constantly emphasised the critical link between entrustment theorists and Lacanian

psychoanalysis: firstly, via the French group “Psych & Po”; secondly, via the 1970s “Practice of the Unconscious”; and thirdly, via Luce Irigaray’s influence. With the emphasis on entrustment first and foremost as a practice, it is difficult not to liken an entrusting relationship to the one which links analyst to analysand in a therapeutic situation.

In psychoanalytic therapy, the analyst undeniably occupies a position of power. He is the one who possesses knowledge and who pronounces diagnostics or rather judgements. According to both the Freudian and the Lacanian therapeutic models, the analyst does not commit himself emotionally (something which I will later contest). He is not even judged by the patient on the truthfulness of his interventions since he is not supposed to utter truths, but should rather lead the patient to betray his own unconscious thoughts through the mechanism of transference. In *Madness and Civilisation*, Michel Foucault has highlighted all these elements:

[Freud] exploited the structure that enveloped the medical personage: he amplified its thaumaturgical virtues, preparing for its omnipotence a quasi-divine status. He focused upon this single presence – concealed behind the patient and above him, in an absence that is also a total presence – all the powers that had been distributed in the collective existence of the asylum; he transformed this into an absolute Observation, a pure and circumspect Silence, a Judge who punishes and rewards in a judgement that does not even condescend to language; he made it the Mirror in which madness, in an almost motionless movement, clings to and casts off itself.²

Unlike a therapeutic relationship, a relationship of entrustment does not have to conform to a set of guidelines which determine its spatio-temporal setting. Entrustment theorists have never raised questions of place, form and duration, central to the differentiation between various schools of psychoanalysis also explains why Cavarero has never embraced entrustment explicitly, although she has been a central figure in the development of *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*.
psychoanalysis. In addition, the position of *affidataria* is bound to a particular context where her specific qualities can prove to be an advantage in the relationship which ties her to the entrustee. Like the “Practice of the Unconscious”, described in Chapter III, the permutation and instability of roles is believed to curb the “capitalisation of knowledge” (that which puts the analyst in a position of power), so as to make it circulate within women’s groups.

In Chapter III, I criticised the “Practice of the Unconscious” for brushing aside the notion of the power inherent in psychoanalytic relationships by proposing this interchanging of positions. I wish to reiterate the same critique in relation to the permutation and contextuality of entrusting relationships between women. Although temporary and contextual, a relationship of entrustment can induce a certain level of dependency in the entrustee so that such a relationship becomes, in a certain way, “addictive”. The aim of a relationship of entrustment is the entrustee’s eventual symbolic independence. But without precise criteria, how is one to know when she has achieved a sufficient degree of symbolic independence? Who judges that independence has been attained? The *affidataria* or the entrustee?

Entrustment theorists are generally caught up in a dilemma. On the one hand, they refuse to give a precise definition of what is meant by several of the recurrent expressions which appear in their writings for fear of being too normative. They do not qualify idioms such as “something extra”, “signifying the fact that one is a woman”, “recognising the authenticity of the entrustee’s desire to count in the world”, the social translation of a desire while “not imitating men”. On the other, such a lack of precision presents the risk of leaving the establishment of these definitions to the sole *affidataria*, thus offering her an enormous amount of power.

Despite the differences in “setting” mentioned above, the parallels which can be drawn between a relationship of entrustment and a psychoanalytical one

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thus remain evident. The aim of a relationship of entrustment is to identify and define the precise desire which the entrustee aims at expressing socially. In addition, the point behind the social-symbolic practice of entrustment is also to create a symbolic order by socially re-enacting the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother, in order to give it an actual force. This brings us to a discussion of transference, central to psychoanalytic therapy. In transference, the desires and affects linked to a particular relationship belonging to the past of the patient are revived and transferred onto the analyst.\(^5\) This is the point of psychoanalytic therapy – to re-invoke past relationships in order to identify the desires and affects buried behind them. The process of transference is precisely encouraged by the analyst’s silence, apparent passivity which Foucault describes in the above quotation. Could we argue that transference is the aim behind the relationship of entrustment? In that case, is the relationship re-enacted in entrustment that which links a daughter to her real mother and shows the desires behind it? What is the connection between transference, entrustment and Luisa Muraro’s invitation, discussed in Chapter IV, to transform all the affects and emotions linked to the relationship with our real mother in a matter for reflection and knowledge?

Entrustment theorists never address these questions explicitly. However, it seems that the transference which could occur in a relationship of entrustment is only temporary, a sort of preliminary stage which is meant to be transcended. One evident objection to the proposal of entrustment is given by the fact that many women have difficult contacts with their mother and would strongly reject the proposition to re-live, even if symbolically, such a relationship.\(^6\) This objection is acknowledged by entrustment theorists.\(^7\) However, they contend that the mother we hate is the oedipal mother. She is the mother who serves the existing symbolic order and whom we judge by adopting phallic parameters. She is the one whom the daughter blames for not having given her a penis, or, in

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\(^6\) As we shall see shortly, there exists in Italy, a feminist vision of the mother-daughter relationship as one of irreconcilable conflict. See in particular Silvia Vegetti Finzi, Il bambino della notte. Divenire donna, divenire madre (Milan: Mondadori, 1990). Lea Melandri also questions the undisputed benefits of reviving the mother-daughter relationship by fostering relationships between women. See Lea Melandri, Una visceralità indiscibile, op. cit., p. 125. We will come back to Vegetti Finzi and Melandri’s critiques shortly.

\(^7\) For example, see Luisa Muraro, “L’orientamento della riconoscenza” in Diotima, Il cielo stellato dentro di noi, or L’ordine simbolico della madre (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992), ch.1.
more Lacanian terms, the one whom we reproach for giving us biological but not symbolic life. A relationship of entrustment thus allows all of these affects to be put into words. Presumably, thanks to the mechanism of transference, the relationship with the affidataria would remind the entrustee of her link to her own mother. The affidataria’s role would thus be to encourage the process of transference in order to identify, in the entrustee’s speech, the affects that are linked to her ancient relationship with the mother. It is in that sense that we must perhaps understand Muraro’s request to “narrate the mother” [“raccontare la madre”] in order to “love her”.

Therefore, the disparity between entrustee and affidataria should be used positively to trigger the mechanism of transference. The transference from the real mother to the affidataria could thus be seen as a way of re-presenting, rethinking, re-symbolising the relationship with the mother, away from the masculine frame of reference. The entrustee would then become conscious that her difficulties with her real mother are due to a patriarchal symbolic which opposes the figure of the mother to the subject’s symbolic independence. Once this coming to consciousness occurs, the aim of the relationship would be to consider the work of the pre-oedipal mother and to try and re-instate the symbolic link between mother and daughter via a system of dialogical relationships between disparate women.

Affidataria, real mother and Symbolic Mother.

There is however a difficulty in considering the relationship of entrustment as one of transference. If transference is the aim of entrustment, then the affidataria temporarily takes on the place of the real mother. She would hence be in a position of extreme power in relation to the entrustee: like the real mother of our life, she could demand from her daughter obedience to her dictates. Some commentators have expressed their doubts about the possibility of dissociating the pre-oedipal from the phallic mother. They have thus seen in entrustment a problematic return to the mother who has fitted in the existing symbolic, the
glorified mamma, whom the strong Catholic imaginary has nourished over the years, and who sustains patriarchal society as bearer and transmitter of patriarchal norms. Conversely, Angela Putino, an active member of the Centre Virginia Woolf B and of Diotima, has recently expressed her fears that il pensiero’s emphasis on the maternal order, on the mother’s adequate response to the daughter’s exigencies, on dependency and on disparity might renew the social view of women as primary carers. Similarly, Teresa de Lauretis views the emphasis on the figure of the mother (even when symbolic) as a dangerous return to the association between feminine sexuality and maternity on the one hand, and between feminine identity and motherhood on the other. We shall return to the feminine subject that entrustment and il pensiero call forth in Section II of this chapter.

For the moment, I will contend that, in view of these risks, we have to think of transference not only as one important aspect of the relationship of entrustment, but also as a stage to be transcended. I suggest that this is the central reason why entrustment theorists have repeatedly tried to distinguish between the real mother, the affidataria and the Symbolic Mother. This mistaken confusion has often led to the theoretical dismissal of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. For example, in the context of her more general discussion of Irigaray’s interpretation of Antigone, Christine Battersby refers to entrustment as a “harmful practice”. She argues that entrustment “has led to political practices structured around the need to choose (and obey) a symbolic mother who is not one’s natural mother”. As we have seen in Chapter IV, entrustment does not aim at substituting the real mother with another woman. As Muraro expresses it, the use of the mother is here symbolic and not metaphorical. Contrary to Battersby’s reading, the Symbolic Mother is not and cannot be the affidataria either, since the Symbolic Mother does not refer to a flesh-and-blood woman, but

9 Luisa Muraro, “L’orientamento della riconoscenza”, op. cit., p.16.
14 ibid., p.119.
to a dialogical and significant *relationship* between two women who, together, represent reality in accordance with their shared experience of it. The Symbolic Mother is thus a *figure* of linguistic exchange between women, aimed at signifying feminine sexual difference socially.

However, I believe that Battersby's erroneous interpretation is indicative of an implicit oscillation at the heart of *il pensiero della difference sessuale*. This oscillation itself relates to the difficulty in keeping the *affidataria*, real mother and Symbolic Mother confined to their respective functions. While *all* entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists reject the incarnation of the Symbolic Mother in any specific woman, there seems to be two distinct conceptualisations of the relationships between *affidataria*, real and Symbolic Mother. On the one hand are those entrustment theorists who, like Lia Cigarini and Ida Dominijanni, envisage the Symbolic Mother as transcending the real mother. On the other hand are those who, following Luisa Muraro and Diotima, insist on the symbolic importance given to the gratitude for one's *real* mother. As seen above, Muraro insists on the necessity to transform our relationship with our real mother into a source of knowledge, thus expressing our love and gratitude to the woman who has given us both life and language. What both positions express in a slightly different way, is a concern for the potential incarnation of the Symbolic Mother into the *affidataria* thus enabling an abuse of power on the part of the latter. I would thus argue that, in effect, entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists share Christine Battersby's concerns. The first group prevents such an incarnation by stressing that the symbolic debt must be paid publicly to a particular woman who is *not* one's mother but who has helped the entrustee carry out a specific desire attached to a given context. The second position seeks to prevent the confusion between *affidataria* and Symbolic Mother by interposing the *real* mother between the Symbolic Mother and the *affidataria*, and by stressing that the debt must be paid primarily to the *real* mother.

This slight fluctuation explains why entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists have been attacked, by different critics, from opposite directions. As seen above, some have rejected entrustment on the basis that it puts too much emphasis on

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the real mother and on her role within the existing social order. Others have expressed their dislike for entrustment on the basis that it ignores the mother. We will now approach this second critical position by concentrating on the mechanism of counter-transference.

2. Entrustment, counter-transference and the imaginary.

If transference could be implied in a relationship of entrustment as a preliminary step towards the establishment of a female symbolic (by reflecting on our relationship with the real mother), a consideration of counter-transference seems to be lacking. In psychoanalysis, counter-transference refers to the desires and affects aroused, this time, in the psychoanalyst, by the relationship he has with his patient. Laplanche and Pontalis’ definition is more precise; counter-transference is “The whole of the analyst’s unconscious reactions to the individual analysand – especially to the analysand’s own transference.”\(^{17}\) What of counter-transference in the relationship of entrustment? What are the effects that entrustment has on the affidataria herself? Entrustment theorists seem to ignore these questions. Let us examine the reasons for and the consequences of such a blind spot.

If, thanks to transference, some of the fantasies that the entrustee has towards her real mother have space to resurface within entrustment, the fantasies brought by the affidataria when entering a relationship with another woman remain dangerously unexamined. What motivates a woman to pose as an affidataria? Is it always a feminist desire to participate in the construction of a maternal symbolic? Is mere goodwill a factor? Or is it pride, flattery, and worse, a taste for the exercise of power? Or is it an unconscious desire to conform to her patriarchal role as primary carer? One could also ask how, in an entrusting

relationship through which she gains recognition, is the affidataria changed? All
these questions are related to counter-transference. To my knowledge, the
accusation of ignoring counter-transference has never been made to entrustment
theorists either from theorists working within or without the contextual frame of
“Italian feminism”.

However, a similar kind of concern has been voiced by Teresa de Lauretis
and other feminists working within the geographical frame of Italian feminism.
They have accused entrustment theorists of paying too much attention to the
symbolic at the expense of the imaginary.\footnote{Teresa de Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain” in Differences 1 (Summer 1989): 31.} In Chapter II, we have noted how,
for Irigaray, the symbolic and the imaginary are reciprocally determined.
Therefore, one could ask, with Teresa de Lauretis “which phantasies or phantoms
does the symbolic order of the mother generate? And, conversely, what
imaginary gives rise to the notion of a symbolic or feminist mother?”.\footnote{Teresa de Lauretis, The Practice of Love, op. cit., p. 181.}

A few Italian feminists working within the Centro Documentazione Donna
di Firenze [Florence Women’s Research Centre] have tried to address the
importance of the imaginary and its role in determining the symbolic order.
While still stressing feminine sexual difference, the link between practice and
theory, the political viability of practising relationships between women, and the
important figure of the mother, these feminists have retained the Lacanian
distinction between the three registers of the Real, the Imaginary and the
Symbolic to account for women’s acquisition of subjectivity and sexuality. They
have tried to redirect their research towards an analysis of the body, sexuality,
the actual mother-daughter relationship.\footnote{For example, see il Centro Documentazione Donna di Firenze, Verso il luogo delle origini (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1992). Silvia Vegetti Finzi and Lea Melandri are members of the Florence Women’s Research Centre. Although they have criticised entrustment and il pensiero theorists, the members of the Centro Documentazione Donna di Firenze have acknowledged the influence that the Libreria delle Donne di Milano or the Centro Virginia Woolf B have had on their research project. See Verso il luogo delle origini, op. cit., p. 9.} Hence the Centro Documentazione Donna di Firenze have criticised entrustment theorists for failing to analyse the images and phantasies which inform the real mother-daughter relationship and
for ignoring the corporeal experience of motherhood and of the maternal body.

For example, Silvia Vegetti-Finzi, an influential psychanalyst involved in
the activities of the Firenze Centre, has retrieved the notion of “the child of the

night" ("il bambino della notte") from the clinical observation of little girls. The "child of the night" designates an image of a parthenogenic child, firmly anchored in the little girl's unconscious. She subverts the Freudian account of the penis envy: the little girl primarily perceives her body as a place of fullness and satisfaction, not as lack. Vegetti-Finzi considers the existence of that parthenogenic image as an evidence of a repressed maternal pulsion which would precede sexual desire, and which would not involve the existence of a sexual partner or of a reproductive act. The maternal pulsion thus ignores social interaction. However, the phantasies linked to this maternal pulsion are not allowed social expression. It is a forbidden desire that the little girl should renounce to fit in the norms of a society organised around masculine desire and body. The maternal phantasies are thus repressed and manifest themselves only through dreams, games, day-dreaming and pathological symptoms. This has devastating consequences for the little girl's access to subjectivity. First of all, the little girl is forced to turn to the masculine body to find an accepted form of fullness. It is only then that the little girl experiences her own body as lacking.

Secondly, woman's relationship to her own body is changed in such a way that her creative capacities (biological reproduction and intellectual production) are downgraded. Finally, woman's relationship to her reproductive and productive capacities is now mediated by a masculine imaginary so that woman is defined in relation to man.

Like entrustment and il pensiero theorists, Vegetti Finzi and the other members of the Firenze group, seek to retrieve feminine specificity from an invasion of the masculine norms. However, for the Centro Documentazione Donna, this is solely possible by trying to analyse the repressed feminine imaginary which links feminine sexual desire to the maternal body and which escapes representation. Thus, the members of the Firenze Centre concentrate on a series of figures (mythical characters such as Medusa or psychoanalytic figures such as hysteric or the little girl). Alongside psychoanalysis, women's literature is a great resource for such a research. Lea Melandri, who conducts courses at the Libera Università delle Donne (Free University of Women) in Milan, is at the

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22 ibid., p.22.
forefront of this attempt to express women’s corporeal experiences through autobiography as well as creative and critical writing. 24

Vegetti Finzi’s efforts to locate the origin of sexual difference in motherhood is not shared by entrustment or il pensiero theorists. On the contrary, the concept of “maternal continuum” stresses the identity of women as daughters. However, the work on the imaginary carried out by Vegetti Finzi and the other members of the Firenze Centre can be used to support my own reservation towards some aspects of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Since the imaginary and the mechanism of counter-transference are not analysed sufficiently, the healthy functioning of a relationship of entrustment is predicated on a transparency between affidataria and entrustee. In many cases, such transparency might be difficult to achieve or uphold. The members of the Libreria delle Donne di Milano and those of Diotima, some of whom have presumably been chosen as affidatarie, have themselves often been accused of authoritarianism, elitism and prevarication. 25 They have also been seen as imposing a “necessary and thus obligatory” practice of female symbolic mediation. 26 As Lois McNay has argued in relation to Habermasian discourse ethics and the account of intersubjectivity supporting it, such a level of transparency is attained firstly by ignoring psychic blockages (in our case, that of the affidataria in entrustment). This, explains McNay, leads to “anodyne notions of subjectivity” and a “sanitized view of gender subjectivity and agency […] based on respect and equality which suppress the irrational and often negative contents of identity.” 27 It is also in the name of transparency that such theories further ignore the influence that other structural elements will have on

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23 Ibid., p.29.
26 See the aforementioned article by Grazia Zuffa who nostalgically looks back at the “‘free’ feminist politics” of the autocoscienza age and rejects the “necessary and thus obligatory” practice of female symbolic mediation (p.52). It is also the compulsory politics of mediation structured around the symbolic order of the mother that Angela Putino contests in Amiche mie isteriche, op. cit., p. 8. In my interview (Warwick, 18.05.2004), Adriana Cavarero has equally mentioned the lack of open-mindedness as a reason for leaving the Diotima community.
relationships such as entrustment. Let us now turn to examine the precise objections made to entrustment theorists in relation to these structural elements. 28

Entrustment and “La carta delle donne”.

Entrustment theorists have faced the accusation that the “something extra” that the affidataria demonstrates socially can take the habit of class, age, social position, level of education, professional status, income or even magnetic or charismatic personality. If left untheorised, the “something extra” displayed by the affidataria could become a mere reflection of power relations and entrustment could become a conservative and adaptive social-symbolic practice.

In Italy, this type of criticism has emanated from two sources: Marxist and Lesbian feminists. It could have equally come from ethnic minorities had Italy been sufficiently multicultural at the time of the elaboration of entrustment. 29 Marxist feminists have typically accused entrustment theorists of elitism and a bourgeois class bias. 30 However, a group of communist women active in the P.C.I became extremely interested in the potential of the practice of entrustment and tried to apply it to their political party. In 1986, Livia Turco, Rossana Rossanda, and Maria Luisa Boccia issued a document called the “Women’s Charter” (“La carta delle donne”). 31 At the time of its publication, the “Women’s Charter” seemed to ally feminists, communist women, the female electorate, and even some communist men (including the future secretary of the Party, Achille Occhetto). The “Women’s Charter” urged women to be communist and feminist at the same time, and requested both equality for women within the party and the

28 ibid, p.12.
29 Race is surely an issue that entrustment and il pensiero theorists will have to face in the coming years, now that Italy is no longer a land of emigration but one of immigration. Asylum seekers and illegal workers, mainly from North Africa and Eastern Europe, are rapidly increasing in number, and such a change of circumstances will certainly influence the development of feminism in Italy. The question of the relationships between Western and third-world women is slowly starting to be addressed. In October 1993, the Milanese Associazione per una Libera Università delle Donne [Association for a Free Women’s University] organised a two-day event on this subject. The conference papers were subsequently published in Luciana Percovich, Franca Petronio and Cesarina Damiani (eds.), Donne del Nord, donne del Sud: Verso una politica della relazione tra diversità, solidarietà e conflitto (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994).
recognition of demands specific to women. The road to such a double recognition was thought to be possible only by choosing women candidates who were receptive to the question of sexual difference, sensitive to women’s desire to participate in society, and willing to build a network of communication and strong relationships. These women candidates were considered to best represent the interests of women. The P.C.I.’s “Women’s Charter” did achieve greater political representation for women in the subsequent elections, and even occasioned Luce Irigaray’s praise.\textsuperscript{32}

However, both the Charter and Irigaray’s apparent support of it were heavily criticised and eventually dismissed by entrustment theorists themselves.\textsuperscript{33} Entrustment theorists considered the “Women’s Charter” as a simplified and misleading application of entrustment to the political arena.\textsuperscript{34} The project was rejected for favouring political parity and women candidates at the expense of finding social-symbolic significations of being a woman in society. Parity is indeed diametrically opposed to entrustment which holds that women are not a class or not even a compact interest group and cannot therefore be represented in a traditional sense of the word.\textsuperscript{35} In addition, the Charter still upheld liberal rights as the answer to women’s disadvantaged position in society, and put loyalty to the party before being a woman in society. Finally, the Charter was written by women who often conceived the political as the realm of political parties, institutional procedures, economics, and mass mobilisation, rather than as a sphere of significant relationships between women.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{32} 95 women (65 of whom were communist candidates) were elected as members of parliament (the total numbers of members of parliament is, in Italy, 945). For a historical account of the vicissitudes and of the political destiny of the “Women’s Charter”, see Chiara Valentini, \textit{Le donne fanno paura: la verità sulla vita delle italiane} (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1997), pp.49-50. For her praise, see the opening paragraph of Irigaray’s foreword to the French edition of \textit{Le temps de la différence} (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1989), p.7.

\textsuperscript{33} For a critique of Irigaray’s endorsement of the “Women’s Charter”, see Alessandra Bocchetti, “Lettera per Luce Irigaray” in \textit{Che vuole una donna?}, op. cit.


\textsuperscript{35} This is the point made by Adriana Cavarero in “L’ordine dell’uno non è l’ordine del due”, op. cit.

\textsuperscript{36} A good example of such a conception is to be found in a major communist figure of Italian political life, namely Rossana Rossanda. For example, see her “Politica: significati e progetti. Le diverse strade delle Carta e dell’affidamento” in \textit{Reti: Pratiche e saperi di donne} 1 (1987): 39-44.
Lesbian theorists have also objected to entrustment on the account that the affidataria and entrustee might carry the heterosexual bias of the existing society. The lesbian critique of “More Women Than Men” has been strong enough for some entrustment theorists to predict the imminent advent of a “double movement”. In Italy, lesbian feminism ("lesbofemminismo") arose as a distinctive trend of the women’s movement, at the beginning of the 1980s, thanks to the efforts of some feminists who felt that their lesbian difference was being ignored within women’s groups.

The creation of the Italian Lesbian Union (Comitato Lesbico Italiano) thus marks the formation of a lesbian line in the debate on sexual difference. It is this line which opposes the social-symbolic practice of entrustment for upholding the ambiguity of heterosexual society. Firstly, entrustment theorists are criticised for using Adrienne Rich’s work without mentioning the fact that she is a lesbian theorist. More importantly, entrustment theorists are accused of turning a blind eye to the homosexual implications of creating a “common world of women”. Thirdly, entrustment is said to ignore important questions such as the specificity of lesbian identity in relation to woman’s identity as well as the relationship between a collective lesbian identity and a heterosexual feminist one. Lesbofemministe contend that entrustment theorists’ silence regarding an erotic definition of sexual difference amounts to an implicit homophobia.

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37 Some commentators have objected to the social-symbolic practice of entrustment on the grounds that it refuses mixed social relations and therefore amounts to “homosexual fundamentalism”. On this point, see Grazia Zuffa, “Tra libertà e necessità. A proposito di Non credere di avere dei diritti”, op. cit.
39 Although the Italian Lesbian Union (Comitato Lesbico Italiano) was only created in 1982, lesbian women have always been active within Italian feminism, especially within il pensiero della differenza sessuale. For a history of lesbian activism and its relation to the women’s movement up to the 1980s, see, Bianca Pomeranzi, “Differenza lesbica e lesbofemminismo” in Memoria 13 (1985): 72-78. This essay has been translated in English as “A Survey: Lesbian Difference and Lesbian Feminism” in Bono and Kemp (eds.), Italian Feminist Thought, op. cit., pp.162-169. See also Rossana Fiocchetto, L’amante celeste: la distruzione scientifica della lesbica (Rome: Estro, 1987).
42 On the call for an erotic definition of sexual difference, and on the homophobic practice within the Libreria, see Rossanna Fiocchetto, “Quattro luoghi comuni” in Squaderno, 1 (June 1989): 5-9.
separatist lesbians, a compulsory heterosexuality is thus at the basis of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. The problem of heterosexuality, as imposed by men’s desire and values, is never challenged or even approached. As a result, entrustment imposes a new type of universality on women, one which has resulted, for lesbians in “the non belonging to oneself as well as others”, and in “the loss of identity and of community”\(^{43}\).

There is certainly no attention to the lesbian imaginary that relationships of entrustment might foster, and this, lesbofemministe contend, results in an impoverished analysis. Some lesbian theorists, such as Simonetta Spinelli, have argued for this lacunae to be filled by “coming out” in order to show the potential of lesbianism as a critique of patriarchal society and as a position from which to theorise a specifically lesbian feminist identity.\(^{44}\)

3. **The power/authority dichotomy:**

Why, then, do entrustment theorists, concentrate solely upon an analysis of the position occupied by the entrustee? Why are the unconscious motives and the changes in the *affidataria* left aside? Entrustment theorists would probably answer this question by stressing that it is the entrustee, and not the *affidataria*, who chooses to enter a relationship of entrustment; that it is she who is motivated by a desire for which she can find no social expression; and that it is she who needs assistance. The *affidataria*, we are told, has already found ways of socially signifying the fact that she is a woman, and this is the precise reason for which she is chosen. However, I propose an additional explanation as to why entrustment theorists seem to have bracketed the problems of counter-transference and of the imaginary content of relationships of entrustment. I contend that avoiding counter-transference might be a way for entrustment theorists to elude the pressing question of power within entrustment and within relationships between women in general.

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\(^{44}\) ibid, p.52.
In order to proceed from our discussion of transference and counter-transference in a relationship of entrustment, I will begin with a psychoanalytic definition of power. As Stephen Frosh points out, in the context of the psychoanalytic relationship, "power refers to the forces by which structures of an individual's subjectivity are produced." Power is conceived both in positive terms (as an enabling process which produces and organises experience), and in negative ones (as something repressive which contains actions and desires). In political theory, power is an essentially contested concept which has also been theorised in pejorative and in positive terms. In the context of the "Community-Power debate" for example, Stephen Lukes has analysed the three-dimensions that the conception of power as conflict can take: the dimensions of decision-making, of non-decision-making and of interest-shaping. Other theorists such as Hannah Arendt have linked power with the more positive capacity to come together in order to reach a consensus, and to act in concert. Michel Foucault, for his part, has theorised power in both repressive and productive terms. In Foucault, power is fluid, beyond the individual, the group and social structures. It "is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society." Let us briefly return to examine the relationship between entrustment, il pensiero and these different conceptions of power.

As seen in Chapter IV, the re-examination of power and authority by il pensiero theorists occurs towards the end of the 1980s. The critique of power taken by il pensiero from Carla Lonzi, is viewed as problematic since it portrays women as the helpless victims of male domination, therefore limiting their prospect for liberation. Entrustment and il pensiero theorists face the task of retrieving a positive conception of power so as to stress that where there is power, there is also potential for resistance. In Foucauldian terms: "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only in so far as they are free." 

49 Foucault, "The Subject and Power", op cit., p.221.
This is how entrustment theorists develop a positive sense of authority that we have analysed in Chapter IV. To sum it up briefly, authority is linked to the symbolic dimension of language. It is not the possession of an individual but only exists in a dialogical relationships between women. It arises every time two women enter in a signifying relationship and interpret the world in accordance to their shared experience of it. Authority is linked to becoming a subject, an actor in a position of enunciation. It refers to the capacity to act and speak in the world independently of the male frame of reference and is thus conducive to what entrustment theorists call "female freedom". Authority is solely legitimate since women choose to enter entrusting relationships, and actively select a particular affidataria.

This vision of authority thus corresponds to the "enabling process which produces and organises experience" mentioned above, in the psychoanalytic definition of power. In addition, the representation of authority as a capacity to act and speak in concert with another woman has Arendtian resonance. One can equally find echoes of Foucault in il pensiero's conceptualisation of authority as relational, fluid (that is, constantly arising and disappearing), and observable at a microphysical level. As we shall later see, entrustment is also about the (conscious) re-appropriation and re-signification of (masculine) norms.

We will recall from Chapter IV that this type of authority is then contrasted to power. Entrustment theorists theorise power as conflictual, imposed from outside and aimed at keeping the status quo. It is related to the male political sphere, and features the Lukesian three-dimensionality mentioned above. Institutional politics is seen as the battlefield for the acquisition of instrumental and oppressive power. The negative, repressive side of power, that which delimits actions and desires, or at least governs their production and expression, is visible only outside relationships between women. However, I have argued that this form of power may be displayed through the mechanism of counter-


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transference, where the *affidataria* can bear the patriarchal, sexist or classist norms of society.

The splitting of the concept of power into a positive and a negative form is not, in itself, theoretically restrictive. As we have seen above, power is multidimensional. What is harmful for the credibility of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment, is the construction of a sharp distinction between the positive aspects of power (the pole of “authority” and entrustment) and the negative ones (the pole of power proper to patriarchy). The analysis of power thus becomes somewhat limited. As a result, the study of relationships between women (which are governed by authority) and that of patriarchy (where power thrives) look inherently biased. Firstly, the good functioning of such relationships seems to rely on an over-optimistic view of women. Secondly, patriarchy becomes a “closed system”, where power related to race, class, history, sexuality and upbringing is contained and does not affect relationships between women. Relationships between women are presented as a haven of transparency and goodwill. This tendency, if reinforced by Irigaray’s influence on Italian feminism, has got its own domestic history. In chapter III, we have indeed developed a similar critique in relation to Lonzi’s attitude to power.

In addition, the simplistic antithesis set up between authority and power triggers other dichotomous oppositions. For example, there is the “common world of women” vs. patriarchy. In the previous chapter we have also revealed the difference, in Italian feminism, between “rappresentanza” (the political representation of the traditional political system) and “rappresentazione” (the social “acting out” of sexual difference) which refers to the schism between women’s politics (“politica delle donne”) and traditional politics. There would thus be the order of sexual difference on the one hand, and the political order on

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51 Christine Battersby links this tendency to Irigaray’s own sentimentalising of relationships between women, even when unequal power relations exist between them. See Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, op. cit., p.119.

52 ibid., p.119.

53 This schism often appears under different terms: those of “immediate politics” (*politica immediata*) and “instrumental politics” (*politica strumentale*). The term “immediate politics” refers to the will of entrustment theorists to tie theory to practice and to act on present reality. It is contrasted to “instrumental politics”, which refers to the strategy of acquiring rights for the future improvement of woman’s socio-political condition. On the two types of politics, see Ida Domminianni, “Il desiderio di politica”, op. cit., pp.25-33 in particular; Luisa Muraro and Lia Cigarini, “Politica strumentale, politica diretta” in Lia Cigarini, *La politica del desiderio*, op. cit.,
the other. This series of dichotomies could be criticised on a number of counts. Firstly, such dualisms may create inadvertently a new form of separatism, when it was precisely the critique of "static separatism" which gave rise to entrustment and to *il pensiero* (as seen in Chapters III and IV). Secondly, they could be used (as it indeed has been within Italian feminism) to contend that *il pensiero* simply re-introduces and re-affirms the dichotomies upheld by the existing symbolic which it seeks to criticise.54

Entrustment theorists have contested these charges of renewed separatism. Rather than emphasising a parallel world of feminine values, they have stressed that feminist political practice must go beyond institutional politics since the latter is built on a masculine norm which does not recognise feminine sexual difference. Ida Dominijanni explains that the order of sexual difference and the political order are not antithetical but are rather asymmetrical: the order of sexual difference contaminates and reshapes the order of the political.55 We will come back to this point in the second section of this chapter. For the moment, I wish to stress that this re-shaping also calls for an analysis of the way in which the order of masculine politics and of repressive power might contaminate the order of women's relationship and of symbolic authority.

If disparity constitutes the originality of entrustment, it also remains the most dangerous of its aspects. It may certainly be partly justified by its capacity to trigger the temporary and necessary mechanism of transference, and partly by the transitive nature of the "something extra". However, if insufficient attention is paid to counter-transference and to the workings of the imaginary in entrusting relationships, power may be permitted to creep back in. In the relationship which links her to the entrustee, it is conceivable that the affidataria may reproduce power relations already at work in the existing symbolic order.

Such an analysis of authority allows entrustment theorists to conceptualise relationships between women as outside the masculine frame of reference, transparent and protected from an invasion of external social norms. In this way, entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists avoid accounting for power relationships within the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. In Chapter VI, we will see

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54 See for example, Lea Melandri, *Una visceralità indiscibile*, op. cit., p.125.

how Cavarero retains some aspects of this normative description of the positive relationships between women. But for the moment, we will turn to analyse a second source of criticism: the notion of subjectivity which sustains the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale.

Section II. Entrustment and the feminine subject:

In Chapter I, I reconstructed a history of Anglophone feminism by focussing on the equality vs. difference debate. This reconstruction was not aimed at producing a rigid and all-encompassing account of the history of feminism in the Anglo-Saxon context. On the contrary, my objective was to select the key aspects and thinkers who would subsequently aid me to confirm as well as undermine the distance separating Anglo-Saxon from continental feminism, and to establish the originality of the Italian position. I chose the equality vs. difference debate as the best starting point since this debate harbours other important concepts at the centre of my analysis of contemporary Italian feminism. I will now return to one of these concepts – that of essentialism.

In Chapter IV, I have argued that the diffusion of entrustment and of il pensiero outside the Italian context has been hindered by early suspicions of essentialism. Indeed, in the climate of the late 1980s when both entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale were starting to receive international attention, any theory stressing sexual difference, feminine subjectivity or feminist political agency tended to be considered with suspicion. Essentialism functioned as a gauge which determined the theoretical fate of many works on feminism. I believe that Italian feminism was one of the many victims of the crusade against essentialism.56 The fact that entrustment theorists and exponents of il pensiero have still not openly confronted these charges of essentialism has done nothing to improve the exchange of ideas between Italian and Anglophone

56 We have seen that the diffusion of Irigaray’s work in the Anglophone context was equally hampered by suspicion of essentialism.
feminisms. Re-opening the question of essentialism is important in order to avoid misunderstanding contemporary feminism’s attempt to build a maternal symbolic. It will allow to draw parallels between Italian feminists and Anglophone theorists such as Diana Fuss, Judith Butler and Christine Battersby, discussed in Chapter I.

Once again, the term “essentialist” requires some qualification. In Chapter 1, I defined essentialism loosely, as the belief in an underlying substance, a set of fixed and unchanging characteristics defining the “whatness” of things. In the case of feminism, it refers to a given set of attributes without which a woman would not be a woman. “Essentialism” usually contains several variants or “cognates” (biologism, naturalism and universalism). In this second section of the chapter, I endeavour to follow Naomi Schor’s invitation to “deessentialize essentialism” by further distinguishing between three critiques that have – or could be – formulated against the feminine subject resulting from the social-symbolic practice of entrustment and from il pensiero. Firstly, I will weigh the validity of an egalitarian critique of essentialism by assessing whether the Italian theory of sexual difference imprisons the feminine subject in a pre-given biological or naturalist essence which serves the perpetuation of patriarchy. Secondly, I will address the Lacanian critique of essentialism by considering whether il pensiero confines women in a pre-symbolic realm, refuting the concept of desire and the decentering of the subject in language. Lastly, I will come to what Schor calls the “philosophical critique” and establish whether the kind of subjectivity envisaged by entrustment and il pensiero is still enclosed in existing dichotomies and “remains prisoner of the metaphysical with its illusions of presence, Being, stable meanings and identities.”

57 As we will see in the next chapter, Adriana Cavarero is an exception here. In particular, her Relating Narratives (originally published in 1997 and translated in 1999) establishes a dialogue with Anglo-American feminism and attempts to confront the charges of essentialism.

58 Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips With Irigaray” in Differences 1 (Summer 1989): 40.
1. **Entrustment, il pensiero and the egalitarian critique of essentialism.**

Chapters I and II have shown how the egalitarian critique of essentialism has its feminist origins in Beauvoir’s distinction between sex and gender. Anti-essentialists, in this context, consider any stress on differences between the sexes as a return to a kind of biologism (the stress on women’s biological capacities) and to naturalism (the emphasis on a fixed nature which does not necessarily manifest itself in biological terms). Indeed, essentialism and its cognates have always been invoked to justify women’s subordinate position in society. Could entrustment and il pensiero’s stress on sexual difference be translated as a return to sex roles?

The last chapters have made this type of accusation invalid. Following Lacan and Irigaray, entrustment and il pensiero theorists understand women’s alienation and exclusion to be the result of their position (or non-position) within the symbolic order, rather than of some biological characteristic or predetermined nature. The seminal essay by Cavarero, which I have referred to at length in Chapter IV, provides an initial definition of woman as “the living being who has the language of the other”, as “the living being who has language in the form of self-alienation” or “separateness”, as “the Other who thinks herself as the other, and in this thinking herself she experiences that separateness of the other from the Other.”

Cavarero’s stress on alienation/separateness, together with entrustment theorists’ focus on estrangement, are meant to be starting points, not indications that there is an authentic core to Woman’s nature, one to be found “in some improbable era whose sun has set.”

Teresa de Lauretis has defended Italian feminism against this charge of essentialism by stressing that Italian feminists historicise women’s position. She has pointed out that the only type of essentialism that entrustment theorists might be guilty of is a form of Lockean nominalism which describes “specific properties (e.g. a female sexed body), qualities (a disposition to nurturance, a certain relation to the body, etc.), or necessary attributes (e.g., the experience of

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59 ibid., p.42.
61 ibid., p.203.
femaleness, of living in the world as a female) that woman have developed or have been bound to *historically, in their differently patriarchal sociocultural contexts*, which make them women, and not men.\(^{62}\) As seen in Chapter I, Christine Battersby uses a similar strategy in her search for a feminist metaphysics. Her starting point is the common positioning of women (what she calls the "five features") *vis-à-vis* the founding metaphysical categories of "identity", "self", "substance", "personhood".\(^{63}\)

It remains nevertheless true that *il pensiero* constantly "risks essentialism", to borrow de Lauretis' own expression. A parallel could thus be drawn here with Diana Fuss' notion of "strategic essentialism". For entrustment and *il pensiero*, the ontological subject Woman or the political subject women are still deemed fictitious (since it is the existing symbolic which equalises women in their gender, as the "other" of Man). However, it is the common positioning of women at the margins of signification which brings women together to devise a social-symbolic practice which would signify sexual difference.\(^{64}\)

In the later texts of entrustment and of *il pensiero*, the definition of sexual difference manages to challenge the sharp distinction between nature and culture, thus between essentialism and constructionism. The point of departure is the phenomenological fact that we are born women. This fact clashes with the order of representation which denies the signification of the female body (and hence, women's historical experience of estrangement). The purpose is to take on the task of "signifying [the body], instead of negating its significance merely because, thus far, it has been interpreted to [women's] disadvantage."\(^{65}\) It could be argued that this move is more existentialist than essentialist. We will recall, from Chapter IV, the emphasis entrustment theorists place upon action as "the social translation of the human value of being a woman",\(^{66}\) and their definition of

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\(^{62}\) Teresa de Lauretis, "The Essence of the Triangle", op. cit., p.5 [my emphasis].

\(^{63}\) Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, op. cit., pp.8-11. We will recall that the five features are: the conceptual link between the paradigm of woman and a body that births, the socialisation of women as primary carers, the impregnation of the self with otherness, the connection woman has with a flesh-and-blood body, and the experience of the female as anomalous/monstrous.

\(^{64}\) On this point, see Dominijanni, "Il desiderio di politica", op. cit., p.24.

\(^{65}\) Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, "Introduction: Coming from the South" in Bono and Kemp (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought*, op. cit., p.16.

freedom as the capacity to express sexual difference in words and actions. Adalgisa Giorgio similarly points out that *il pensiero* stresses process, rather than essence, “namely a difference which is constructed and subject to change.”

With the notion of the maternal continuum, having a woman’s body is supplemented by the fact that we are born women out of a woman’s body. This is a source of value which women must constantly re-activate (by seeking signifying relationships with other women).

Therefore, the positing of sexual difference as an irreducible difference, and as a starting point for any notion of female subjectivity is what makes the social-symbolic practice of entrustment a feminist practice. In this context, “risking essentialism” thus means privileging this irreducible difference as part of “an ongoing (re)definition of [the] specific difference [of feminism].” In Chapter VI, we will see how feminism is no longer the starting point of Cavarero’s later “politics of uniqueness” but becomes its necessary result. For the moment let us turn to a second type of accusation related to essentialism.

2. **Entrustment, *il pensiero* and the contentious return to the mother.**

As explained in Chapter IV, entrustment’s objective is to make feminine difference appear in the existing social-symbolic order by re-enacting/re-actualising the pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother. For Lacanians, this goal is essentialist on at least two counts. Firstly, returning to the pre-Oedipal mother contains the risk of locking women outside language and history. Secondly, returning to the mother is essentialist because it denies the concept of desire and the decentering of the subject in language. We have already encountered these

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68 Adalgisa Giorgio, “Mothers and Daughters in Italian Feminism”, op. cit., p.183.
69 On this point, Cavarero writes: “being engendered in difference is something not negotiable; for each one who is born female, it is always already so and not otherwise, rooted in her being, not as something superfluous or something more, but as that which she necessarily is: female”. See Adriana Cavarero, “L’elaborazione filosofica della differenza sessuale” in Maria Cristina Marcuzzo and Anna Rossi Doria, *La ricerca delle donne: studi femministi in Italia* (Turin: Rosenberg and Sellier, 1987), pp.180-181.
two objections in Chapter II, when discussing Irigaray’s thought. Let us turn to examine their validity in the light of entrustment and il pensiero.

According to the Lacanian scheme discussed in Chapter II, symbolising the mother-daughter relationship is a theoretical aberration. In particular, the return to the pre-oedipal (and thus pre-symbolic) relation between mother and daughter as constitutive of an alternative feminine symbolic could indeed trigger accusations of restricting women to an archaic form of expression which remains erratic and unintelligible. This would more or less confirm the prejudiced view of women as hysterics, irrational, closer to dangerous and unruly passions. In the light of this accusation, it is not surprising to find, for example, Luisa Muraro reclaiming hysteria as a feminist position which opens the way to subjectivity via an attachment to the mother.\textsuperscript{71} Does Muraro and the rest of il pensiero della differenza sessuale really envisage hysteria as a model for a new feminine subjectivity?

Understanding the nature of this “return” or this “attachment” holds the key to counter this first Lacanian accusation of essentialism. It is not a question of locating feminine subjectivity in a pre-discursive realm or re-valuing the pre-oedipal realm of hysteria as “more authentic”. In fact, il pensiero criticises the existing symbolic on the grounds that it essentialises women as outside language.\textsuperscript{72} Il pensiero theorists use the political practice of relationships between women to restructure the existing order of representation so that it can accommodate sexual difference. This is not an easy task since the only symbolic available is that which forecloses the thinking/expression of sexual difference. With this in mind, contemporary Italian feminists devise several strategies to push the boundaries of the existing symbolic order. These include Diotima’s feminine realism, Muraro’s mimetic re-appropriation of hysteria, her “narration of the mother” (all discussed in Chapter IV), or Cavarero’s conceptual theft (examined in the following chapter). Entrustment was the first of these strategies to be elaborated: since the existing symbolic order denies female genealogies and differences between women, entrustment theorists practice relationships between

\textsuperscript{71} Luisa Muraro, \textit{L’ordine simbolico della madre}, op. cit., p.59 [my translation]. For a discussion of this feminist reclaiming of hysteria, see Angela Putino, \textit{Amiche mie isteriche}, op. cit., ch. 1.

women so as to see the destructuring effects these would have on the order of representation. It is not so much a question of reproducing, in the present relationships between women, a more authentic *a priori* language buried (one might say “forgotten”) under the patriarchal one. It is the actual relationships of entrustment which create a new language, whose relational form recalls the language spoken with the mother.

This thesis has repeatedly stressed that there are two levels which contemporary Italian feminism wants to preserve and link together: language and political practice, or text and context. Entrustment is a *social-s symbolic* practice. It creates a language aimed at being visible socially and at altering political reality. Entrustment is in no way a parallel language to be spoken within women’s separatist groups; it is one which is spoken between women *so that women can enter a mixed society as subjects*. It is this new language which makes the “return” to the mother possible.

Nevertheless, some critics have questioned the possibility of adapting the past to the present. For example, Angela Putino claims that “there might be parallels [between past and present] but that their possibility should not overshadow the evidence of a rupture.” In her view, interpreting past events through the lens of the present understanding of what sexual difference is, also risks establishing “a new chain of being, where the present is the complete and perfect form of an evolution”. This critique could be answered by pointing out that, firstly, Italian theorists do recognise a cut or break, namely that imposed by the access to the existing symbolic (see discussion below). Secondly, entrustment and *il pensiero* do not conceive of the pre-Oedipal and the symbolic as temporal stages in an individual’s development, but as co-existing elements that determine one another. There is therefore no question of a “past” or a “present” or of a teleological progression since past and present coexist in the existing symbolic. Finally, entrustment theorists, or *Diotima* for that matter, do not aim at providing

75 Angela Putino, *Amice mie isteriche*, op. cit., p.15 [my translation].
76 ibid., p.16 [my translation].
an alternative psychoanalytic account of the child's psycho-sexual development.\textsuperscript{77}

*Entrustment and desire.*

The second Lacanian critique linked to the return to pre-Oedipal mother, is even more fundamental – since it focuses upon the concept of desire and the decentering of the subject in language. The recuperation of the "original" relationship with the mother is here interpreted as a refusal of the "split" which inaugurates both subjectivity and desire.\textsuperscript{78}

Entrustment theorists start from this notion of desire, at the core of women's problematic rapport with society. We will recall how the two central affects of "More Women Than Men" are called "the wish to win" (desire) and "estrangement" (the failure of desire). The aim of a relationship of entrustment is to enable a woman to express her desire and make it count socially, while staying faithful to her feminine sexual difference (this is called the "sense of ease"). Contra Lacan, for whom the full-expression and satisfaction of desire is not only impossible but also threatening to subjectivity, entrustment theorists seem to stress that some social translation of desire is not only possible, but also central to female subjectivity.

What must be made clear, from the outset, is that the notion of desire evoked by entrustment and that employed by Lacanians differ considerably. In the wake of Irigaray, entrustment theorists contest the current allocation of life and death-instincts in culture, one where women inherit death. In other words, they argue for a representational system where desire is not solely signified in relation to the phallus. Entrustment relationships aim at re-working the symbolic structure of desire through *conscious* social interventions. Entrusting relationships are thought to have this restructurig capacity. Desire thus becomes the desire to signify sexual difference starting from the particular circumstances of one's life.

\textsuperscript{77} Giorgio, "Writing the Mother-Daughter Relationship", op. cit., p.18. For an alternative account of the child's psycho-sexual development, one has to turn to Silvia Vegetti-Finzi's notion of "the child of the night", discussed above.
There are many ways of signifying sexual difference. This explains the formalism of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Chapter IV explained that the role of the affidataria was to teach the entrustee how to desire (the form of desire) and not what to desire (the content of desire). The affidataria's role is to help the entrustee to understand and express what she wants. A relationship of entrustment is built on an individualist basis. It is sought when a woman wants to express a particular desire in a specific situation. Therefore, relationships of entrustment are designed to cater for a vast arrays of individual desires and hence, for differences between women. Relationships of entrustment thus express the many faces of sexual difference in society. The feminist politics which arises from entrusting relationships is not based on one collective subject Woman to be represented in the political arena. Rather, entrusting relationships act out the many aspects that feminine sexual difference can take on a political and social level.

*Entrustment relationships and “coalition politics”*

In *Sexual Difference*, the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective describes a relationship of entrustment as linking two “moments of humanity”, represented by the “woman who wants” and who seeks help of the “woman who knows”.79 The typical description of a relationship of entrustment is indeed one where the disparity, which differentiates but at the same time connects the entrustee to the affidataria, is represented by a difference in experience. While the affidataria has “the experience which comes with defeat”, the entrustee has her “claims intact”.80 “More Women Than Men” describes the “sense of ease” (that feeling acquired when one's desires affect reality) as “the third term between a savage wish to win and submission, between fantasies of omnipotence and failure.”81 Other questions hence emerge: in order to be applied, must this “wish to win” be necessarily weakened and adapted to the existing reality? Is the “sense of ease” a conservative adaptation to social reality? Does the dialectic established between

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78 We have also seen that it is on this basis that Irigaray had been read as a “psychic essentialist”. See Lynn Segal, *Is the future Female? Troubled Thought on Contemporary Feminism* (London: Virago, 1987), p.132.


80 ibid., p.122.
desire and its social expression suggest a feminine subjectivity devoid of ambiguities?

In order to answer the first of these questions, let us return to the notion of “feminine realism”, developed in the writings of Diotima. In Chapter IV, we have described this specific understanding of realism as an awareness of the contextual demands of a social situation and as the simultaneous capacity to subvert these demands. I believe that it is here possible to draw a limited comparison between the type of realism produced by an entrusting relationship and Butler’s notion of “coalitional politics”, discussed in Chapter I. Like Butler,entrustment theorists do not appeal to a coherent subject Woman to be represented politically. Instead, two particular women can form an entrusting relationship (a “coalition”, in more Butlerian terms) on the basis of their common positioning within the existing symbolic in a view of expressing a specific desire socially. Certainly, Butler is not to be considered a sexual difference theorist, and the notion of genealogy she appeals to is of Foucauldian rather than Irigaryan inspiration. Nevertheless, both coalition and entrusting relationships involve re-assuming and re-signifying existing social norms in order to represent gender (in a theatrical more than a political sense).  

As for the second remaining question, I will only provide here a partial answer, to be completed in the following section. If the sense of “ease” is the third term, the synthesis between the “savage wish to win” and “submission”, does that suggest a subjectivity which is devoid of ambiguities? In Freudian terms, this notion of “ease” could be the name given to the dialectical relationship between the pleasure and reality principles. Nothing says that female desire is always fully translated or indeed translatable. There might be an excess of desire which resists social translation into “ease”. Far from being conflict-free and unified, the feminine subject arising out of relationships of entrustment is one who negotiates the demands of desire and that of reality. In the preceding section to this chapter, it has been argued that because entrustment theory fails to give proper attention to the mechanism of counter-transference and to the imaginary, the entrustee might, in some cases, have to negotiate the demands of the affidataria as well.

82 See the aforementioned difference between “rappresentanza” and “rappresentazione.”
In this way, the feminine subject arising from entrusting relationships, and from the theoretical elaboration of *il pensiero*, is not coherent and void of ambiguities. As the chapters of this thesis have made clear, *il pensiero* theorists do not contest the Lacanian positing of the subject as constituted by language. However, they do contest the status of the phallus as primary signifier. For them, its law is not an “eternal law” and it is in this respect that Lacanian commentators might dismiss *il pensiero* as essentialist. Entrustment and *il pensiero* theorists search for a symbolic order not solely centred on the phallus, one which would therefore allow an alternative representation of sexual difference. We have seen how this alternative is explored by setting up significant relationships between women and making possible a symbolic return to the mother.

We will now assess whether this return to the mother, the giver of life and language, to paraphrase Muraro, implies a feminine subject which mirrors the “monstrous subject of philosophy”. This is indeed Teresa de Lauretis’ main objection to the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. For her, the excessive emphasis on the symbolic content of relationships between women and the simultaneous lack of attention to the imaginary content evoke a feminine subject with universalist pretensions. In the critique of psychoanalytic feminism that she develops in *The Practice of Love* (1994), Lauretis condemns the social-symbolic practice of entrustment for failing to account for the erotic content of the mother-daughter relationship, turning the mother into a metaphor for women’s individual and collective empowerment. According to de Lauretis, this leads to a false universalist picture of the feminine subject, one which fails to considers lesbian specificity. Section I of this chapter has contended that the mechanism of counter-transference and the position of the *affidataria* were dangerously left aside. I have shown that this resulted in a lack of analysis of the norms that the *affidataria* might herself embody. We shall now take this accusation of

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83 The expression is Naomi Schor's. See Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One”, op. cit., p.42.
84 Teresa de Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle”, op. cit., p.31.
86 Naomi Schor refers to this type of accusation as the “feminist critique of essentialism”: “essentialism, according to this critique, is a form of ‘false universalism’ that threatens the vitality of the newly born women of feminism.” See Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One”, op. cit, p.42.
“monstrosity” a step further and relate it, finally, to what Noami Schor calls the “philosophical critique of essentialism”.87

3. Within or beyond existing dichotomies?

The last critique of essentialism to be considered is more philosophical in nature. Naomi Schor links it to the feminists who have relied on Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics as a metaphysics of presence by which he understands a belief that language (the logos) can make the world present to the speaker.88 In the logocentric system, meaning (presence) is constructed by imposing order, coherence and closure on heterogeneity and mobility. The logos precisely imposes order and coherence by discarding all that is unrepresentable (because heterogenous and mobile) as non-existent. The logocentric system is thus founded on binary oppositions where one term is taken as norm, in opposition to a denigrated one. It is these dichotomies that create an illusion of stability. Therefore language constructs reality/meaning/stable identities by denying genuine difference. In this deconstructive context, an essentialist is somebody who believes in a subject anterior to language and a metaphysics which prioritises transparency, identity and self-consciousness. It also involves denying the play of difference in language, subscribing to the binary opposition woman/man, and to stable identities or meanings.

In the light of this new definition, the charge of essentialism could be expressed in relation to two components of entrustment and il pensiero della differenza sessuale. Firstly, entrustment has sometimes been viewed as offering women a subjectivity which simply mirrors that of men. According to this point of view, entrustment still upholds a dichotomous frame of representation modelled on the binary opposition between man and woman. For example, Lea Melandri sees in the establishment of female genealogies a direct analogy of men’s historical community.89 The existing symbolic is criticised for obeying the “law-of-men-between-themselves”, and finds its counter-weight in the “common

87 ibid., p.42.
88 In Chapter VI, I will come back to Derrida’s metaphysics of presence when discussing Cavarero’s For More Than One voice. See Chapter VI, fn.111.
world of women"\textsuperscript{90} established by entrusting relationships. Secondly, some sympathetic commentators have also warned against \textit{il pensiero}’s “unquestioning acceptance of the classic, unified subject of philosophy”.\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Il pensiero} is here seen as establishing a dialectic between the experience that women have of reality and its symbolic representation. Indeed, in \textit{L’ordine simbolico della madre}, Muraro argues that there is no temporal or psychic separation between experience and the possibility of signifying this experience (between “being” and the “sense of being”\textsuperscript{92}). Hence the assertion that, together, the mother-child couple “creates” the world according to the shared experience they have of it. Entrustment would thus provide the practical framework in which subject and its social meaning can be made to correspond. Critics such as Rosi Braidotti argue that the crisis of the classical subject of Western metaphysics was precisely brought about by the contention that reality and our symbolic representation of it, or that the subject and thinking consciousness do not concur.\textsuperscript{93} Entrustment theorists seem to contend that, once feminine sexual difference is introduced, reality and representation will once again be harmonised. Similarly, the correspondence between the subject and the consciousness the subject has of herself will be restored anew.

To a certain extent, our discussion of desire in the context of psychoanalysis has already contested a reading of entrustment and of \textit{il pensiero} as presenting a new, fixed and stable model for women’s subjectivity. I will therefore simply complement this discussion here. It is possible to conceive the form of subjectivity arising from entrustment and from \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale} as transcending sexual dichotomies by envisaging a dynamic subject always in process. In some texts of entrustment, sexual difference is theorised as that which exceeds the norms of the existing symbolic. With the social-symbolic practice of entrustment, the norms of the symbolic are constantly redefined, re-figured and signified anew. Ida Domminijanni writes:

\textsuperscript{89} Lea Melandri, \textit{Una visceralità indiscibile}, op. cit., p.125.
\textsuperscript{90} “More Women Than Men”, in Bono and Kemp (eds.), \textit{Italian Feminist Thought}, op. cit., p.119.
\textsuperscript{92} In Muraro’s text, this appears as “essere” and “senso dell’essere”. See \textit{L’ordine simbolico della madre}, p.26 and again on p.58.
\textsuperscript{93} Braidotti, “Commento alla relazione di Adriana Cavarero”, op. cit., p.196.
sexual difference is always at stake because the symbolic collocation of men and women in relation to the symbolic order is always at stake [...] one can change it, modify it, displace it [...] It is not a question of fixing sexual difference in a definition of gender (masculine or feminine) but of interpreting how being a man or a woman is precisely played, combined, and shifted in actual situations.  

Three points need to be made here. Firstly, this viewpoint underscores that feminine sexual difference is now considered, in the words of Lia Cigarini herself, as a "universal mediation". Since feminine sexual difference has placed the monstrosity of the subject in crisis, men can now investigate masculine sexual difference beyond the pretence of universality. This has prompted a re-examination of masculinity, of which entrustment theorists have been very supportive. It is in this sense that one must understand Italian feminists' contention that feminine sexual difference does not seek the inclusion of a feminine subject into the existing symbolic. Rather, the project set out by il pensiero is one of "asymmetry and dislocation of the forms of subjectivity and of sociality considered as universal. It implies a change not only in women, but also in the world, a change of both social and symbolic orders, or reality and representation".

Secondly, sexual difference is no longer simply understood as feminine sexual difference. In more recent years, sexual difference is interpreted as that which does not find signification in the existing symbolic. In other words, that which exceeds the existing symbolic is attributed to Woman.

Thirdly, sexual difference is always at stake and is subject to a perpetual movement of re-signification. This suggests that entrustment might be one possible strategy which might prove effective in a particular situation, and for the

95 Lia Cigarini, La politica del desiderio, op. cit., p.245.
96 ibid., p.246.
97 Many articles on masculine sexual difference have been published in the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective’s own periodical Via Dogana. For example, see the articles by Aldo Tortorella and Dino Leon in Via Dogana 8 (1993) and those by Alberto Leiss and Victor J. Seidler, in Via Dogana 21-22 (1995).
social expression of a specific desire. Entrustment is thus best understood as a part of a plural but shared strategy of "practising relationships between women" in order to restructure the order of representation so that sexual difference can be included. Cavarero's description of il pensiero seems to confirm this point. She writes:

Crucially, it is not a question of a theory of the subject, male or female, but a theory of a structure understood as a relation. In other words, the question of the subject and of its construction is here replaced by the question of a relation as a practice able to simultaneously de-structure the patriarchal symbolic order and to restructure a female symbolic order in which the signification of the individual woman is generated in her relationship with another woman. 99

A final point concerns the supposed correspondence between reality and the feminine subject's perception of it, since this relation is at the origin of the accusation that entrustment and il pensiero still rely on some characteristics of the Cartesian subject, a solipsistic and self-reflective subject guarantor of knowledge. The Cartesian self acquires certainty of his own existence by discarding the realm of the corporeal in order to focus on his rational activity. Once the material realm is transcended, this rational self is able to know the world with certainty. He can attain universal truths. Cartesianism is thus predicated on another series of dualisms (mind/body, subject/object, self/other, etc.) which inevitably involves a hierarchical mastery of the first term over the other. Feminists have often pointed out that, in patriarchal societies, the dominated terms of the different dichotomies are generally associated to women. Psychoanalytic and poststructuralist critiques refutes this Cartesian self as an illusion on the basis that the unconscious or the play of difference in language always erases the possibility of self-mastery or self-transparency.

98 Ida Dominijanni, "Il desiderio di politica", op. cit., p.36 [my translation].
Unlike the masculine subject they criticise, the feminine subject theorised through entrustment and *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* is not solipsistic and fixed. Rather, it is dialogical, relational and “in process”, as our discussion of desire has shown. One can counter this last objection by using Luisa Muraro’s “epistemological move” (discussed in Chapter IV). We will recall that, for Luisa Muraro, our first and most important knowledge comes from the contact with our mother. From the mother, we “create the world” by attributing symbolic meaning to the reality around us. For Muraro, the criteria of truth lies in the experience and perception of reality shared by two women. As pointed out in Chapter IV, this truth is thus dissociated from objective, abstract, universal and eternal metaphysical forms or laws. This truth is not entirely subjective either: instead, it depends on the experience one has of reality, but this is a *mutual* experience thus an interpretation of reality that one *shares* with the other. By theorising relationships between women, Muraro explores a notion of truth which transcends the dichotomous opposition between self and other, objectivity and subjectivity, and gives rise to a notion of a “realistic symbolic”. Reality becomes a particular interpretation of the world that two women share. This interpretation is constantly re-worked, adjusted to new contexts and new dialogical relationships which link two women.

**Conclusion:**

In this chapter, the social-symbolic practice of entrustment has had to face two major sources of criticism. In the first section, I have enquired whether entrustment is an empowering practice or a practice of power. I concluded that, although entrustment is not meant to be an outright practice of power, it is predicated on a level of transparency (between entrustee and *affidataria*), which could be difficult to attain or indeed to maintain. Entrustment theorists do not consider the risks of such a social-symbolic practice due to two theoretical blindfolds. Firstly, they do not analyse the pole of the relationship that the *affidataria* occupies. The phenomenon of counter-transference is untheorised and the imaginary which might inform the relationship is insufficiently analysed. In addition, the social-symbolic practice of entrustment is weakened by the artificial
dichotomy set up between authority and power. The risk of an abuse of power within entrustment cannot hence be properly tackled. Far from a genuine oversight, this limited conceptualisation of power is aimed at presenting relationships between women as founded on legitimate authority only.

The second section of the chapter has re-examined the contentious issue of essentialism from an egalitarian, Lacanian and philosophical point of view. Accusations of a biological form of essentialism have been rejected. The Lacanian accusation that entrustment imprisons women in a pre-linguistic essence have equally been deemed unfounded. I have also argued for conceiving of sexual difference in entrustment, and more generally in *il pensiero*, as a process to be constantly re-signified anew. Finally, the theme of essentialism has allowed parallels to be drawn between contemporary Italian feminism and Diana Fuss, Judith Butler and Christine Battersby, whose contribution to feminist thought was discussed in Chapter I.

To conclude, the main weakness of entrustment lies, I would argue, in its voluntarist character. It is surprising that such a social-symbolic practice, which was created using the contribution made to feminism by psychoanalysis, ignores precisely those elements (e.g., counter-transference, imaginary, and erotic desire) structurally linked to the unconscious. Nevertheless, it is important to conceive of entrustment as an open project, as a practice which is meant to be complemented. Then, space exists to develop these connections.

The last chapter of this thesis examines the work an Italian feminist philosopher who has offered an alternative to the politics of sexual difference embraced by entrustment theorists and by *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*. Although an important figure at the origin of the elaboration of *il pensiero*, Adriana Cavarero has professed her dislike of entrustment. In the 1990s, she has also distanced herself explicitly from those collectives still close to entrustment as well as from *Diotima*. Cavarero’s work thus provides an important concluding perspective on contemporary Italian feminism. Chapter VI will thus examine a passage from a politics of difference to one of uniqueness in her work. It will also determine whether her thought goes beyond the problems posed by the social-symbolic practice of entrustment.
Chapter VI.
Adriana Cavarero: From a Politics of Sexual Difference to a Politics of Uniqueness.

Introduction: Adriana Cavarero and Italian feminism.

Of all the Italian feminists encountered along the chapters of this thesis, Adriana Cavarero is the best known in the Anglo-American context. In Italy, Adriana Cavarero has been instrumental to the development of il pensiero della differenza sessuale and my account of contemporary Italian feminism would be incomplete, it may be argued, without a chapter dedicated to an exegesis of her work.

Despite her important role in Italy, Cavarero’s journey into feminist theory has not followed the evolution of feminism that I have retraced in Chapter III. Cavarero has never been a member of Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective and has never embraced the social-symbolic practice of entrustment, which she has, at times, openly criticised. Rather than political activism in the ranks of the Milan Women’s Bookstore or of other feminist collectives operating during the 1970s, Cavarero first approached feminism via her academic interest in

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2 When I interviewed Cavarero at the University of Warwick (19.05.04), she vehemently rejected entrustment as a practice which established a dangerous psychological dependency between women.
philosophy and her personal experience as a female scholar.\(^3\) With other women academics from the University of Verona, she co-founded the philosophical community Diotima. She remained deeply involved in the group's activities until the beginning of the 1990s, when she chose to take her distance. Despite both her dislike for entrustment and her more recent separation from Diotima, Cavarero's positioning as a proponent of sexual difference leads her work to share many of the theses held by entrustment theorists.

I will thus conclude my study of contemporary Italian feminism with an account of the complexity of the relationship between Adriana Cavarero's thought and il pensiero della differenza sessuale. In particular, this chapter will compare and contrast Cavarero's thought to the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. It will trace its evolution. Indeed, in the course of my argument, the shift of influence from an Irigarayian to an Arendtian frame of reference will become evident.\(^4\) My aim is to show how, like entrustment theorists, Cavarero inherits from Irigaray the critique of the existing "hom(m)osexual" symbolic and answers the call to "invent" feminine sexual difference.\(^5\) This is what situates Cavarero, Diotima and entrustment theorists under the banner of il pensiero della differenza sessuale. However, this chapter also endeavours to demonstrate that the solutions that she proposes to "invent" feminine sexual difference distinguishes Cavarero from entrustment theorists, and from the other members of Diotima. It is in the last fifteen years, a period which more or less corresponds to her criticism of entrustment as well as to her estrangement from Diotima, that Cavarero's frame of reference has shifted resolutely from Irigaray to Arendt.

\(^3\) I owe this information to the interview mentioned above. It seems to be confirmed in writing in one of Cavarero's early papers. See A. Cavarero, “L'elaborazione filosofica della differenza sessuale” in Maria Cristina Marcuzzo and Anna Rossi Doria (eds.), La ricerca delle donne: studi femministi in Italia (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987), translated in P. Bono and S. Kemp (eds.), Italian Feminist Thought, op. cit., p.182.

\(^4\) I am referring to an evolution and not a break in Cavarero's thought. Indeed and as this chapter will show, Arendt has long been a source of reference for Cavarero. Arendt's influence is explicit right from one of the first essays Cavarero published under the banner of il pensiero della differenza sessuale (see "Dire la nascita" in Diotima, Mettere al mondo il mondo: oggetto e oggettività alla luce della differenza sessuale [Milan: La Tartaruga, 1990]). Equally, Cavarero has not altogether turned away from Irigaray. Although Irigaray is not given centre stage in Cavarero’s latest works such as For More Than One Voice, her concept of symbolic matricide still features as a support to Cavarero's attack on the centrality of the category of death in Western philosophy.

\(^5\) In chapter IV, we have seen that "inventing" sexual difference is the project which informs the work of Diotima. "Inventing" sexual difference is understood as this symbolic search and translation of feminine sexual difference. See Diotima, “Differenza sessuale: da scoprire e da produrre” in il pensiero della differenza sessuale (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987).
originality of Cavarero's thought, in relation to other exponents of il pensiero, is marked by two components of her work - firstly, the feminist adaptation of the Arendtian categories of natality, uniqueness and action, and secondly, the prevalence of these themes over the Irigarayian concept of female mediation (central to entrustment and to the philosophical elaborations of Diotima).

My rendition of Cavarero's work and of her relationship with il pensiero and the social-symbolic practice of entrustment will thus be informed by three questions. Firstly, how does Cavarero manage to integrate Arendt into a feminist theory of sexual difference? Secondly, what can this shift from Irigaray to Arendt offer contemporary Italian feminism? In other words, how does Cavarero's thought resolve some of the limitations of entrustment that we have identified in Chapter V? Thirdly, what are the difficulties already encountered in relation to entrustment which persist in Cavarero's version of the theory of sexual difference? My argument will be divided into two parts. The first section will treat Adriana Cavarero as an integral and pivotal exponent of il pensiero della differenza sessuale. The second section of the chapter will concentrate on Cavarero's recent work, which is markedly more Arendtian. It is here that I will weigh the contribution that Adriana Cavarero's writings can bring to an assessment of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment.

Section I. For a theory of sexual difference: Cavarero as an exponent of il pensiero della differenza sessuale.

In an essay discussing feminist philosophy in a comparative context, Cavarero declares that Italian feminism, while internally marked by many diverging and sometimes conflicting positions, owes its originality to the hegemony achieved by the theory of sexual difference.\(^6\) In this opening section, I will thus look for this mutual approach. It is because contemporary Italian feminists all denounce the existing symbolic order for not representing sexual difference that they all come under the label il pensiero della differenza sessuale. In Chapter IV of this thesis, the hegemonic critique of the existing symbolic

order has been divided into two areas: the monosexual norm which inconspicuously rules over the existing symbolic order and the denial of female genealogies. I have shown that these two themes are inspired, in part, from Irigaray and adapted to the Italian context via the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. These are also two leitmotifs that we find in Adriana Cavarero’s work, especially in her early writings for *il pensiero della differenza sessuale*. Let us briefly return to these two themes in order to determine their role in the development of Cavarero’s work, and to assess the originality and theoretical potential that references to the thought of Hannah Arendt confer upon Cavarero’s approach.

1. **The monosexual symbolic order:**

Central to “More Women Than Men”, the original document of entrustment which we have extensively analysed in Chapter IV, is the contradictory experience of women who are moved by a desire to actively take part in society (the “wish to win”) and a feeling of estrangement when they do so. Echoing the insights of Irigaray, entrustment theorists contend that women “live out” a fractured subjectivity because of the monosexual symbolic order which, under the pretence of neutrality and universality, harbours the masculine sex as a norm.

It is on this political basis opened by “More Women Than Men” that *Diotima* and Cavarero elaborate their philosophical analyses of the social-symbolic system which hides its masculine mark. In fact, the historical genesis of the philosophical community of *Diotima*, as it is recorded in an appendix of *Diotima. Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, explicitly refers back to “More Women Than Men”. It also places Cavarero at the centre of this philosophical translation of the political work that entrustment theorists carried out before the creation of *Diotima*. In this respect, Cavarero firmly grounds her work in the

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7 For example, see “L’elaborazione filosofica della differenza sessuale”, op. cit., “Per una teoria della differenza sessuale” in *Diotima, Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, op. cit., “Dire la nascita” in *Diotima, Mettere al mondo il mondo*, op. cit., and, to a lesser extent, *In Spite of Plato*, op. cit.
Italian tradition of feminist political activism, which seeks to keep theory not only connected but subsequent to political practice.\(^9\)

In her early research as a member of *Diotima*, Cavarero refers to women’s experience by employing the same terminology previously used in “More Women Than Men”.\(^10\) Women’s experience is viewed as one of estrangement and desire. But Cavarero theorises estrangement in epistemological terms, as a constitutive gap between being a woman and being the subject of language and of knowledge. As seen in Chapter IV, it is in “Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference”, where Cavarero blames women’s estrangement on what she calls the “monstrous subject” who defines himself and the other according to the criteria he has himself established, that the extent of Irigaray’s influence really becomes evident.\(^11\) As for desire, it is theorised by the early Cavarero as “a desire to think oneself, starting from oneself and not already thought by the other.”\(^12\)

This is the desire to inscribe feminine sexual difference as an ontological principle.

*Arendtian Reality and the “atopicality” of sexual difference.*

This other resource that Arendt’s political philosophy provides for Cavarero becomes perceptible from the publication, for *Diotima*, of an essay on “feminine realism”.\(^13\) It is a distinctive understanding of realism, a concept that we have previously encountered in entrustment theorists and in other exponents

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\(^9\) On this important relationship between theory and practice, Cavarero writes in 1987: “Since *Diotima* has achieved a precise theoretical configuration, it would please me a great deal to identify the theory we have been developing as the consequent result, or, if you will, as the mature elaboration, of the theoretical speculations carried on in the past years by the feminist movement in Italy. In other words, I’d like to be able to put it in this way: feminist theorizing has developed over the years to the point where it demanded a philosophical ‘systematization’ of its concepts and categories. *Diotima* has then responded to this need by engaging in the production of a ‘sexed thought’ (pensiero sessuato)”. Cavarero, “L’elaborazione filosofica della differenza sessuale”, trans. in Bono and Kemp (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought*, op. cit., p.181.

\(^10\) ibid.

\(^11\) See Cavarero, “Per una teoria della differenza sessuale” in *Diotima, Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, op. cit. and my discussion of this text in Chapter IV, pp.148-149.

\(^12\) Cavarero, “L’elaborazione filosofica della differenza sessuale”, op. cit., p.177. We shall see how in later works, such as *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero no longer conceives of desire as specific to women. Desire becomes an ontological component of a self who always desires to be narrated.

\(^13\) Adriana Cavarero, “Dire la nascita”, op. cit.
of il pensiero,\textsuperscript{14} which offers Cavarero a bridge between the theory of sexual difference as developed in Italy and a feminist adaptation of Hannah Arendt.

For Arendt, reality, appearance and the political/public sphere are intrinsically linked and it is upon this connection that Adriana Cavarero extensively draws in order to think feminine sexual difference. In \textit{The Human Condition} (1958), Arendt explains that “appearance - something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves - constitutes reality.”\textsuperscript{15} In other words, for Arendt, reality is constructed through our “appearances” with others. If one thought of feminine sexual difference along these lines, one could say that being a woman is a fact of reality because women appear in their corporeality. The definition of sexual difference would be here phenomenological - others can see that I am of the feminine sex, therefore feminine sexual difference is real and exists. But in Arendt, it is not as straightforward. Although aware of the body (of its needs and desires which have to be catered for in the private realm for political life to be possible), Arendt sees corporeality as antithetical to and threatening of politics.\textsuperscript{16} Arendt further points out that “the human sense of reality demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and to call into existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow.”\textsuperscript{17} Consequently, for Arendt, reality is not a mere collection of facts but a shared sense of the world that one acquires through the witnessing or the perpetrating of an \textit{action} on an interactive political scene.

Arendt’s notion of reality thus provides Cavarero with slightly different tools to theorise the estrangement felt by women within the dominating male symbolic, allowing her to argue that, for women, the world is separated into two. On the one hand stands the social order, whose reality comes from the fact that it

\textsuperscript{14} See my part on “Desire, necessity and realism” in Chapter IV.
\textsuperscript{17} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, op. cit., p.208.
designates a shared symbolic order. On the other hand stands the factuality of “that which is, without having a space within this social order”. The reality women feel estranged from is that of the social order. Although being a woman cannot be expressed in the given social order, the fact of feminine sexual difference is still “there”, as an excess. Cavarero’s feminist slant on Arendt here becomes the claim that it is the masculine sex who monopolises the scene of appearance (the political or, in the vocabulary used by il pensiero, the symbolic order), thus relegating feminine sexual difference to a mere fact without real political significance. In Cavarero’s terms, feminine sexual difference is “atopical”, that is it is without location within the existing symbolic order. In Cavarero’s early reading of Arendt, the symbolic order becomes that shared reality, the political scene where one appears to others by acting out one’s sexual difference. In Section II of this chapter, we shall see how Cavarero reconfigures this understanding of the political.

2. Equality and the relationships between women.

For all feminists endorsing the project of il pensiero, the second area of attack regards female genealogies that the current symbolic order denies. As seen in Chapter IV, contemporary Italian feminists contend that the masculine norm also invades relationships between women. It codifies and prevents them from being free. This insight is then used politically in order to bring philosophical weight to the case against egalitarian politics, already put forward in the 1970s.

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20 ibid., p.94. As a preliminary remark to a more lengthy discussion that I will conduct in the second part of the chapter, I would point out here that Cavarero understands the political in Arendtian terms as “a plural and interactive space of exhibition that is the only space which deserves the name of politics”. See Relating Narratives, op. cit., p.57.

21 ibid., p.93.
Cavarero’s work has been instrumental in the denunciation of the egalitarian politics which constitutes, for her, one of the four axes of il pensiero.\textsuperscript{22} She rejects it for the same reasons as the other exponents of il pensiero – equality either means assimilation or equalisation, but never subjectivity. Cavarero sees an elementary repression of feminine sexual difference at work when women are simply excluded from political participation. Here, exclusion is coupled with equalisation – the differences between women are completely insignificant since they are all equalised as the “other of man” and confined to the private realm.\textsuperscript{23} It is when the repression of sexual difference is more complex, that one can talk of assimilation. In that case, feminine sexual difference is not altogether excluded but rather included in the neutral-universal definition of Man.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Against assimilation and equalisation: Rahel and natality.}

Again, in relation to the common attack on equality as sameness and assimilation, Hannah Arendt proves to be a useful ally for Cavarero. Cavarero first focuses on Hannah Arendt’s biography of Rahel Varnhagen, a well known nineteenth century Berlin Jewish woman. For Cavarero, \textit{Rahel Varnhagen} narrates the story of a “cruel auto-negation because, by seeking to integrate to the social order which excludes her, [Rahel] participates and contributes to her own exclusion.”\textsuperscript{25} In addition, Arendt’s text is used by Cavarero to confirm il pensiero’s rejection of separatism as a political strategy which needs to be complemented. Indeed, Rahel contemplates the possibility of extracting herself from the world. This, for Arendt (and Cavarero), would mean not to “exist” since


\textit{Dialettica e politica in Platone} (Padova: CEDAM, 1974) is Cavarero’s first book. It is not until 1987 and “L’elaborazione filosofica della differenza sessuale” that Cavarero began to write on feminism and on the theory of sexual difference.

\textsuperscript{23} Cavarero, “Beyond Equality and Difference”, op. cit., p.34.

existence is necessarily public. It would also negate politics as that shared scene of appearance.

However, the main aim behind Cavarero’s use of Rahel Varhagen lies in her recuperation of a second Arendtian category, that of natality. In Arendt’s system, natality is linked to the coming into being of what is new. Natality permeates what Arendt classifies as the three fundamental human activities: labour, work and action. In Arendt’s system, natality is linked to the coming into being of what is new. Natality permeates what Arendt classifies as the three fundamental human activities: labour, work and action.26 Labour and work are rooted in natality since they “provide and preserve the world for the constant influx of newcomers”. But, most of all, natality is what impregnates action as both are linked to new beginnings, new possibilities, to the occurrence of the unpredictable and unexpected. If natality is concerned with the disclosure of uniqueness at the time of one’s birth, this uniqueness is then acted out through one’s life, through one’s words and deeds.

For Cavarero, Rahel’s biography supports Arendt’s general thesis that birth gives the individual a uniqueness, which if ignored, leads to the experience of estrangement.28 However, a feminist reading of Arendt is at work here. For Cavarero, what is inescapable and does not find a place in the given order is not Jewishness per se, as it is in Rahel Varnhagen, but sexual difference itself.29 Cavarero adds corporeality as a feature of natality. Birth is, in Cavarero, the birth of sexed bodies from a sexed body (that of the mother). She comes back to this point in Relating Narratives when she writes: “Despite Arendt’s reticence on this point, one must affirm that, [by] being born, there always appears to the world a sexed who. The one who is born is always this girl or this boy, even if the absolute nudity that exposes it corresponds with the absolute absence of the what [...]. The one who is born does not yet have any qualities; and yet has a sex.”30 The Arendtian category of natality is here used for rooting out a corporeal identity, one marked ontologically by sexual difference. We shall return to this point in Section II of this chapter.

27 ibid., p.9.
29 ibid., p.102.
3. The relationship with the mother and symbolic matricide.

All the thinkers of *il pensiero*, from entrustment theorists to the philosophers of *Diotima*, attribute the poverty of female relationships primarily to the social refusal to accept disparities between women. *Il pensiero* theorists repeatedly mention that the relationship where both equality and difference prevail is one linking a mother to her daughter. For them, this relationship also serves, and is “colonised” by, the masculine symbolic. In the existing social-symbolic, the differences between mother and daughter are either deemed irrelevant or are theorised as a source of rivalry. In any case, the link with the mother must be broken in order to access subjectivity. The influence of Luce Irigaray and her conceptualisation of female genealogies are here evident. As Chapter IV has noted, in Italy, it is the need to develop and weave such genealogies between women that is addressed by entrustment theorists. In the writings of the *Diotima* philosophers, and in Muraro’s work in particular, the expression “female genealogies” is often supplemented by the notion of a “maternal continuum”.

The interruption of female genealogies and the maternal continuum are two central themes in Cavarero’s interpretation of the myth of Demeter and Kore, discussed in *In Spite of Plato*. Here, Cavarero also interprets female genealogies in terms of the “maternal continuum”. The maternal continuum indicates the lineage linking the daughter both to the origin of her life and to her children (should she be able or decide to have any). It also defines sexual difference. Men and women are differentiated by the fact that the former are given birth by an individual of the opposite sex and thus stand outside the continuum, while the latter are always at its centre (should a particular woman have a daughter) or at its end (should she remain daughterless). Finally, we have

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31 I once again refer the reader to “More Women Than Men”, p.121.
32 In Chapter IV, we have discussed the notion of maternal continuum in relation to Muraro’s *L’ordine simbolico della madre* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992), p.54.
mentioned how the maternal continuum is a useful concept which breaks the mother-daughter confusion. Thanks to the maternal continuum, the mother-daughter relationship is one of sameness and difference, rather than one of rivalry.

The maternal continuum is a useful interpretative key to the myth of Demeter. It is used by Cavarero to place, at the centre of the myth, the theme of a woman’s control over her maternal potential for generation. For Cavarero, this particular myth narrates the progressive submersion of this maternal potential by the patriarchal symbolic order. The myth opens with Demeter and Kore side by side, or in Cavarero’s terms, “in the reciprocal gaze” of legitimation. Demeter’s power to give or not to give life is not regulated. When Hades abducts Kore, Demeter cannot, does not and, crucially for Cavarero, chooses not to generate life. In both these phases, Demeter makes free use of her power to give and not to give life. It is in the last phase of the myth, when Hades concedes to Kore’s periodic release, that the maternal potential is usurped by patriarchy. Hades comes to decide on the time of generation, thus organising and normalising the maternal potential. By breaking the continuum, patriarchy has transformed the mother from a subject who chooses, to an object that patriarchy may rule and regulate. Thus initially a potential, maternity becomes a role and, often, a “prison”.

In the same chapter, a discussion on demography and abortion ensues to illustrate this usurpation of the maternal potential.

Now, whilst Arendt anchors her thinking of the “vita activa” in the category of natality, the theme of maternal continuum is absent from her oeuvre. In Arendt, natality is not only a birth without bodies, but being born is also a “coming from nowhere” and from “no one”. This brings us to the last theme that Cavarero and il pensiero thinkers share – that of matricide. By ignoring the

35 ibid., p.61. In the English translation, the original “potenza materna” has been translated as “maternal power” (In Spite of Plato, op. cit., p.61). However, I shall use “maternal potential” because I believe it better indicates Cavarero’s idea that, as a mother, and as a woman, Demeter can also choose not to give life.

36 ibid., p.62; In Spite of Plato, op. cit., p.61.

37 ibid., p.73. On this point, Cavarero argues that Western tradition has relied on the last phase of the myth to explain the seasons, menstrual cycles, as well as the “mystery” of generation, and to convey the belief that it is in fact the sperm which contains the active element of life (while the maternal womb is just a passive container). The supposed passivity of the mother in generation is also dealt with in Corpo in figura, op. cit., pp.94 – 97.

38 ibid., pp.64, 66.

39 ibid., pp.8, 47.
mother, Arendt could well stand accused of symbolic matricide. Interestingly, this accusation of matricide is directed by Cavarero to many of the philosophers who make up the so-called “tradition” of Western thought, but not to Arendt. It is perhaps the immense resource that her philosophy of natality provides to counter death as the privileged concept in Western philosophy, which redeems Arendt in the eyes of Cavarero. Let us now turn to consider these themes in more detail.

Matricide and the philosophy of death.

As we have seen in Chapter IV, the matricidal character of the existing symbolic is an Irigarayian theme, one shared right across il pensiero, and particularly developed by Luisa Muraro. In Cavarero’s writings, there seems to be two sides to the notion of symbolic matricide. The first one is already present in Muraro and indicates Man’s symbolic usurpation of the mother’s power to give birth. We have seen this at work in Cavarero’s reading of the myth of Demeter discussed above. At a deeper level, however, Cavarero interprets this matricide in Arendtian terms, as a violation of what she calls “the natal order”. What structures the myth of Demeter is the philosophical act of turning away from the place of Man’s origins to favour death as a measure of existence. Cavarero contends that the myth betrays the supremacy of a philosophy of death, according to which men are mortals and the masculine sex signifies the whole of humankind.

Cavarero is thus able to combine Arendt’s critique of death as the paradigm of Western philosophy with Irigaray’s insights on sexual difference. She contends that there are at least four important consequences of this priority of death over natality. Matricide comes first and is explained by the kind of “womb envy” to which Muraro also seems to point. Man finds refuge in the philosophy of death not because he does not give birth (since some women do not give birth either), but because a woman’s body necessarily generates him. Secondly, looking

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40 see chapter IV of this thesis and Luisa Muraro, L’ordine simbolico della madre, op. cit., p. 9
41 Cavarero, Nonostante Platone, op. cit., p.63. This is a contention which informs other chapters of In Spite of Plato and other works by Cavarero. I have chosen to restrict my argument to Demeter because we have previously discussed Cavarero’s interpretation of the myth when dealing with maternal potential and the maternal continuum.
42 ibid., p.70.
at death for a measure of one’s existence creates a great deal of anxiety. It is in terms of this anxiety that Cavarero explains the male subject’s obsession with eternity, where the same subject is thought of as universal and where death is seen as a detachment from the body. Thirdly, human essence is displaced into thought. Here again, Cavarero recovers the challenge that Arendt addresses in *The Life of the Mind* (1978) to the philosophical dualism established between being and appearance. Like Arendt, and Nietzsche before her, Cavarero questions the strong tendency of Western philosophy to picture two worlds—one real or “true” and one only apparent. What is real and true is the realm of thought and ideas, while phenomenal reality is relegated to mere semblance. This is understood by Cavarero as “an inversion” or “dematerialisation” of our sense of reality. This primary opposition between Being and appearance triggers the other dualism between body and thought. We shall see below how Cavarero uses this critique to oppose this masculine “autistic intellectualism” to an “elementary realism”. For the moment, I just wish to remark that the fourth consequence of the conceptual primacy of death is to picture the body as a superfluous burden, especially when it is gendered feminine. Together with sexual difference and the body, the mother and the natal order are erased. The mother is no longer viewed as the origin of life, but as a “container” necessary for the nourishment of bodies. Natality is also reduced to the provision of bodies in which thought can spend its earthly life. Restoring the full meaning to natality

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43 The expression comes from Adrienne Rich (See Of Woman Born [London: Virago, 1979], p.11). It is explicitly used by Cavarero in *Nonostante Platone*, op. cit., p.105.
44 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol.1 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp.19-65. For example, in the Introduction, Arendt writes: “What has come to an end is the basic distinction between the sensory and the suprasensory, together with the notion, at least as old as Parmenides, that whatever is not given to the senses - God or Being or the First Principles and Causes (archai) or the Ideas - is more real, more truthful, more meaningful that what appears, that it is not just beyond sense perception but above the world of the senses. What is “dead” is not only the localization of such “eternal truths” but also the distinction itself” (p.10).
46 ibid., p.45.
47 ibid., p.52.
48 In the introduction to *Nonostante Platone*, Cavarero calls “elementary realism” the fact of insisting on one’s corporeal singularity. See *Nonostante Platone*, op. cit., p.7. We shall see how this insistence on a singularity which is embodied and corporeal is an addition made by Cavarero to the Arendtian notions she employs. More will also be said on the feminist strategy of “elementary realism” in the second section of this chapter.
49 Cavarero, “Dire la nascita”, op. cit., p.115, *Nonostante Platone*, op. cit., p.71, and *Corpo in Figure*, op. cit., especially ch. 2.
50 Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, op. cit., p.74. This is also a term that Irigaray uses extensively.
thus involves, in Arendt and Cavarero alike, thinking of individuals as natals, unique singularities, and in Cavarero’s thought alone, as sexed beings.

As a forceful and convincing exponent of il pensiero della differenza sessuale, Cavarero shares the two themes that Italian feminism inherited from Luce Irigaray. At this point, Arendt’s notions of reality, atopicality and natality, that Cavarero liberally adapts to her feminist needs, impart added strength to the critique of the existing symbolic order as monosexual, patriarchal and matricidal. But this critique is merely one side of the project of il pensiero. The other side is, in Cavarero’s own words, “the restitution of the bisexuality of the world, which inevitably involves the re-signification of sexual difference”.\footnote{Cavarero, “Dire la nascita”, op. cit. p. 108.} It is here that Cavarero distinguishes herself from Diotima philosophers and entrustment theorists. Instead of favouring a political strategy based on feminine mediation, Cavarero chooses an alternative which progressively becomes more Arendtian in content. We turn now to consider Cavarero’s radical feminist politics.

\section*{Section II: Cavarero’s political practice: refuting entrustment?}

Section II of this chapter will be dedicated to a discussion of Cavarero’s political strategy. We will here again trace an evolution in Cavarero’s political thought from an Irigarayian “politics of sexual difference” to an Arendtian “politics of uniqueness”. The differences between the political practice suggested by Cavarero and that employed by entrustment theorists will become more acute, and will further allow me to determine whether Cavarero’s re-conceptualisation of the political surpasses some of the difficulties encountered in entrustment. This is a key issue in my exegesis of Cavarero’s later work. In addition, a new question will surface - how does this move from a politics of difference to one of uniqueness manage to be a feminist move? In other words, how does Cavarero’s conception of politics remain a feminist conception?
1. **Cavarero’s politics of sexual difference:**

The analysis of the existing symbolic order that *il pensiero* has inherited from Irigaray, and that we have revisited above in the work of Cavarero, shows that the erasure of sexual difference is not and cannot be entirely successful. Although the existing symbolic order relegates feminine sexual difference to the margins of language and thought, the symbolic supremacy of the masculine sex relies, nonetheless, on the definition of the feminine as “other of the same”. For the political strategy followed by Irigaray and *il pensiero*, this has two implications that Cavarero places at the centre of her re-conceptualisation of a feminist politics. Firstly, feminine sexual difference resurfaces, in the existing symbolic order, as an excess. Secondly, the language and thought which exclude and marginalise women are the only ones available to devise an alternative feminist politics. Against the backdrop of these consequences, Cavarero uses the same deconstructive method found in Irigaray and entrustment theorists. It involves looking for, and re-signifying, the traces that the erasure of feminine sexual difference has left behind. Emphasising estrangement as the experience that women share in virtue of their position in the existing symbolic thus becomes the first step of a more complex political strategy.

*Estrangement and conceptual theft.*

In Chapter IV, we have used Cavarero’s “Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference” to elucidate the workings of such a strategy of re-signification of the experience of alienation in/from language. We have seen how Cavarero arrived at a multiple and temporary definition of “woman”, starting from her place in the existing symbolic order. We stressed that this preliminary step was in fact a political move aimed at taking women from a situation where they suffer estrangement passively, to one where they actively re-possess and re-signify it. This preliminary re-signification is also a hermeneutical step which Cavarero calls “conceptual theft”. It is the traces left by the erasure of sexual difference in the narrative figures of philosophy which direct Cavarero’s

53 Ibid., p. 199.
hermeneutic perspective. Cavarero then "abducts" these figures from their contexts and uses them to point towards a different female symbolic as an alternative place for politics. Conceptual theft is akin to Irigaray's notion of mimesis. In Irigaray, mimesis designates a political attitude whereby a woman assumes the definition that the existing patriarchal order gives of her, exaggerates it and by doing so, manages to transcend the meaning originally attached to it. It is also in this spirit that some entrustment theorists stress the political resources held by the psychoanalytic concept of hysteria.

Let us use the example of Cavarero's "abduction" of Penelope in In Spite of Plato. In the traditional interpretation of Ulysses, Penelope portrays the good and faithful wife who preserves, for her husband, both a space (her body and the kingdom) and a time (the eternal present that weaving and unweaving maintains). Cavarero challenges this version of Penelope by insisting that she does not recognise (or, chooses not to recognise) Ulysses at his return from the sea. Penelope here becomes the figure who has created a space of her own within the place assigned to her by patriarchy. The weaving room to which she has been confined becomes the place where she is nobody's wife. More than the tapestry, what Penelope unweaves is the role (of woman and wife) that the existing order has assigned to her. What she weaves in its place is an impenetrable time and space of her own, where she may define autonomously who and what she is.

The space that Penelope carves for herself within the existing symbolic is "impolitical". Cavarero's notion of the "impolitico" is here to be understood in two interconnected ways. Firstly, the "impolitical" is the anti-political. This does not mean that Cavarero is opposed to politics as such: it rather signifies that women should not seek to be included in the existing symbolic order's understanding of "the political". Secondly, the "impolitical" refers to a different type of politics wherein feminine sexual difference can feature. However, the notion of the "impolitico" must not be understood as the gynocentric evaluation of the private sphere over the public one, or as a call for political separatism.

54 Cavarero, Nonostante Platone, op. cit., p.6.
55 ibid., pp.6,15.
56 Cavarero, Nonostante Platone, op. cit., p.15.
57 ibid., p.18.
58 A third definition is given to the "impolitico" in Relating Narratives where the "impolitico" also means a "lack-of-politics" (cf. Cavarero, Relating Narratives, p.57). We will come back to
Rather, I would argue that it is to be read as an implicit feminist critique of Hannah Arendt’s tripartite categories of private/social/public and labour/work/action. Penelope’s activity escapes these tripartite distinctions. Her act of weaving and unweaving cannot be considered as action because it takes place in the domestic sphere. It is not work either because it does not produce an object which gives permanence to the world (Penelope undoes by night what she has just woven by day). Penelope does not “labour” either – although her weaving/unweaving is repetitive, confined to the private sphere and unseen by others, it is not vital to the continuation of life. Similarly, Penelope’s time is not that of action as it does not involve new and unexpected beginnings; instead it is predictable and eternally set in the present. Yet, what Penelope does at home is similar to action because it has the political consequence of postponing a political marriage, thus preserving Ulysses’ crown. It could also be considered as “a new beginning”, that is, an alternative, novel, and unexpected way to approach the activity which has been assigned to her. Some commentators have seen in Cavarero’s challenge to Arendt’s cherished distinction between private and public a possible support of the feminist motto “the personal is political”. What is certain is that it remains an objection to the Arendtian time of action as the accumulation of the new which projects the protagonist towards the future and its possible experiences. Therefore, even in Arendt, action is directed towards death, which implies the dissolution of the body and the ignorance of sexual difference.

The “impolitico”: feminine realism and the politics of the body.

Cavarero’s Penelope also displays a particular quality that both entrustment and Diotima theorists value highly. We have already encountered it in Chapter IV as a form of “feminine realism”. In relation to Penelope, it is described as a sort of intelligence which is aware of the contextual demands of a particular

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59 This possible interpretation of Penelope in In Spite of Plato was alluded to in a paper entitled “Elizabthan ‘spinning’ and Penelope’s Weaving: The Political, the Common Law and Stately Bodies”, given by Janice Richardson during the Warwick conference on Cavarero (“The State He’s In: Political Philosophy and the Figural”, 19.05.2004).
60 Cavarero, Nonostante Platone, op. cit., p.16.
situation, yet manages to transcend them. We have alluded to a similar attitude when describing the mechanism of entrustment. In an early essay for *il pensiero*, Cavarero argues that women will represent themselves by privileging relationships with such women. It seems that Cavarero’s Penelope is one of them. By carving a place for herself within the existing symbolic, Penelope has devised the premise for a political strategy which displaces women’s usual dichotomous choice between exclusion and assimilation.

In Cavarero, this realism is attached to the body. Weaving and unwrapping are corporeal activities. In addition, Penelope is a ‘‘whole’’ that does not accept the separation of body (manual labour) and mind (thought). The intellectual part of manual labour is usually seen as minimal and inferior to the kind of intellect displayed by men in public. For Cavarero, Penelope does not contest the fact that she is ‘‘a whole’’ of body and mind, and instead reasserts the intellectual part of that whole that her physical gesture of weaving now supports. The ‘‘impolitico’’ that Penelope represents is thus a politics of the body, and it is one diametrically opposed to that of philosophy. Whilst, for Cavarero, philosophy stresses death as the final liberation of thought from its corporeal prison, and as the separation of body from thought (or mind), Penelope reconnects the two. This time, Penelope’s weaving becomes even more important than her unwrapping since she weaves back what philosophy unweaves (the connection between body and thought). In this politics where the body features, sexual difference can feature as well. We will see how this politics of the body is taken a step further in *For More Than One Voice* (2003).

2. **The politics of uniqueness:**

Up to this point, we have considered Cavarero’s political strategy in terms of a deconstructive method shared with other exponents of *il pensiero*, entrustment theorists included. However, like all labels and categorisations, a

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61 ibid., p.22.
62 ibid., p.20.
65 ibid., p.31.
name like *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* carries the risk of concealing important differences in the theoretical location that Cavarero, the philosophers of *Diotima* and entrustment theorists respectively occupy. It is rather telling that Cavarero, in an aforementioned essay on feminist theory, presents her own work in a section set *apart* from that reserved for contemporary Italian feminism and entitled “anomalous positions in the contemporary geo-philosophy of feminism”. The first section of this chapter has already stressed the early references to Arendtian categories which stamp the originality of Cavarero’s critique of the monosexual symbolic. It is now time to assess what Cavarero’s present position (as “Arendtian”) entails for a feminist political practice as well as for a critical evaluation of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment.

*Disparity and uniqueness: the “what” and the “who”.*

Stressing and valuing disparity between women is the alternative to egalitarian politics and it is the strategy at the centre of the social-symbolic practice that entrustment theorists propose. Entrustment is structured by an empowering disparity between two women who, by virtue of their position in relation to the existing social-symbolic, share an identical historical condition which forces them to live their “*being women*” as estrangement. Whilst the theme of disparity between women also appears in Cavarero’s early exposition of *il pensiero della differenza*, it is eclipsed by the concept of uniqueness in her later works. From the early texts analysed in Section I, one can trace a different political agenda in Adriana Cavarero - if she emphasises differences between women, it is to later contend that every single existent is different because it is unique. The uniqueness of the living existent is a theme which becomes central to Cavarero’s recent work, and which she inherits from Hannah Arendt.

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67 “Single existent”, “unique existent” are expressions which are reminiscent of Jean-Luc Nancy’s work. In recent years, Nancy’s philosophy has appeared repeatedly in Cavarero’s texts. Cavarero has referred to his own critique of the subject as that which calls up a “*what*”, an
Arendt’s concept of uniqueness relies on the distinction between “who” and “what” somebody is. It is one’s words and deeds that reveal to others “who” somebody is, that is his uniqueness and singularity. Revealing “who” one is thus requires witness(es). It hence involves human plurality, the existence of a public/political space where all unique existents “appear” and “exhibit” who they are through speech and action. In its attempt to define Man, philosophy is unable to express the “who”, precisely because it denies plurality. When trying to arrive at a definition of Man, that is in its search for generalities, philosophy falls back into the description of “what” somebody is – “his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings which he may display or hide” and which this person possibly shares with others. If philosophy is insufficient, literature provides better tools for expressing human singularity and plurality because “every individual life can eventually be told as a story with a beginning and an end.”

Arendt asserts that “Who somebody is or was can be known only by knowing the story of which he is himself a hero – his biography, in other words.” The consequences of one’s words and deeds are almost always unpredicted and unpredictable, and somebody’s life story is open to multiple significations. Therefore “who” somebody is always revealed by an other, ex post facto, and never achieves “closure”.

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69 ibid., p. 179.
70 ibid., p. 184.
71 ibid., p. 186.
In the past fifteen years, Cavarero has positioned the Arendtian concepts of uniqueness and relationality at the centre of her political theory. Cavarero’s *Relating Narratives* displays this Arendtian legacy. In the introduction for example, Cavarero relies on an anecdote, told by Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen) in *Out of Africa*, to introduce some of the Arendtian themes at the centre of this particular work. Here, in the stork, we have the allegory of a unique, unintended and unforeseeable existence, traced in the snow; the fragile figure of a stork which is only glimpsed, after the nocturnal episode when looking from a detached point of view. Chapter One of *Relating Narratives* can also complete our search for a common ground between Cavarero and Arendt. Cavarero interprets Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* as the tragic story of a man who privileges the “what” over the “who”. “At a time when he has yet to learn who he is, Oedipus recognizes himself in the definition of Man.” Oedipus, refusing to know his birth, is forced to deny his uniqueness, something which leads him to a tragic end. “Who” Oedipus is, is revealed to him by many others, especially through the retrospective gaze of the blind Teiresias. Thus, through his speech and actions, Oedipus, without wanting or being conscious of it, exhibits “who” he is to others, on an interactive and plural scene.

The desire for narration.

For both Arendt and Cavarero, then, the self is unique and re-enacts or actualises the singularity given to him by birth on a shared political scene through words and deeds. As Mary Dietz writes of Arendt, this means favouring the “who-ness of acting” over the “what-ness of being”, a philosophy of existence over one of essence. It also implies, for both Arendt and Cavarero, that the meaning of a particular existence is best glimpsed, not in the universal discourse of philosophy, but in “polyphonic” life-stories told, *ex post facto*, to the existent by others who have witnessed the words and deeds of the actor.

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72 ibid., p.187.
However, Cavarero brings additional elements to Arendt’s conception of the unique existent, ones which are important to take into consideration for a feminist political strategy. What a life story reveals is both a unique and unrepeatable identity and a desire to hear that singular identity.\(^{76}\) That is why, in Cavarero’s text and in very different contexts, both Ulysses and the Milanese housewife Emilia (who will turn out to be a pivotal character in our discussion of Cavarero’s feminist politics) weep. At last, their fundamental desire to hear their story being told has been unexpectedly recognised and answered. It is an “immediate”\(^{77}\) desire. Emphasising her contention that, in Arendt, the time of action is oriented towards death, Cavarero argues that Ulysses does not partake in heroic actions because of a desire to be narrated and thus remembered posthumously. Action is not a challenge to death. Ulysses’ tears rather show a desire to hear one’s story in life.

Desire is also constitutive of the self – the self knows itself (and others around him) to be narratable and thus desires this narration. Following Arendt, this means that, from its birth, the self is exhibited to others through speech and actions. Departing from Arendt, it also implies that, because it can be exposed, this same self “senses itself”[assaporarsi]\(^{78}\) to be narratable and comes to desire his narration from the mouth of another. The characteristics of exposure and narration are thus conditions of the self, but these characteristics do not re-confer upon it an essence. Cavarero insists that the self is narratable and not narrated. The content of the narration of one’s life story does not matter and does not alter the fact that this story can be told.\(^ {79}\) Rejecting the thesis of the performative power of narration, Cavarero argues that the self is not an effect of the text either.\(^ {80}\) Rather, she coincides with this desire to have a text about her life story.

But a question remains – why do we desire our story to be told, or, in Cavarero’s own words, “what exactly is desired by this desire?”\(^ {81}\) To the Arendtian category of uniqueness, Cavarero adds that of unity. Despite her

\(^{76}\) ibid., p.32.
\(^{77}\) ibid., p.33.
\(^{78}\) ibid., p.35.
\(^{79}\) ibid., p.35.
\(^{80}\) ibid., pp.35, 37.
\(^{81}\) ibid., p.37.
declared and clamorous dislike for psychoanalysis,82 I would argue that Cavarero’s account of desire contains strong psychoanalytic undertones which recall the ones at the basis of the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. Cavarero opposes the unity of the One (the universal Man) to that of the one (as singular, as unique existent). The unity of the unique existent involves not only natality as the occurrence of new and unforeseen beginnings, but birth – the baby who is born is always a unique singularity. The new-born – unique and immediately expressive in the fragile totality of her exposure – has her unity precisely in this totally nude self-exposure. “This unity”, Cavarero writes, “is already a physical identity, visibly sexed, and even more perfect in so far as she is not yet qualificable.”83 Nonetheless, this time of perfect correspondence between unity and identity is ephemeral. With the immediate unfolding of time, this conformity between identity and unity is turned into a distant memory (the sense that one’s unity is narratable) and into desire.

The importance that birth takes in the narratable self’s desire for its unity to be narrated allows Cavarero to stress the third characteristic of the self – the self is unique, narratable and relational. Autobiography is unreliable because personal memory fails to recall the details of one’s birth, the details of that unity that quickly withers away and that we wish to recover.84 The unity that one desires necessarily begins by the birth that only another (often one’s mother, as we will later stress) can narrate.

Cavarero also distinguishes unity from homogeneity.85 The desire in question is “the desire for unity which asks the narration of another above all to be recognised as desire.”86 It is not the text of the story but my desire which confers unity. We have already pointed out that, because the self is narratable

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82 When interviewing Cavarero at Warwick, I was struck by Cavarero’s vehement rejection of psychoanalysis: “I am familiar with psychoanalytic theory because, for an academic working in the field of political theory, it is inevitable not to be... but I do not have any interest in it. I do not exclude it as unimportant for feminism because it has been very influential for feminists such as Irigaray, de Lauretis, Butler, but I personally try to avoid using psychoanalytical categories in my writings. [Like] Hannah Arendt, I can say that I loathe psychoanalysis. I get teased in Italy about the fact that I avoid using psychoanalytic theory – there is a kind of joke that Adriana does not have an unconscious!” Adriana Cavarero also cited the importance of psychoanalytic theory for the theory of entrustment as one of the reasons why she refused to support this social-symbolic practice.

83 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, op. cit., p.38.
84 ibid., p.39.
85 ibid., p.72.
86 ibid., p.42.
and not narrated, her life-story can be polyphonic. It can come from different sources and have diverse contents. When conversing with post-modern and poststructuralist feminist theory, mainly of Anglo-American provenance, Cavarero emphasises that stressing unity does not mean moving closer to a “unitary, substantial and self-referential subject”.\(^{87}\)

It is perhaps in this respect that Arendt is Cavarero’s best ally. Indeed, Cavarero uses Arendt’s philosophy to argue that, because uniqueness constantly and relentlessly shows itself in action, it can never be substantiated or frozen into a content. “The unity lies precisely in this insubstitutability that persists [permane] in time because it continues to present itself in time”.\(^{88}\) Even a posthumous life-story does not satisfy homogeneity, because the unity that the life-story confers ex post facto is, for Cavarero and contra Arendt, inscribed in the economy of desire. This desire, as said above, is immediate. One desires to hear one’s own life-story whilst still alive and, ultimately, in Hegelian fashion, desires her desire to be recognised.

*The narratable self and Italian feminism.*

Chapter III of this thesis showed how the practice of storytelling lay at the heart of the history of Italian feminism. Cavarero devotes a full chapter of *Relating Narratives* to a discussion of such a practice, thus situating her political strategy within that of contemporary Italian feminism. As it has become her habit, Cavarero begins her discussion with an anecdote, that of the friendship that Emilia and Amalia forged while attending “the 150-hour schools” ("le scuole

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87 Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, p.69. For a comparative discussion of Cavarero and Butler, see Paul A. Kottman’s rich introduction to *Relating Narratives*, op. cit., pp.vii-xxxi. Cavarero explicitly discusses Butler in “Il pensiero femminista. Un approccio teorico” in A.Cavarero and F. Restaino, *Le filosofie femministe*, op. cit., pp.154-156, and in “Politicizing theory”, op. cit., p.520. I would also like to point out that Cavarero often mentions the “theoretical isolationism” of the members of *Diotima* as a reason why she distanced herself from the group in the 1990s. During the interview in Warwick, Cavarero declared: “To a certain extent, my position is pluralist [...] in that I am very interested in debating my ideas with different perspectives [...] I find positions which are radical and different from mine (like those of Butler and Braidotti) very challenging, even when they are held by men like Nancy and Derrida. This openness to other opinions does not exist within *Diotima*. *Diotima* is a group structured around internal, not external debate. It is true that *Diotima* has contacts with other women’s groups but these are groups which share the same ideas, and which look to *Diotima* as a guide [...] in *Relating Narratives*, there is a constant dialogue with American feminism and literary theory, with what they have to say on biography, on the subject. This type of dialogue is absent from the texts of *Diotima.*”
Amalia has the gift of expression and communication and whenever she exchanges the stories she has written with Emilia, who does not possess such talent, the latter weeps and expresses her desire to be able to talk about her life. Amalia, who comes to know Emilia's story from the scattered details given orally, decides to write her friend's story. On the reception of such gift, Emilia is overcome by emotion and always carries her life-story close to her, in her handbag.

Apart from strengthening Cavarero's previous contention on the self's desire for narration that the other recognises and satisfies, this anecdote offers Cavarero the opportunity to examine Arendt's distinction between private and public, and her allocation of action to the latter, in the light of women's experience. Cavarero points out that the difference between Ulysses and Emilia is that the former is a hero who has access to an interactive public space where he can exhibit himself, whilst the latter is a Milanese housewife whose only scene is the "impolitical" ("impolitico") private house. Here the "impolitical" is not the "anti-political" and does not indicate a different type of politics, as it did earlier in our discussion of Penelope. The "impolitical" takes on the new signification of "without politics", where "politics" is understood in Arendtian terms as "a plural and interactive space of exhibition". While Cavarero adopts Arendt's interpretation of Western history as a history of depoliticization, she argues that, because of "the dominant social codes", this lack-of-politics takes a dual form for women. On the one hand, women are traditionally denied a public space of exhibition and expression. On the other hand, and this is where Cavarero makes the link with her earlier work as an exponent of il pensiero della differenza sessuale, women remain at the margins of the patriarchal symbolic order. Therefore, "Whether on the level of expression or on the level of representation, women find themselves trapped between a double powerlessness that concerns both uniqueness and quality." Hence the usual resource that friendship (and love) represent for a woman, like Emilia, who has the desire to exhibit her uniqueness. Cavarero extends action to the private sphere of relationships.

88 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, op. cit., p.72.
90 ibid, pp.105-106.
91 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, op. cit., p.57.
Friendship is indeed "the scene where uniqueness constitutes itself 'in relation'"\(^93\), as the story of Amalia and Emilia illustrates. The "political act" of exhibition is here one of self-narration (autobiography). Emilia provides Amalia with disjointed details of her life, which Amalia weaves together in the narration of her friend's life-story.

This same mechanism, one that sees autobiography/biography coincide to reveal the life-story\(^94\), is at work in consciousness-raising groups, where "the feminine custom of self-narration [...] finds a political scene".\(^95\) The consciousness-raising group is also the other prime example of a space where politics and narration intersect. This is particularly true of its Italian version which, as seen in Chapters III and IV, stresses "practices" ("the relationships between women", "the practice of starting from oneself", etc.) and their link with the historical and political context. Cavarero thus uses the consciousness-raising group to dissociate gender from the "what" of qualities, where Arendt assigns it because of her rejection of corporeality, and reintroduces it as an ontological component of uniqueness. She anticipates the objection which chastises consciousness-raising groups for hypostatising the female gender by inviting women to identify with all other women. Cavarero acknowledges this risk, inherent in feminist politics, of mobilising an essentialised political agent in view of collective action. However, she still retains the phenomenon of *autocoscienza* since it shows that "the impulse for self-narration, at the moment in which it generates a political space, roots itself [...] in a self that is constitutively sexed."\(^96\) Like the technique used by Penelope, consciousness-raising becomes a sign, an indication, of a possible and multiple political strategy. Consciousness-raising belongs to the "*impolitico*" because it is not longer "apolitical" (that is, without a public space of exhibition and appearance) but still "anti-political" (namely, against the traditional definition of politics) and is indicative of a different type of politics. Like entrustment theorists, Cavarero stresses that consciousness-raising, while indicative of one route to pursue, must be

\(^92\) ibid., p.58.
\(^93\) ibid., p.58.
\(^94\) ibid., p.63.
\(^95\) ibid., p.59.
\(^96\) ibid., p.61.
complemented. Can entrustment, like the practice of autocoscienza be considered as “another piece in the mosaic of a potential female symbolic order”?  

The social-symbolic practice of entrustment: a practice of storytelling?

It is interesting to note that, whilst Cavarero explicitly refers to some important Italian practices put into place in the 1970s and 1980s, she never alludes to the social-symbolic practice which has been the object of my thesis. Why, then, doesn’t Cavarero consider entrustment? Is it a sign of her disapproval, or is it because, despite her professed antipathy for this social-symbolic practice, some elements suggest that entrustment could be considered as a practice of narration?

A number of common elements can be drawn from a comparison between Cavarero’s conception of storytelling and the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. On the surface, entrustment could indeed be considered as an exemplary practice where biography and autobiography, as well as narration and politics, intersect and where the desire for narration roots itself in a self which is constitutively sexed. Both storytelling and entrustment are also relationships of desire. A woman entrusts herself to another by virtue of a desire that she wants to translate socially, while not forgetting the fact that she is a woman. Similarly, the narratable self desires her story to be narrated by another in order to confer upon her both uniqueness and unity.

In addition, both storytelling and entrustment are relational. In storytelling, each one of us entrusts his or her identity to another’s tale; in entrustment, one entrusts to an affidataria her desire to make her sexual difference count socially. Because of the importance Cavarero gives to natality as actual birth, it is often the mother, as other, who is best able to describe the first chapter of the story

97 Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Sexual Difference, op. cit., p.84. As said in Chapter III of this thesis, “static separatism” refers to those years at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s when the laws on divorce, contraception and abortion had been secured. The future entrustment theorists felt that feminism, as theorised and practised in consciousness-raising groups (gruppi di autocoscienza) was functioning as a ready-made discourse without visible effects on political and social reality. “Static separatism” or “ideological feminism” was also rejected on the basis that it assigned a universal identity to women, where sexual difference was defined in terms of battered housewives, raped women or women who had suffered abortion.

98 Cavarero, Nonostante Platone, op. cit., p.125 n.5.
stubbornly sought by the narratable self with all her desire.\textsuperscript{99} The desire expressed here is to go back to “the miracle of the beginning”\textsuperscript{100} when unity and identity coincide. In a relationship of entrustment, it is also a question of recreating the language of that initial relationship when, following the description given by Muraro in \textit{L’ordine simbolico della madre}, mother and daughter together create the world by naming it according to their shared experience of it. As we will shortly see when dealing with Cavarero’s politics of the voice, mother and daughter together create a language. Arguing for a relational subject (in entrustment) and a relational self (in storytelling) is an evident challenge to the subject of the existing symbolic and modern philosophical discourse, that subject who defines himself by rejecting the other.

Likewise, both entrustment and storytelling stress “the essentiality of the context and the inessentiality of the text”.\textsuperscript{101} Cavarero stresses her disregard for the content of the life-story narrated, or the identity of the narrator. The life-stories are always polyphonic, their content is never definite and always in process. A relationship of entrustment is also always tied to a specific situation and to a particular desire to be carried out in society, thanks to a particular \\textit{affidataria}. It is also said that the act of entering into a relationship of entrustment is more important than the actual advice or identity of the \\textit{affidataria}. As seen in the preceding chapters, some entrustment theorists do not foreclose the possibility that desire is not entirely translatable into the “sense of ease” expected. The subjectivity arrived at in entrustment is thus neither “whole”, nor void of ambiguities and contradictions. In the course of one’s life, one can enter into several relationships of entrustment (which can sometimes be simultaneous). Finally, the positions of narrator/narrated, \\textit{affidataria}/entrustee can permutate or be assumed simultaneously. Such a stress on contextuality and formalism in storytelling and entrustment is used by both Cavarero and entrustment theorists to avoid hypostasizing, respectively, the female subject and the self.

Despite these obvious similarities, differences subsist and obstruct a straightforward categorisation of entrustment as a politics of narration. First of

\textsuperscript{99} ibid., p.39.

\textsuperscript{100} ibid., p.38.

\textsuperscript{101} Cavarero, \textit{Relating Narratives}, op. cit., p. 75.
all, Cavarero has never employed such terms as the "Symbolic Mother". The relationship of storytelling also loses the liberal undertones of entrustment. It is not a "contract" which one chooses to enter into and which involves an "obligation" to pay a "symbolic debt". Since it is not a contract, the narrator does not have to conform to any preventive rules (that the affidataria must respect in order not to misuse the disparity which separates her from the entrustee).

Secondly, desire is not quite conceptualised in the same way. In Cavarero, desire is constitutive of the narratable self, regardless of her gender. Both men and women feel the same desire to be narrated, and wish this desire to be recognised and answered. In entrustment, the desire to count in society while not forgetting one's sexual difference is a desire which, by virtue of the place occupied by women within the existing symbolic, is specifically feminine. Equally, unlike narrator and actor who do not necessarily share the same sex, it is a precondition of a relationship of entrustment that entrustee and affidataria do.

Thirdly, and as a result, a relationship of entrustment is much more voluntarist in nature – both the relationship of entrustment and the affidataria are chosen. In Cavarero, storytelling is always desired (something which one could contest), but often unforeseen and not chosen. It is the case with Ulysses and Emilia who both weep at having their desire for narration unexpectedly answered and recognised. Narration, in Cavarero, thus acquires the characteristics of a gift. Without this voluntarist element, can storytelling still be counted as a political strategy? I shall come back to this important question in the concluding paragraphs of this chapter.

The fourth major difference regards the concept of power. As seen, Cavarero values difference between women (and men) as uniqueness rather than disparity. Cavarero insists that if a disparity exists in the relationship between two singular existents, then it is purely accidental and not chosen. In Cavarero's storytelling, the narrator does not possess authority, even when the "authority" is taken in its literal sense as authorship. Following Arendt on this point, Cavarero insists that neither narrator nor actor are the authors of the life-stories. The former just relates the words and deeds of the former, who does not know in advance "who" he exhibits.

In addition, Cavarero professes that entrustment carries the risk of too much psychological dependency between an entrustee and an affidataria who is,
first and foremost, a guide, a model or a mentor. In Relating Narratives, Cavarero declares that a politics of uniqueness ‘does not support empathy, identification or confusions.’ This is the reason why it follows an ‘altruistic ethics of relation’ where the other is irreducibly other. Under such an ethics, ‘No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognise myself in you and, even less, in the collective we.” Hence the aforementioned limits of the practice of consciousness-raising, and the questions it calls forth for feminist politics.

Nevertheless, if one wants to transform Cavarero’s philosophy of storytelling into a political practice, some of the problems already encountered in entrustment resurface. I would suggest that, if storytelling is to be considered a political practice, valuing uniqueness over disparity is not enough to evict the questions of power and psychological dependency. For instance, one could point out that, although she is not the author of the story, the narrator, like the psychoanalyst or the affidataria, still enjoys considerable power since she possesses greater knowledge, does not commit herself emotionally, and is not judged on the truthfulness of her intervention. Cavarero accepts the resemblance between her version of storytelling and psychoanalysis, but avoids too many similarities to be drawn by her exhibitive account of the self. Indeed, the self is completely expressive and “symptomatically external in so far as it is entrusted to the gaze, or the tale, of another.” Unlike entrustment, the aim is not to locate something internal, deep and intimate, the content of a specific unconscious desire to be expressed in reality since this desire, which shows itself through exhibitive action, is known to be the desire for narration. Unlike entrustment, there is no question of (temporary) transference between narrator and narrated. One of the advantages of Cavarero’s philosophy of storytelling is thus to resist the traps of essentialism – there is no hidden core to the self.

However, Cavarero still overlooks a number of questions and problems. First, and as we have argued against entrustment, power does not disappear with the interchangeability of positions between narrator and the person whose story

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102 Adriana Cavarero herself pointed to those differences between narration and entrustment in the Warwick interview.
103 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, op. cit., p.91.
104 ibid., p.92.
105 ibid., p.64.
is narrated. Secondly, even if a relationship of narration is not structured by disparity, how is this relation affected when there is a difference in power between narrator and the person whose story is narrated? Thirdly, countertransference, already ignored by entrustment theorists, is also overlooked by Cavarero. The following questions remain unanswered—what are the affects and desires aroused in the narrator by his relationship to the person whose story she tells? What motivates a unique existent to pose as a narrator? What imaginary sustains the relationship between narrator and actor? Thirdly, is the content of the story really irrelevant? However much the text of our life stories is cast aside by the fact that we are narratable and not narrated, there a risk that one might feel more “attached” to that particular narrator who pictures a flattering image of one’s identity. The image, the content, would indeed be composed of one’s qualities—one’s “what”—and this is not what Cavarero has in mind. But it is easy to be seduced by this “what”, and to become dependent on the story told by an indulgent narrator. Equally, one can be ashamed of the content of one’s life story and refute it. Thus, Liz Mitchell asks whether Emilia “carr[ied] her life story always with her because the story fulfilled her desire, or because she wanted to keep this very private document to her person?” 107 Hence, this desire for exposure and narration of one’s story could also be questioned, especially when it is left in the hands of another. 108

We will now conclude with a brief analysis of Cavarero’s latest work in order to see whether the problems outlined above are resolved by her recent philosophy of vocal expression. An exegesis of For More Than One Voice will also serve to determine the extent to which Cavarero’s political strategy compares with entrustment, il pensiero and feminism in general, and to what degree her move from a politics of sexual difference to one of uniqueness and relationality remains a feminist move.

106 ibid., p.41. See also p.23.
In her latest work, *For More Than One Voice*, Cavarero returns to the unique, relational and plural existent ignored by philosophy. In order to insist further on the corporeality of this uniqueness and relationality, Cavarero focuses on the voice, as the mark of all these ontological categories of the self. Through the voice, one can perceive both sex and age. The voice also shows the relationality of the human condition because it is destined to be heard. It is contextual and requires what Arendt would have referred to as the condition of plurality, but which Cavarero here conceives as a system of bodily "resonance". With the voice, one arrives at a phenomenology, which for the Arendtian Cavarero is simultaneously an ontology, of "uniqueness-in-resonance".

Since Western metaphysics is obsessed with eternal and universal truths, with the privileging of the mind over the body, it has come to exclude the theme of the voice from its consecutive speculations on ontology. The voice, as it is manifested in speech, comes to be thought solely as *that which signifies*. This has the three-fold consequence of privileging the semantic part of the speech over the vocal, of conceptualising speech as a vehicle for thought, and of

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109 On the interpretation of the theme of resonance, see the chapter of *For More Than One Voice* dedicated to the myth of Echo.
111 I would like to point out that Cavarero does acknowledge the attempts made by several disciplines to reckon with the theme of the voice. However, all these sources of interest for the voice fail to study the voice as carrying an embodied uniqueness and relationality. It is beyond the scope of my study to evaluate here Cavarero's criticism of thinkers such as Roland Barthes (p. 216-217), Emmanuel Levinas (pp.35-43, 192-193) and Franz Rosenzweig (pp.29-31, 191-191). However, it is here important to say a little more about Cavarero's reading of Jacques Derrida, to whom Cavarero dedicates *For More Than One Voice* (p.233) and whose *Speech and Phenomena* is discussed in the postscript (pp.233-263). Cavarero sees the resources that the voice offers for a critique of Western philosophy's logocentrism. The voice is an element of speech. From Aristotle, the voice is the logos which signifies. Cavarero starts from the analysis and critique of the "metaphysics of presence" made by Derrida in *Speech and Phenomena*. Derrida links "presence" to a certain form of phonocentrism. The voice of phenomenological consciousness is the voice of thought – namely, the voice of the individual who hears himself speak, and the presence of the signified in the acoustic signifier. Cavarero argues that Derrida's contribution lies in opening the theme of the voice and of its relation to metaphysics. However, Cavarero adds that the voice targeted by Derrida privileges semantics over vocality. It is the voice which signifies. It is "related to the speech of a self-referential subject who basically speak to himself" (A più voci, op. cit., p. 246, trans. p. 224). The voice is here the metaphorical voice of consciousness, devoid of vocality. If the voice is not thought as corporeal, relational and unique, then logocentrism and phonocentrism become interrelated.
112 *A più voci*, op. cit., pp.45-52.
rendering speech impersonal. The act of speaking is separated from the speaker and listener to find its origin in thought. In *For More Than One Voice*, the voice is still conceived as an element of speech since it is still destined to the spoken word. However, Cavarero’s task lies in *stressing* the vocal part of speech (the voice as an *ontological* indicator of the singularity, plurality of unique existents in relation). Cavarero hence seeks to interrogate the “the vocal phenomenology of uniqueness” or “vocal ontology of uniqueness”.

What is interesting for our discussion here and what grounds *For More Than One Voice* in *il pensiero della differenza sessuale* is Cavarero’s suspicion that the type of philosophy which refuses to thematise the voice is informed by the patriarchal symbolic order. We here find a familiar contention already developed in *In Spite of Plato* and in *Stately Bodies*. In Cavarero’s view, all that philosophy excludes or devalues (the voice, the particular, the body) is then associated to Woman, while all that is valued (thought, the universal, reason) is viewed as the sole property of Man. Cavarero insists that, although voice is destined to speech, it is not *reducible* to speech. The relationship between vocality and semantics is one of excess but the dominant tradition of Western philosophy has turned this excess into a lack. This examination of the status of the voice is reminiscent of *il pensiero*, and of Cavarero’s earlier analyses of the position of the feminine sexual difference in the existing symbolic order. Feminine sexual difference is seen to be lacking in relation to the male model, and women are therefore alienated in and from language. However, feminine sexual difference manages to pierce through the existing symbolic order as excess. If both the voice and feminine sexual difference are excluded from the order of signification (semantics), the hermeneutical choice of concentrating on the voice becomes a feminist move.

As she had done in *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero identifies the prime place where uniqueness, relation and corporeality meet in “the phenomenology of the maternal scene”. Cavarero’s contention bears some affinity with the

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114 Thus, Cavarero employs the same technique of “conceptual theft” in order to re-appropriate and re-signify those vocal feminine figures such as Homer’s Muse, the Sirens, the Opera Singer which have served the stereotypical association between woman and the voice on the one hand and man and thought on the other.
116 ibid., p.186.
thesis developed by Luisa Muraro in *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*. In the first months of life, and indeed even inside the womb, a mother teaches the child a “maternal tongue” (*lingua materna*). The maternal scene is, first and foremost, a scene of resonance and repetition of sounds that are exchanged between mother and child, and which Cavarero designates as a “song”, before the signification of that voice in language. Cavarero stresses that, more than teaching us how to speak (Muraro), the mother teaches us how to communicate. She does not limit herself to responding with noises to the call of the child, but she also links voice to speech by telling stories, singing songs, and thus introducing the child to language. Contra Lacanian analysis, the mother does not stand in total opposition to a Father who severes the relationship to introduce his Paternal Law. Instead, she symbolises that link between voice and speech, “to which, as it were, metaphysics reacts in the name of the father”. Therefore, the mother does not speak with the child a language with which they signify reality in accordance with the common experience of it (Muraro). Instead, the mother reorients speech to its vocalic and musical nucleus of sounds, resonance and repetition.

Nonetheless, a politics of the voice is not intended, by Cavarero, as a regression to the maternal scene. Like Muraro, Cavarero uses the maternal scene as a way to imagine a re-conceptualisation of the political. The question that Cavarero implicitly addresses is thus the following – how would this politics of the voice, or rather of voices, be expressed? In other words, how can we rethink politics as a sort of musical ensemble of unique voices? Cavarero defines this politics in Arendtian terms. It is a space of appearances. The political is an “in-between” (*inter-esse*), a relational and public place of interaction where one can show her uniqueness to others who are equally unique. Cavarero defines it as

118 Cavarero also draws on Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva’s conceptualisation of the pre-symbolic language spoken with the mother. See in particular *A più voci*, pp.154-160 for a discussion of Cixous’ concept of the “langueilait”, and of the “écriture féminine” and pp.146-155 for Kristeva’s notion of the maternal chora. These two concepts are developed, respectively in Cixous, “Sorties” in Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *La jeune née* (Paris: UGE, 1975) [*The Newly Born Woman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986)], and in Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). However, what Cavarero contests in Cixous and Kristeva’s positioning of the maternal figure as the source of a vocal pre-symbolic language, is their over-reliance on a psychoanalytic model which thinks of the mother-child relation as one of fusion. Thus, the phenomenon of vocal uniqueness is once again ignored (*A più voci*, op. cit., p.187).
“absolute locality” or a “locality without territories”. Its geography and temporality are therefore contingent, as “absolute locality” constantly arises and disappears anew. It has the physicality of the gaze and the voice. Indeed, for Cavarero, concentrating on the voice has the philosophical advantage of thinking ontology in terms of uniqueness, relationality and corporeality. But it also has the political benefit of allowing the conceptualisation of politics in terms of:

a contextual relation, which is entrusted to speech and which does not appeal to a territory or to identity myths of community. The protagonist of this politics is a speaker who, leaving aside his or her belonging to this or that group, this or that language, communicates him- or herself, first of all, as voice.

Cavarero here returns to the notion of the “impolitical”. The politics of the voice is “impolitical” because it is a different type of politics which stands against the traditional practice of politics.

Two important questions nonetheless remain. Considering the irrelevance of the “what”, and the deconstruction of any identity or “belonging” that the politics of “absolute locality” requires, is this new politics compatible with feminism? And if it is, is the politics of the voice reconcilable with entrustment or with the project of il pensiero della differenza sessuale? When comparing the practice of storytelling to that of entrustment, I have already questioned the extent to which one could understand the former as a feminist strategy. Cavarero would probably answer that storytelling is not only a political strategy but a feminist strategy because it re-introduces what the existing symbolic order of representation (the order of the “what”) has excluded, namely, uniqueness which is both corporeal and marked by sexual difference. One could build on this answer by observing that the uniqueness conferred upon us by birth is corporeal and marked by sexual difference where both corporeality and sexual difference

120 ibid., p.222, “Politicising Theory”, op. cit., p.525.
121 Cavarero, “Politicising Theory”, op. cit., p.525.
are not yet qualifiable, therefore not yet masculinized.\textsuperscript{123} Cavarero’s politics of uniqueness, although distinctive, is also reconcilable with \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale}, since uniqueness shows up all the elements that are excluded in the existing symbolic order.

Cavarero expresses this similarity explicitly in \textit{For More Than One Voice} through a radical re-thinking of the relationship between speech and politics. By re-connecting speech to its vocal root, Cavarero thereby dismantles the binary oppositions set up between vocality and semantics, speech and thought, body and mind. She also challenges the allocation of the former terms to Woman and of the latter to Man.\textsuperscript{124} It is not “Woman” who can be heard in the vocal part of speech but uniqueness, relationality, and corporeality – namely, all which is rejected by the existing symbolic order. The vocal part of speech thus contains an intrinsic anti-patriarchal value.\textsuperscript{125} Consequently, to recognise and account for the vocal part of speech is not a feminist practice \textit{per se}, but it necessarily leads to one. Feminism becomes the necessary result of Cavarero’s politics. It is no longer the starting point. This has the incommensurable advantage of taking feminism beyond the equality versus difference debate, and carrying \textit{il pensiero} out of the crippling accusation of essentialism. Cavarero’s politics is ultimately a politics of the “who” which, albeit tacitly, serves the interests of feminism.

\textbf{Conclusion.}

Adriana Cavarero is a central political thinker of \textit{il pensiero della differenza sessuale}. As this chapter has shown, she has been instrumental in developing the critique of the existing symbolic order first put forward by entrustment theorists in “More Women Than Men”. Her early references to Arendt have conferred a certain originality to the critique that all pensiero.

\textsuperscript{123} The relationship between the body and the masculine norm is extensively analysed in one of Cavarero’s work which has not featured extensively in this chapter. In \textit{Stately Bodies}, Cavarero analyses the ambiguous treatment of the body in philosophy and literature. She shows that, on the one hand, the body is conceived of as dangerous and threatening to politics. The body which is cast away from the polis is usually a feminine body. On the other hand, the body reappears in the metaphor of the “body politic”, but this time it is an adult, able and masculine body which is reintroduced, one which signifies rationality and order.

\textsuperscript{124} Cavarero, \textit{A piú voci}, op. cit., pp.224-225.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{ibid}, p.226.
thinkers embrace. However, it is since Cavarero’s split from *Diotima* that the full potential contained in her early writings has manifested itself. In other words, it is in the last fifteen years that one is able to best grasp her contribution to theory of sexual difference in Italy.

With the displacement from a politics of difference to one of uniqueness, Cavarero has managed to put forward a political strategy which is still feminist in its effects. This has required a few modifications to Arendt’s political thought. Firstly, Cavarero has used the Arendtian categories of natality and plurality to stress corporeality and thus, indirectly, sexual difference. Secondly, besides thinking of natality as bringing on the new and unexpected, Cavarero has also re-conceptualised it as actual birth: it is the birth of a corporeal uniqueness, from a mother who is equally corporeal and unique. Thirdly, Cavarero has challenged the spatio-temporal limits of Arendt’s category of action.

Despite this feminist adaptation of Arendt, her stress on uniqueness rather than difference displaces feminism from being the cause to being the effect of her political strategy. Uniqueness indeed contains all that is “*atopical*” in the existing symbolic order. If one stresses uniqueness, one automatically stresses sexual difference which shows itself as one of the self’s unique qualities. Sexual difference, visible and still unqualified at birth, can *then* be signified in multiple ways. This has the invaluable advantage to take Italian feminism away from the essentialist accusation and establishes its distance with the equality versus difference debate.

Cavarero’s political strategy also has had the benefit of contesting the strict and often artificial barriers that the equality v. difference debate has erected between Anglo-Saxon and Continental feminism. Cavarero has indeed restored the dialogue between Italian feminism and its Anglo-Saxon counterpart. As seen in the preceding chapters, this dialogue was fervent in the 1970s (at a time when both the practice of consciousness-raising and Adrienne Rich’s writings erupted onto the Italian scene), but was virtually abandoned in the 1980s and 1990s (when members of *il pensiero* elaborated and consolidated their particular version of the theory of sexual difference). This does not mean that, in the process, Cavarero has lost the originality which has marked Italian feminism for more than three decades now. Indeed, she has not opted for a strategy of diversity, as many Anglo-American feminists have in recent years, but has rather
stressed the resources that the concepts of uniqueness, relationality and corporeality hold.

For my particular concern, her thought also becomes useful in examining and re-assessing the value of entrustment for (Italian) feminism. As seen in this chapter, it is probably her antipathy to the issue of power that lies at the heart of entrustment, which excludes such a practice from her consideration. For her, even without entrustment, Italian feminism retains its originality. It originates in the political practices of “the relationships between women” [la pratica delle relazioni tra donne] and of “starting from oneself” [la pratica del partire da sé], and the political stress on the figure of the mother, all of which date from the late 1970s-beginning of the 1980s.

However, I would argue, that rather than completely sidelining the social-symbolic practice of entrustment, which has been central to the development of Italian feminism, it might be more useful to consider it as a part of what Cavarero describes, in In Spite of Plato, as that “mosaic” of feminist strategies. Although its weakness and dangers must be reckoned with, entrustment might help to put Cavarero’s politics of uniqueness into effect. In other words, the politics of the “who” might sometimes need to use the strategy of the “what”. If uniqueness is to be exhibited through acts and words, a work on the symbolic level might still be required to give women the possibility to speak. Entrustment could thus becomes that practical refusal of the monstrous subject of representation, and the setting up of an alternative where, thanks to a relationship, women (but not only women) would be able to speak and act in society thus expressing and exhibiting their uniqueness as corporeal beings.
Concluding Remarks:
The Essential Difference of Italian feminism

This thesis opened by referring to Teresa de Lauretis’ efforts to familiarise Anglophone feminism with the Italian theory of sexual difference. By way of conclusion, I wish to return to one of her observations. In “The Essence of the Triangle”, de Lauretis remarks:

The essential difference of feminism lies in its historical specificity – the particular conditions of its emergence and development, which have shaped its object and field of analysis, its assumptions and forms of address; the constraints that have attended its conceptual and methodological struggles; the erotic component of its political self-awareness; the absolute novelty of its radical challenge to social life itself.¹

This thesis has not so much described the essential difference of feminism. It has rather focussed on the essential difference of Italian feminism. It has confronted the “difficult negotiation [...] between recognising the specificity of different women’s struggles and locating points of identity or synthesis that sustain a recognisably feminist process.”² The first three chapters have attempted to delineate the historical specificity of Italian feminism, by situating it in relation to the more familiar Anglo-American and French contexts. Together, these chapters have focussed on what Bono and Kemp have called the “interculturality and intertextuality”³ of Italian feminism. Chapter I has partly concentrated on imports made from the Anglophone context – mainly, the practice of consciousness-raising and the thought of Adrienne Rich – whilst Chapter II has

¹ Teresa de Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S. and Britain” in Differences 1 (Summer 1989): 4.
started to trace the enormous influence that the feminist group "Psych & Po" and, above all, Luce Irigaray have had on the development of Italian feminism towards a specific theory and practice of sexual difference.

The "essential difference" of contemporary Italian feminism has formed the focus of the rest of this study. In order to locate and analyse the essential difference of contemporary Italian feminism, I have focused on the social-symbolic practice of entrustment. While Chapter III has analysed the Italian intellectual and historical foundations of entrustment, Chapter IV has specifically concentrated on the contemporary character of Italian feminism. The social-symbolic practice of entrustment, formulated in 1983, has been a unique way of practising sexual difference. It is by no means a practice which has been unanimously embraced, as Chapter V has made clear. However, it has helped polarise the feminist debate in Italy and has also directly contributed to the subsequent diffusion of the theory of sexual difference amongst a majority of feminist groups. These groups have responded to il pensiero’s critique of the monosexual social-symbolic order, as well as to its call to sexualise social relationships by creating a female symbolic centred on the figure of the mother.

Despite the cautions I have expressed in Chapter V, entrustment remains an exemplary way for a topical engagement of women with society. As the Libreria delle Donne di Milano point out, the search for a symbolic reference and the practice of relationships between women are very ancient practices. These mediating relationships have often taken the form of friendships because "there are no other social forms in which a woman can satisfy her need for self-verification through a fellow-creature." The novelty brought by entrustment has been to transform these relationships between women into the content of a political project, that of signifying sexual difference within a monosexual social-symbolic order. This has provided a platform for the public discussion of sexual difference outside the sole feminists groups as Chapter V has emphasised. It has also supplied contemporary Italian feminism with a practical frame in which to subsequently theorise the maternal symbolic order.

5 ibid., p.30.
In its attempt to study "contemporary Italian feminism", my thesis has run the risk of presenting Italian feminist theory and practice as a unified form with a single identity. I hope that Chapters III and V have partly countered this tendency by exhibiting a picture of Italian feminism as a context in which lively and diverse feminist debates are a common and welcomed practice. Chapter V has also endeavoured to glean an engaged critique of entrustment and of il pensiero della differenza sessuale from the internal debates current in Italian feminism. While I have supported the cautious attention that one must pay to disparity and its possible degeneration into abusive power, I sought to recover both entrustment and il pensiero from different accusations of essentialism which have obstructed the dialogue between Italian feminists and their Anglophone counterparts. Chapter VI concluded the thesis by examining Adriana Cavarero as a feminist thinker who has been, at the same time, a fierce critic of entrustment and a major exponent of il pensiero della differenza sessuale. I have argued that her Arendtian stress on uniqueness has reserved to Cavarero a unique place amongst contemporary Italian feminists.

These last two chapters have aimed at conveying, one might say, the differences within the essential difference of Italian feminism. They have centred on more recent developments and debates in the theory of sexual difference, while stressing the factors which remain distinctively Italian. I have hence argued that entrustment is best considered as a part of a plural but common strategy of practising relationships between women. Sexual difference now becomes the political practice of restructuring the order of representation so that feminine specificity can be included.

Finally, this thesis has been an attempt to add the Italian perspective to the past and current debates about the essential difference of feminism. In this way, I have tried to counter the inherent imperialist tendencies of feminist theory, discussed in the Introduction. In an article regarding the failure of the traditional vocabulary of political theory (which is founded on the territorial sovereignty of nation-states) to account for "globalisation", Adriana Cavarero remarks that one of the ways in which the force of the "global" has been countered is through a stress of the "local". Thus, Cavarero writes that "the globalization of the market and technologies sees a resurrection of identity localism [...]" that in turn gives rise "to a narrative that is, essentially, anti-State, or rather, antimodern,"
performing islands that aspire to assert themselves exclusively and thus to fight one another". Whilst conscious of the limitations of this image, I nonetheless wish to draw a comparison between this phenomenon and the presentation of feminist theory. A central objective of my thesis has been to counter feminism’s imperialistic tendencies without asserting contemporary Italian feminism as a sort of island which resists and opposes the invasion of its Anglophone and French counterparts. Indeed, I think that a much more efficacious way of stressing the essential difference of feminism while allowing for multiple ways of expressing this difference is to theorise feminism as a shifting space of plurality and relationality – in the terms used by in Cavarero’s article, this would mean to understand feminism as “a locality without territories”. One current of feminism (here, il pensiero della differenza sessuale) would hence define itself against, but also in relation to, other strands of feminism (here, the Anglophone and the French). In this regard, Cavarero’s move to restore the dialogue between Italian and Anglo-Saxon feminist theories should be welcomed. To borrow Cavarero’s imagery (drawn upon in Chapter VI), presenting the essential difference of feminism would be like constructing a “mosaic”, where each piece of this overall image would be made by different shades of the same colour.

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7 ibid., p.525.
Bibliography


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