

Je ne suis pas Catherine Deneuve. Reflections on contemporary debates about sexual self-determination in Italy

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Good versus bad women

During the preparation of this special issue, media headlines worldwide were frequently dominated by the sexual scandal involving Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein. Accusations of sexual harassment and even rape came from a wide range of women, including the Italian actress and director Asia Argento. In stark contrast to the solidarity that Weinstein's victims received elsewhere, in Italy public opinion was divided over Argento's decision to speak out: in fact, she was criticised by a number of newspapers and, in particular, on social media. The criticism was often accompanied by verbal insult and scorn, ranging from reprimands for not having rejected Weinstein's sexual advances, to condemnations of her continued collaboration with the producer in subsequent years, during which she suffered further abuse. Many interpreted this as an opportunistic way of advancing her career: her current, belated, accusations against Weinstein were thus seen as an attempt to gain media attention for herself. As Vittorio Feltri, the infamous director of the right-wing newspaper *Libero* observed:

[I]f you've given it away consensually and you're of age, then in the end you're the one who gave it to him. And you didn't have to, because not all gave it to this gentleman. Some refused. Instead of playing a role in some film, they went to work as shop assistants or cashiers in a supermarket. Nobody obliges you to become a famous actress. If you give it away in order to obtain an advantage, it's a form of prostitution.¹

What may have fuelled this spiteful attack on Argento, other than the sexism that many Italians – beyond the likes of Feltri – excel in, was the fact that the actress has often interpreted roles of prostitutes and sexually transgressive women. Thus, along with her occasionally brazen behaviour and physical appearance,² a certain cross-over between Argento's real person and the fictional women she has represented on the screen evoked the image of a femininity that falls outside the norm, marking her as a 'bad' woman, ergo not entitled to make accusations of sexual abuse. Contrary to the 'good' woman, who renounces any form of sexual-economic exchange and settles, instead, for a normal job, the 'bad' woman takes advantage of her sexual power in order to get higher on the social ladder. In doing so she transgresses the rules and norms 'that "control" women morally and socially' (Hipkins 2011, 419), and is then attributed the title of prostitute. As Danielle Hipkins has observed with regard to the press coverage of the scandal around Silvio Berlusconi's private parties, certain newspapers described the women who attended the parties in a moralising way, dividing them into 'good' women, who rejected offers of money, and 'bad' women, who did not (422). The 'whore stigma' is, then, the price women inevitably pay the moment they break social rules and norms about sexuality.

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Linked to this is another aspect of the backlash against Argento: the idea that female actresses, rather than to take up a ‘real’ job, prefer selling their bodies, as illustrated in this comment by one of Argento’s haters: ‘The truth is that in order not to go and do a job that would throw her into anonymity she sold her mouth and perhaps also her other orifices and now she cries and plays the victim????’³ Hence Feltri’s comment about those ‘good’ women who – instead of yielding to sexual abuse in order to get a part in a film – take up a modest, but ‘respectable’, job as a shop assistant or a cashier. Others, like Vladimir Luxuria, called to mind naive ideas about women’s empowerment, according to which Argento could and should have rejected the abuse: the LGBT activist and former parliamentarian for Rifondazione Comunista suggested that Argento should have refused Weinstein’s sexual advances because her talent would have helped her get to the top anyway.⁴

The various negative judgements hurled at Argento in Italy reveal not only an incapacity to understand the trauma of sexual violence (and the consequent difficulty for victims to speak about it in public), but also an unwillingness to acknowledge that women are exposed, more than men, to sexual exploitation and extortion. This subordination is not a natural condition but is caused by unequal power relations: ‘The sexual-economic exchange is not just one of many instruments, but the device *par excellence* that lies at the basis of female subordination and sexual appropriation of women [...]. It is by no means a predictable and natural exchange, and it rather nurtures itself through the disproportion of power’ (Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012, 74). Thus, behaviour like that of Weinstein is downplayed, even justified, as a form of seduction or *ars amatoria*.⁵ Rather than condemn (or indeed recognise) sexual exploitation, it is considered the way of the world.

The case of Argento does not tell us anything we didn’t know: as we have seen in the introduction to this special issue, victim blaming is a recurrent and widespread phenomenon in Italian society. Clearly for many people the problem isn’t so much that ‘bad’ women – i.e. women who don’t resist – undergo sexual abuse, but that they *complain* about it, that they denounce this abuse and as such also mark it *as* abuse. Thus if a woman agrees to take part in a sexual-economic exchange, and consequently accepts her subordination to a more powerful man, denouncing it in public implies a breach of that agreement. In sum, in a neoliberal society where women supposedly ‘choose’ to use their bodies in exchange for money or a career, an unequal system of power relations is at work where the only legitimate sex-economic exchange is one that is not declared, or indeed, denounced (Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012, 75).

Has Italian feminism failed?

The Weinstein scandal caused much debate and, in particular, confusion about the meaning of feminism, its current state of affairs, and about sexual self-determination. Thus an opinion article about the attacks on Argento’s persona in Italy, published in the *New York Times*, was provocatively titled ‘The failure of Italian feminism’.⁶ Although the article wasn’t much more than a resentful venting of the author’s discontent with feminism, it raised an interesting point: the fact that among Argento’s critics there were many women. To name just one: the 88-year-old journalist Natalia Aspesi, who offered the notorious excuse that ‘boys will be boys’ when she observed that ‘producers, at least for as long as I can remember similar incidents, have always acted this way’.⁷

More importantly, in the wake of the accusations against Weinstein, which – other than launching a worldwide social media campaign – provoked a chain reaction that saw other film producers and actors accused of similar acts (for example Fausto Brizzi, in Italy), a group of

French women published a letter in *Le Monde*.⁸ The letter denounced the persistence of an alleged puritanism behind the accusations, and severely criticised what was considered a witch-hunt against men who were guilty perhaps only of a ‘clumsy’ seduction attempt.⁹ The signatories included some well-known, predominantly white and established women (most famously the actress Catherine Deneuve), who claimed that the freedom to seduce and harass women was essential to sexual freedom.¹⁰ The age-old stereotype of the man-hating feminist strongly resurfaced in this reversed *j’accuse*, where sexuality was located in the heteronormative gender binary that connects the two sex/gender identities through heterosexual desire,¹¹ in which women’s role in society is reduced to that of a passive object of seduction.

These polemics raise a number of questions: has feminism failed to bring women together? In the words of Olympe de Gouges, cited in one of the most famous Italian feminist manifestos of the 1970s, will women always be divided from one another? More importantly, have feminist struggles for sexual self-determination missed the mark? Perhaps the current backlash against feminism can be explained by the fact that, from the late 1960s onwards, feminist battles for sexual freedom and self-determination – although they obtained important results – also encountered strong resistance from institutions, religious organisations, the medical profession and from Italian society at large.¹² As we argue in the introduction, the battles to regain control over and knowledge of women’s bodies and sexuality proved a great challenge to institutions, which sought to steer feminism into calmer and more controllable waters, for example through legislative reform and the institutionalisation of feminism, which continued in the 1980s and 1990s (in particular in terms of equal opportunity policies). The idea of a postfeminist world took shape, where gender equality had supposedly been achieved and feminism no longer seemed necessary, or indeed was cast off as old-fashioned and moralising, in stark contrast to the increasing sexualisation of girls and the proliferation of new forms of hyperfemininity (Hipkins 2011, 416). In this postfeminist world, sexual-economic exchange was considered a conscious decision, and female power presented as stronger than that of men, as taking advantage of the ‘weaknesses’ of men: ‘a power which always expresses itself in terms of seduction, and which manifests itself in the freedom to assign one’s sexuality for one’s own purposes’ (Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012, 72).

Another reason for the anti-feminist backlash that resurfaced in the events described above is related to the limited transference, in Italy, of a history and memory of feminism. Indeed, feminism is often remembered in a partial manner, and receives relatively little attention in history books and media: movies or TV series about the 1970s women’s movement, for example, are scarce, while documentaries have appeared only in recent years.¹³ I have reflected on the reasons for this limited transference elsewhere (Hajek 2016, 134–135), but suffice to say that Italian second-wave feminism had far fewer political ‘impact events’ as opposed to other social movements in the late 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ It therefore offers less ‘spectacular’ material for the media, with the exception of the mass public demonstrations concentrated mostly in the second half of the 1970s, which did gain media attention, and consequently tend to dominate in public memories of second-wave feminism.

A final, possible explanation for the current anti-feminist backlash is the general gender panic surrounding issues of sexuality, gender and reproduction. In France this gender panic was given explicit visibility through the *Manif pour tous*, the Catholic movement that arose in 2012 in reaction to a law proposal on same-sex marriage, but which also opposed surrogate motherhood and medically assisted procreation.¹⁵ In Italy, too, gender panic has taken various shapes, most notoriously in the public campaign against the so-called *teoria del gender* or *ideologia gender*, a neologism used by Catholic organisations to contest and oppose sexual education programmes aimed at overcoming gender stereotypes and discrimination.¹⁶

It is not all despair in the world of contemporary feminism, though, and Asia Argento also received much solidarity, both from feminists linked to the second-wave generation,¹⁷ and from contemporary feminist activists. Support came in particular from the new feminist movement *Non una di meno*, whose members wrote a public letter to Argento after she announced that she would leave Italy as a result of the attacks against her. *Non una di meno*, which makes reference to the Argentinian movement *Ni una mas*, originated following the particularly brutal murder of a young Italian woman by her ex-boyfriend in the summer of 2016. It is one of many new feminist groups and networks that have evolved since the early 2000s, following a period of relatively quiet feminist activism in the 1980s and 1990s. This renewed surge in feminist mass protest began with the 2001 G8 events in Genoa, and, in particular, the international meeting hosted by the World March of Women during the G8 (Galetto et al 2009, 196). Other than pursuing a struggle – both at a public, grassroots level and in a digital environment – against sexual violence and gender stereotyping, these new feminist groups claim a strong interest in sexual self-determination. This can be explained by the fact that sexism, gender violence and discrimination have persisted, perhaps even grown, in the new millennium, whereas attacks on earlier achievements in the area of women’s control over their bodies and sexualities, for example the right to abortion, continue (Galetto et al 2009, 192; 197).

Contrary, then, to what the anti-feminist backlash would like us to believe, gender equality and free choice have not yet been consolidated. Nor is it true that feminism has failed, as we can deduce from the comment made by a feminist activist during the national demonstration against sexual violence, in 2016: ‘The most beautiful thing, for those of us who were out on the streets in the 1970s, is the vivacity of this demonstration, the concreteness without nostalgia. For years we thought we hadn’t transmitted anything of that experience: seeing today this river of boys and girls that say no to the *femminicidi* [...] means that the movement, in reality, *has* left its mark’.¹⁸

Notes on contributor

Andrea Hajek obtained her doctoral degree at the University of Warwick. She is the author of *Negotiating Memories of Protest in Western Europe. The Case of Italy* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2013), and has published in various peer reviewed journals and edited volumes. She has also co-edited a number of special issues and the volume *Memory in a Mediated World: Remembrance and Reconstruction* (2015). She is the managing editor of the Sage journal of *Memory Studies*.

Notes

1. <http://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/sfoglio/13264213/cunnilingus-vittorio-feltri-asia-argento-e-quella-leccatina.html>. Accessed 5 January 2018.
2. Argento, for example, notoriously raised her middle finger at the press during the Cannes film festival of 2013.
3. <http://thesubmarine.it/2017/10/12/asia-argento-weinstein/>. Accessed 18 December 2017.
4. http://www.corriere.it/spettacoli/17_ottobre_11/weinstein-argento-io-insultata-aver-denunciato-stupro-2ad7be30-aeb8-11e7-b0c4-b8561c2586e6.shtml Accessed 18 December 2017.
5. <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/ida-dominijanni/2018/01/10/catherine-deneuve-appello>. Accessed 11 January 2018.
6. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/opinion/italian-feminism-asia-argento-weinstein.html?_r=0. Accessed 18 December 2017.
7. <https://www.vanityfair.it/news/appfondimenti/2017/10/11/weinstein-commento-natalia-aspesi>. Accessed 12 January 2018.
8. As we also explained in our introduction, the #metoo campaign aimed at bringing the problem of sexual harassment out into the public.
9. http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html. Accessed 10 January 2018.

10. http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/people/2018/01/09/news/catherine_deneuve_lasciamo_agli_uomini_la_liberta_di_importunarci_-186158566/?ref=fbpr. Accessed 10 January 2018.
11. The gender binary, or gender binarism, refers to the classification of sex and gender into two distinct, opposite and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine.
12. We should keep in mind that, although the women's movement was large and widespread in Italy, and in the second half of the 1970s became a mass movement, many men and women did not engage with it at all.
13. Alina Marazzi's successful documentary *Vogliamo anche le rose* was made in 2007, while two historical documentaries have been aired on television in 2014 and 2015.
14. One exception is the death of Giorgiana Masi during a public demonstration in favour of abortion legislation, in 1977.
15. More generally, the claim that sexual liberation is impossible without seduction or harassment perhaps also reveals a certain nostalgia for 'traditional', heteronormative gender relations and ideas about love, sexuality and the couple in French culture.
16. http://27esimaora.corriere.it/17_novembre_06/teoria-gender-come-nata-cosa-serve-bbf2dfba-c2b0-11e7-985a-e44f18aa540b.shtml. Accessed 11 January 2018.
17. The journalist Ida Dominijani, in particular, criticised the French women's initiative. Conversely, Germaine Greer, a key feminist figure of the 1970s women's movement, strongly attacked the contemporary feminist campaigns against sexual harassment. Although she acknowledges that 'what makes it different is when the man has economic power, as Harvey Weinstein has', Greer argued that 'if you spread your legs because he said "be nice to me and I'll give you a job in a movie" then I'm afraid that's tantamount to consent, and it's too late now to start whingeing about that'. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/23/germaine-greer-criticises-whingeing-metoo-movement?CMP=fb_gu. Accessed 25 January 2018.
18. <http://www.iniziativaiaica.it/?p=33739>. Accessed 30 November 2016. The italics are mine.

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Italian summary

Questo articolo offre uno sguardo attuale sui discorsi pubblici intorno al tema della sessualità. Partendo dallo scandolo sessuale che ha travolto il produttore cinematografico Harvey Weinstein nel 2017, l'articolo mette al centro le polemiche sul femminismo contemporaneo e sull'idea di autodeterminazione e libertà sessuale, che lo scandalo accese nel contesto italiano.