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Book Review: Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968–1983 by Maud Anne Bracke

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Bracke, Maud Anne. *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968–1983*. New York: Routledge, 2014. Pp. xiv + 256. ISBN 9780415734028 (Hardback). £85.00.

This study represents a rich and original contribution to the history of feminism in Italy, a history that has been characterized by historiographical lacunae, amnesia, and discontinuity, due to the intrinsic difficulty of researching a mass-based grassroots movement that largely happened outside organized structures. The majority of existing accounts, particularly those written by the former protagonists of the movement, have often focused on one specific political group or geographical location. In this sense, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political* is a welcome exploration of second wave feminism and of its broader historical and political significance in 1970s Italy. While offering a nation-wide investigation, the author simultaneously pays justice to the diversity of political experiences across the country through the case studies of feminist organizing in Rome, Turin, and Naples. The author's conclusion that "the feminist agenda meant different things to women of different localities, different social and cultural backgrounds and different political trajectories and ages" (209) is a very significant contribution, which allows for the opening up of new strands of research. Another innovative element is the attention towards the transnational connections established between Italian activists and activists from other countries, particularly the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. By looking at the local recontextualization of foreign texts, the author shows the wider scope of transnational second wave feminist debates and challenges the common representation of the Italian feminist experience as unique and "untranslatable."

The first chapter of the book introduces the analytical framework, discussing the patriarchal system that dominated post-war Italy, the crisis of political representation that followed 1968, and feminism's critique of the post-1968 radical left. The chapter outlines the underlying thesis of the book, namely the idea that the feminist movement led to a reconfiguration of women as political subjects and of the spaces and terms of the political. According to the author, the universalization of sexual difference, against the universality of class advocated by the Marxist left, created a new source of political self-representation centered on the body and sexuality. The spaces of the family and of affective relations, thus, became central to the movement, as made evident by the famous slogan "The personal is political." The meaning of women's liberty (*libertà femminile*) was also rewritten, leading to women's new relation to the state and the public sphere. The author aptly emphasizes the blurred boundaries between what was considered private, public, and political in 1970s Italy, and stresses the need to consider both the institutional and non-institutional strategies of the feminist movement. The research methodology, which combines oral testimonies with published and unpublished written sources, allows the author to encompass both the "existential dimension" and the "social dimension" of feminism (7), that is, the subjective impact of feminism for individual participants, but also the collective character of a social movement embedded in a specific historical and political context.

The following two chapters provide the historical contextualization for the whole book, and a comprehensive analysis of 1970s feminism. In the second chapter, the author stresses the importance of post-war transformations in women's rights and women's political agency within the Marxist *Unione Donne Italiane* (UDI) and the Catholic *Centro Italiano Femminile* (CIF). However, she also exposes the limits of post-war equality, namely women's continued exploitation and marginalization in the sphere of labor, as well as the sexual double standard that dominated public and private life. This "wounded emancipation," (33) according to the author, made many young women receptive to the radicalization of the Italian youth of 1968-1969. Women's political participation did not correspond to a substantial shift in patriarchal roles within the organizations of the old and the new left, contributing to the emergence of feminism and to its radical critique of the

existing political realm. The third chapter offers a chronological analysis of the development of the feminist movement between 1968 and 1983, describing the emergence of separatism and of consciousness-raising groups (*gruppi di autocoscienza*). The discontent with the Marxist left implied both an engagement with and a distancing from Marxist theory, on the basis of women's shared sexual difference. The dilemma of women's engagement in mixed institutions, however, persisted, particularly during the political campaigns for divorce and abortion rights.

The analysis of these campaigns and of feminists' different positions towards state institutions, political parties, and the left, is refreshing as it expounds feminist movements' constant negotiation with the surrounding political context, rather than reproducing the "anti-institutional rhetoric" (103) which usually characterizes the narratives of those who took part in the movement. Feminists' conflicting engagement with local institutions is clearly described in the chapter that examines the creation of feminist self-help clinics (*consultori autogestiti*) in Rome. The chapter on the case of Naples is also stressing the importance of local social struggles in shaping the practices of Neapolitan feminist collectives. Another distinctive approach of the book is the attention towards women's labor and towards women's feminist activism within trade unions, an issue that so far has remained under-researched. The chapter that focuses on the industrial city of Turin, notably, examines trade union feminism, concentrating on the experience of *Intercategoriale donne*, a women-only structure which operated across the main trade unions: CGIL, CISL, and UIL. Bracke's analysis of feminist strategies in relation to local politics, but also in connection to national and transnational debates, is very fruitful. Judith Adler Hellmann adopted a similar methodology almost three decades ago, when she studied feminist groups in Reggio Emilia, Torino, Milano, Verona, and Caserta in relation to local left-wing forces. Unfortunately her pioneering book, *Journeys among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities* (1987) published by the Oxford University Press, was never translated into Italian. Maud Bracke's book demonstrates that this approach deserves new consideration among scholars of Italian feminism in Italy and abroad.

After the chapters dedicated to the case studies, one final chapter discusses the gradual waning of feminism in 1980s and 1990s Italy. According to the author, the feminist theoretical turn of the 1980s led to an increasing focus on sexual difference at the expense of class, regional, and cultural difference. Due to the predominantly anti-institutional stance of the Italian movement, moreover, state feminism in Italy has been relatively weak compared to other Western European countries. Feminist groups, thus, were ill-equipped to counteract the patriarchal backlash of the 1980s, as well as the weakening of progressive movements that followed the collapse of the First Republic and the subsequent rise of Berlusconi in the 1990s. This critique of the "anti-institutional" legacy of Italian feminism is particularly relevant and surely deserves further scrutiny within contemporary feminist debates.

Women and the Reinvention of the Political is more successful in drawing comprehensive syntheses than in presenting women's subjective voices. The life stories of the women from different generations who took part in the Italian feminist movement could have been explored in greater depth, and the analysis of transnational connections could also have been expanded further. Overall, however, the book provides an excellent introduction to Italian feminism for readers who are not familiar with the subject, while also offering new methodological and theoretical insights for scholars of women's and gender history in Italy.

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