

More than One Voice. Relation, Body, and Narrative

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Abstract

While Derrida in *La Voix et le Phénomène (Speech and Phenomena)* invited us to exercise psychoanalytic suspicion in relation to the claim of the authentic fullness of consciousness, the voice in Cavarero shapes another perspective. Singularity emerges in a backward move: it is made by genealogies that free up space for expression; difference is manifested in the relationship with the other in flesh and blood; and authenticity, as it is in Lonzi, does not entail a static and self-assured subjectivity, but rather is set in motion by violence and injustice.

Keywords: Feminist philosophy, Cavarero, voice, relation, narrative

Biography

Philosopher and feminist activist, Federica Giardini is Full Professor in Philosophy of Politics at the University of Roma Tre. After graduating in Philosophy from the University of Pisa, she worked on the relationship between philosophy and psychoanalysis, and then focused on the corporeal dimension of intersubjectivity at the intersection of Phenomenology and Philosophy of difference. Her most recent research uses Difference as an operator to address some of the main themes of contemporary political philosophy, from the relations of obedience/disobedience to the extension of the political sphere to the order of relations between human and non-human (“cosmopolitics”). She is the coordinator of IAPh–Italy – www.iaphitalia.org – a research centre for feminist thought, and director of the Masters degree programme “Studi e Politiche di Genere” at the University of Roma Tre.

Among her main works we find: *I nomi della crisi. Antropologia e politica* (2017), *L'alleanza inquieta. Dimensioni politiche del linguaggio* (2011), *Relazioni. Differenza sessuale e fenomenologia* (2004) and, together with Gea Piccardi, *Produzione*

e riproduzione. Genealogie e teorie (2015). She also edited *Conflitti. Filosofia e Politica* (2020), *Sensibili guerriere. Sulla forza femminile* (2011), and *Il pensiero dell'esperienza* (2008).

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Starting from a relational practice that is shared by both of us, Adriana Cavarero has shaped a path of research and reflection between philosophy and feminism which opens up other spaces and other styles of thought. Attentive to the relationship and the singularity of each voice, her philosophy emerged out of the relationship with others – authors, thinkers, partners. In 1980s Italy, Cavarero is an initiator in the sense defined by Hannah Arendt, a thinker who has always accompanied her: the ability to start anew is the proper of the human condition. Initiator, together with others, of a great bet: betting on the possibility that *being a woman* could make a difference, could open up ways and worlds, different from the existing and consolidated ones, in a plurality of voices and expressions. Some key points of her work will therefore be presented through the many relationships that have both made evident and further interrogated the significance of her thought.

Being a woman – with Carla Lonzi

The irruption of the unexpected subject (Lonzi, 1970), this experience, and the words in which it was told, has been an event with respect to an order and space of power. This event was initiated by women but, today, having that irruption inaugurated again, it can be taken and relaunched by all those subjects who attempt to undo the grammars of power and to produce alternatives. I therefore intend to take “woman” as the signifier of these subjects, as the sign under which to place an enterprise of meaning, of politics, of life. This enterprise consists of risk, of adventure, of knowledge, whose aim is precisely that of undoing the order of power, rather than surveilling the boundaries of that same knowledge. So, from now on, when the word woman recurs, I mean also those in any position that have the experience of defeat, and who do not

want to repeat the history of the winners; who constantly work to undo this history, its effects on the present, and to produce another time. To the ears that are more familiar with a certain thought, this might seem a replica of what Gilles Deleuze has already said, the “becoming–woman” as a wish for freedom for the whole of humanity. Surely, when elaborating his formulation, the French philosopher is affected by the mark of the times, and is sensitive to the awakening of feminist political intelligence. And yet, he avoids embodying that formula, and fails to bring it back to gestures actually made by women. What remains, however, is that the beginning of this story was embodied in the bodies and thoughts of women. The irruption that occurred through female awareness had the time of the event: punctual time, which interrupts the flow of things as they go, their inertia. Here lies all the difference: recognising the eruption of feminist difference offers us a resource and a responsibility: to become unexpected subjects, to get out of the patriarchal history “that is made of the effects of power”, relies on lifestyles, on actions actually carried out, on words actually spoken.

A successful bet, if we look at Adriana Cavarero’s philosophical work, which has followed at least two paths. The first was to tell otherwise, to free some figures from the philosophical and literary canon. *In Spite of Plato* (Cavarero, 1995) has taken and redesigned Penelope, the servant of Thrace, Demeter and Diotima, as figures of intelligence, strength, independence, removing them from the function of secondary support to male events. Making a difference means also going back to the canon, stealing pieces from its figures, reformulating its logic. Starting with how *difference* itself was formulated according to hierarchical, linear, and dual oppositional principles.

Difference – Opening up the Canon

Diff-, from *déférance* “character that distinguishes one thing from another”, c. 1200.

Dis-, prefix that has either privative force, or negative, or serves to indicate an action contrary to that expressed by the simple word, or denotes estrangement, removal, detachment.

Mes-, prefix derived from the Germanic *miss-* (less likely from the Latin *minus*) which indicates a defect, error, or irregularity, “transformation from an original comparative meaning to a negative and pejorative one”.

Deu-, lack, need, cf. the Greek *deuteros*, missing, second.

Dyo, two. Accadic *tu'wu*, double, placed side by side, the unit marked next to the other. So *dis*, **dwis*, that is “twice”. In analogy with the system of marking a unit next to something, on one side or the other, the original meaning is “below, next to, against”.

It was a philosophical gesture which opened up other worlds, with Cavarero and the company of others, such as Christa Wolf and Luce Irigaray. A gesture that has never been abandoned, such as for Antigone with María Zambrano, and Ondina with Ingeborg Bachmann (Cavarero, 2002), or Artemisia (Cavarero, 2016), up to the Sirens and the nymph, Echo (Cavarero, 2005). And I still remember the way in which she restored – I would say a myth, a figure of the contemporary – the friendship between Emilia and Amalia (Cavarero, 2000) that snatches the figure of recognition from the Canon: a figure not of enslavement, but of liberation. The recreation of the meaning and life of these figures, between the crystalised *time* of tradition, the event of feminist irruption and the duration of the elaboration of a response to violence.

Time – with Nicole Loraux

The temporality within which the work of difference can be conceivable is not a linear progressive temporality, but a recursive one, a characterising trait that allows us to grasp the coexistence of different temporal layers (Loraux, 2005). Sexed difference is at the core of the constitution of the political, and at the same time exceeds it; it is a transhistorical constant and

yet nothing can be said except through its historical configurations. It is historical and yet it constantly points to humanity: it does not exist between two entities that can be represented as such, but marks the human being without making it two separate identities; rather, it is the space for negotiation, conflicts, and denials in which humanity necessarily and constantly recreates itself. As for the times internal to the present, on the one hand, we find the instantaneous or reactive temporality of communication: the daily bloody rosary of sexual violence. It is a reactive time, that is not nourished by the past, but by the archaic, and by the instantaneousness of institutional politics, such as the “security emergency”, that legitimises illiberal interventions. On the other hand, the slow time of populations. In an era in which geographical borders are more than ever political borders – porous or impermeable according to the needs and the order of reasons with which each “community” represents and administers itself – population movements (internal ones, such as the rate of demographic growth, or external ones, such as migratory flows) introduce the *longue durée* into our present. Family policies, increase or decrease of births and resources, configure the state of sexual relations. But it is also the temporality that characterises the subjects not foreseen by the philosophies of progressive history, which thus break in with their own memory and time, tracing other conflicts, other precedents, in that space that official history delivers as a mere absence.

I said that Cavarero made this bet in two ways at least; the other, although linked to the free re-signification of one’s experience, has expanded to the point of proposing a different philosophy. If I had to identify the cardinal points, I would name the following: relationship, the body, uniqueness, and narrative. All terms that are at the same time critical, and affirmative. Relationship challenges the isolated and self-possessed subject. The body presents itself as a force that threatens the mastery of the will, and at the same time can become a source for resignifying the world. Uniqueness and narration are the terms that bring her the closest to Arendt: the former warns against what makes us serial, compliant, docile to the designs of power; the latter opens up to a style of thought,

of writing, of the sense of self, which has no claim to mastery over the truth, through *logical argumentation*; which rather asks for and presupposes listening and therefore the presence of others.

Other Discourses – with Iris Marion Young

Young points to three different discourse styles for effective communication (Young, 1997). The greeting formulas with words or gestures: “hello”, “welcome”, “how are you?”, are phrases that – whilst used in communication without expressing any content – are signals of recognition of the interlocutor. They are *rhetorical* signs, that is, signs of the choice of topics that may strike the listener; it is precisely listening that is highlighted. In the landscape of discussions that take language as an irreducible human dimension, little space is given to listening, which is instead an indispensable requirement for exchange. Unlike the figure of recognition, listening refers to the context within which the communication takes place, to whom the individual speakers are, to the relationship they establish with the listener, and vice versa. Finally, another discursive style is storytelling. As opposed to the deployment of discourse in institutional politics, advertising, or the corporate world, narrating is a relational practice. Neither generalised intersubjectivity nor individuals competing for their own interests in order to prevail, narrative accepts that the initial discursive situation is made up of misunderstandings, if not of a complete lack of understanding, and makes it the starting requirement. Through the narration of singular experiences, which cannot be immediately common – those who are forced to use a wheelchair recount the episode of their difficulties in the face of architectural obstacles, for example – the listener will have a concrete understanding of the situation available to them, while not experiencing it themselves. Furthermore, the narrative has an explanatory and inclusive effect: while the argument that proceeds from a premise to a conclusion solicits the agreement of those who share the premise, telling a story allows those who are not already familiar with that world to

understand the practices, positions, values or symbols of the narrator.

In *For More than One Voice* (Cavarero, 2005), the philosophical canon is taken off guard, too; both in Derrida's philosophy, which entrusted subjectivation to writing against the self-deceptions of presence to oneself through the conscience as an inner voice; and in Habermas's, which bends the voice and its legitimation to the rational argumentative logic, where truth and recognition become internal properties of the utterance. In Cavarero, the voice is both extroverted and intensified: moved by others, it takes consistency into the corporeal dimension.

Voice – with Carol Gilligan

The voice, that of the interviews constituting the corpus of Gilligan's initial research, allows her to dwell on hesitations, contradictions, inconsistencies. The voice, a physical sign of a singularity that expresses an entire era, can only be such if it is listened to, if it is heard. Here Gilligan's work encounters a central theme for the thought of European difference, the linguistic and discursive matrix of the sense of self. When she denounces the repression that operates through the framework of dominant values; when she tells us that the sense of self for a woman becomes available as long as she conforms to what a society defines as a "normal woman", or under the condition of silencing everything that does not fall within this standard. Assuming that silences, hesitations, contradictions, which have their own consistency, are signs and traces of a different economy, the author approaches the great work that has been done around the figure of the hysteric. The symptom, a sign straddling body and word, is already a signifying act, it is already endowed with truth, however it needs an order of discourse that allows it to arrive at expression or, more precisely, to enter the circuit of relationships, of those exchanges that constitute common living. Moreover, the symptom becomes an opportunity to extend the meaning of resistance (Gilligan, 2011). Resistance refers to the dynamics between the spoken and the heard word: before speaking,

something has always already been heard. The subordination of the girl she describes – who can enhance herself only according to the values of competition, aggression, arrogance, the alternative between her own interest and that of others – is an obedient being. In fact, obeying (*ob-audio*) refers to the sense of hearing: it is through the ear, one of the senses that most exposes us to the outside, that the injunctions reach us and for which our speaking is not so much an original and independent activity. The primacy of *logos* is overturned: the voice, knowing how to speak, refers to an original posture, listening. And yet this is nothing more and nothing less than an opportunity, not a guarantee. Resistance becomes that first movement through which what arrives as an injunction from within is pushed back outwards. In the space thus rediscovered, speaking, and the voice, do not unfold immediately with coherence and a persuasive capacity, that is, with the ability to be heard. Here, in fact, lies the second side where the voice–listening relationship appears: against too easy and pacifying interpretations of Gilligan’s work, in an invitation to dialogue, the voice becomes such when it works on its own occurrence, when it creates and generates the conditions which allow it to be heard.

Like the traces in the snow of Karen Blixen’s story (Cavarero, 2000) – the sense of Cavarero’s work is and will be traced in a backward move that chorally (*coralmente*) relaunches and updates her main figures: body – the voice is not consciousness of cognition, it consists of the physical and internal body that we are; the relation – the voice consists of both pronouncement and listening; uniqueness – the voice, when it is not that of one speaking for all, becomes the cipher of singularity; narration – when the voice frees itself from argumentative logic, which seeks an impossible legitimacy, having renounced listening and uniqueness – here comes the “epic song” (Cavarero, 2005: 80).

Other Beginnings – with Vandana Shiva

The dualism between nature and technique, the title *par excellence* of the anthropic subsumption of planetary otherness through linguistic reductionism, decays due to the alternative

between subjectivity and modernity. Shiva shows how the sacred and technique can be contiguous, if not coincident. Just as there are names for the single moments of encounter between the river Ganges and the beings that engage with it, so there are at least twenty-five names to designate the hydraulic systems of irrigation and the transportation of drinking water, which make Rajasthan the most flourishing desert on earth. Technique, like language, is therefore reconsidered as a relationship of co-creation, neither creation *ex nihilo*, nor a referential sphere. The ways of the songs are paths taken through a gigantic extension, on a non-human scale, at times hostile, certainly not reassuring. Unlike ours, in the Australian Aboriginal tradition, making this extension a viable, livable space does not involve construction, domestication, appropriation. Rather, it is through movement, encounter, and a special mode of language, that this extension becomes a space. While walking, one meets a rock, a river, an animal and, by singing it, creation happens, of oneself and of that being. The space does not pre-exist and is not attributed to someone to the detriment of someone else; it is rather the effect of a physical relationship – the meeting – and of a non-appropriative linguistic relationship – singing. Thus, a cosmogony, the moment in which everything begins, again.

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