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Gender conflicts: agency versus regression and alienation.
Psychic Ostracism hypothesis

This contribution considers the evolutionary possibilities of conflict in gender individuation. Matching of differences is effective but only on the condition that each subject learns and develops a positive meaning of the conflict. The conflict of differences has a variety of manifestations in complex societies, particularly as to gender differences. Within the limits of this paper, I intend to analyze how, in those conflictual dynamics, along with the social contract, the actual possibilities for self-expression in relational asymmetries and power relationships also take shape. We can see how in this way common forms of denial, exclusion and alienation of women's potentials and capacities are generated. It is possible to call these dynamics inherent in the process of turning a group into a minority, *psychic ostracism*. The phenomenon of psychic ostracism embodies at least two mutual polarities: the psychic mortification of potentials and the social legitimization of that mortification which is often assumed and validated by women themselves. In terms of psychic phenomenology this aspect configures a recursive victim-abuser circularity.

This work, based on a few case studies, presents women's failure to envisage and sustain long-term projects in their lives, with durable change. Girls are not sufficiently stimulated by their mothers to continue investing energy in their everyday behaviour and gender roles. As a result, the difficulty of relating to different affective codes and conceptions deriving from gender leads to a regressive stance and the alienation of one's own power, as a consequence of psychic ostracism. While we can see a systematic alienation of one's own power in the relational and social experience of women, this paper tries to identify in psychic ostracism one of the determinants of such alienation. I have studied the inter-generational transferences of the female model which influences the reciprocal recognition of affective codes, of sexual development and of gender. I use psychoanalytical categories to understand specific problems about the difficulty of one's own individuation project. I refer to Italian psychoanalysts, Franco Fornari and Luigi Pagliarani, who both worked on the evolution of conflict. I utilize Fornari's concept of *affective codes* in relationships and Pagliarani's suggestion of the *bisexual nature* of every individual and collective project. The female plans have to be thought by the mother's and father's minds. At first, the female project asserts itself in the relationships of siblings. My study is based on Pagliarani's episteme of *puer* and his study of the *original lack* and the *affective ambiguity* in the psychodynamic processes of dependence and autonomy. I integrated the research on conflicts with Judith Butler's study on *psychic life of power* and *performative speech acts*. Furthermore, this contribution creates a dialogue between Daniel Stern's study of vital forces and relational resonance in the traumatic experience of violence.

Let us follow a narrative by Siri Hustvedt

«As I looked around the table at my pupils, I grew calmer. They were indeed children. The preposterous but poignant realities of girls on the cusp asserted themselves immediately, and my sympathy for them almost choked me. Peyton Berg, several inches taller than I, very thin, with no breasts, constantly adjusted her arms and legs as if they were alien limbs. Jessica Lorquat was tiny, but she had the body of a woman. A false atmosphere of femininity hung about her that made itself known chiefly in an affectation–a cooing baby voice. Ashley Larsen, sleek brown hair, slightly protruding eyes, walked and sat with the self-conscious air that comes with a newly acquired erogenous zone-holding herself chest-out to display growing buds. Emma Hartley withdrew behind a veil of blond hair, smiling shyly. Nikki Borud and Joan Kavacek, both plump and loud, appeared to function in tandem, as one giggling, mincing persona. Alice Wright, pretty, large teeth covered by braces, was reading when I came in and continued to read quietly until the class started. When she closed the book, I saw that it was *Jane Eyre*, and I felt a moment of envy, the envy of first discovery.

At last one of them was wearing perfume, which on the warm June day mingled with the room's dust and made me sneeze twice. Jessica, Ashley, Nikki, and Joan were dressed for something other than a poetry workshop. Adorned with trailing earrings, lip gloss, eye shadow, T-shirts messages that exposed their bare bellies of various size and shapes, they had strutted rather than walked into the room. The Gang of Four, I thought. The comfort, the safety, the group.»

The writer captures the almost explosive power of potentials in a group of pre-adolescent girls, emphasizing the marked differences between each of them and a quest for a flaunted distinction and, at the same time, their awareness of its effect on the other girls. Nobody can say what these potentials will become in time. Like the story of every single life, even just because of the effects of social recognition and the necessary social bond, many of these potentials will be channelled and will become specialized. What matters, to the end of our analysis, is to explore if the selection of potentials is mainly the outcome of partially independent choices or the result of selective processes that individuals sustain. According to research based on the observation and the analysis of clinical cases, I hold that, in the case of female individuation processes, a progressive reduction of possibilities ending in their alienation and the definition of gender disadvantages tend to dominate, showing in that a remarkable difference from male identification processes. This prevalence, as I have formulated in the hypothesis, does not only seem to be socially legitimized but is also embodied by women.

The piece of literature I have presented above seems to effectively express an issue that worries parents, teachers and psychologists who want to support an emancipation that appreciates gender difference rather than turning it into a minority, or worse, levelling it into one single model, the male model. Ten years ago I formulated a hypothesis about the *atrophy* of girls' potentials as they become adolescents, which I explored in a field-research conducted with tools from clinical practice and ethnography[1]. The data I gathered about pre-adolescent and adolescent girls' potentials and capacities to conceive and sustain long-term plans can still be used to comparatively explore what has actually happened in the life of the girls who took part in the research. Loneliness and fear about the future seemed to make them live in a dull, scarcely meaningful and too constrained world, from which they escape through fantasies of being successful, the desire for romantic relationships with the other gender and by eluding the conflicts that reality imposed on them. It seemed difficult for them to succeed all by themselves. Their mothers magnified their uncertainties, colluded with their fears or kept them under control. Their fathers seemed rather aloof and absent. They did not feel they were responsible for giving their daughters some kind of protection, showing a crisis of the paternal role where lack of presence replaced patriarchal authoritarianism.

In the research I tried to capture the critical steps that outline gender disadvantage. I wanted to identify the origins of this disadvantage by studying when and how it begins to take shape and to be determined.

At that point I started a phase of observation and exploration of the phenomenon in my work as a psychotherapist and clinical consultant to professional roles. It allowed me to highlight a new element of analysis concerning the relationship between psychic exaltation and psychic ostracism.
I use the term ostracism by referring to the "*ostrakon*", a clay shard on which it was marked the name of someone who, by getting too much public visibility, had to be fought and ostracised in Athen's society (Cleisthstenes, 510 BC). This practice, originated as a custom, spread so much as to become a rule and, as such, had to be monitored and approved by public vote. In my use of the term here, as I relate it to the phenomenon of forcing women to be a minority, by psychic ostracism I mean a silent socio-cultural process that remarkably affects self-expression and self-realization and ends in internal mortification and the social normalization of exclusion processes. We are confronted with a phenomenon in which social and psychic dimensions are strongly interconnected and inextricable. It is not a new phenomenon, in fact it is a long-lasting one through history, which makes it look natural. What makes it clear and particularly active in the clinical cases from
my practice is possibly the fact that it is confirmed and enhanced, as we are faced with a marked increase in women's capacities that nowadays is possible through the declaration of rights and the opportunities that are available as never before. All the time I see bright and well-prepared young women, who graduated successfully from university, despite their life conditions that are not always easy; professionally creative women capable of innovation, able to conceive projects and who fill demanding and important roles where they are responsible for the work of many other people. All of them are praised when they achieve successful results. They are told: "You are good", "girls study more", "women do their best if they want to succeed", but then, in fact, nothing else happens, in their own development and emancipation processes. Things come to a standstill. Because of their experiences of denial, a lack of actual recognition of their abilities, and social ostracism that is psychically incorporated, women end up questioning themselves and raising questions about their own abilities. In the end, a feeling of not being able prevails, their self-esteem feels under attack and, as

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1 Weber C. (2004). *Inventare se stesse. Adolescenti sulla soglia della civiltà planetaria*. Roma: Meltemi

a result, they experience fatigue in trying again and raising the ante. Seemingly their abilities and expertise can be prised only if they are considered separately from a process of acknowledgement. In this way, the space of sense-making – which is the basis of becoming oneself – is compromised. Not only are the actual abilities of women higher than in the past, but also the expectations on young and pre-adolescent girls are emphasized by the experiences conveyed by the media and affect their processes of growth. The media influence has an impact on many levels and in a variety of circumstances in the process of growth and individuation, ranging from the exaltation of some characteristics that can be identified in early childhood to a performance informed by exceptionality. All this must influence the structure of expectations and does bring the balance to a level that can hardly be maintained. Hence, often adults feel disappointment and impatience as they are confronted with what does not happen, until they repress expectations themselves. On the other hand, for the adolescent girls it becomes difficult to recognize the performing power of their own desiring force which becomes evanescent as the attention on them fades away. From subjects of desire girls risk becoming objects of desire, a delayed form of ostracism that leads them, in many cases, to present themselves as objects of desire so as to ensure their presence and visibility. Fathers, husbands, boyfriends, brothers, friends, bosses, and colleagues are ready to praise the success of their daughters, girlfriends, sisters, friends, wives and women colleagues, if what these latter do can be viewed as being exceptional. However, it is another story to shift from the event or the events that confirm certain abilities and potentials to a dialogical inclusion that negotiates with the established order, with power positions that continue to belong to men, despite the socio-economic data indicating their crisis.

Analytic and diagnostic indicators

In the theoretical and analytic picture I have outlined, it is possible to formulate a review, though partial and provisional, of the affective/relational correlates of the effects of psychic ostracism in female individuation.

One of the elements to be observed concerns how the women's ability to conceive and sustain long-term plans in their lives is approached. The manifestations of psychic ostracism seem to be particularly triggered by women's constructive plans, even more so when these plans appear to be fertile. There is an alarm every time that female thought express ideas and words autonomously. The ability to conceive long-term plans is such because it is characterized by originality. Psychic ostracism tends to generate inhibition and to encourage mimetic behaviours based on the imitation of male styles. It is a very common strategic orientation that hinders female affective codes and styles and, therefore, their specific potential for innovation. Because of its repressive power, the effects of psychic ostracism regarding the ability to conceive and sustain long-term plans seem to be connected with a remarkable range of neurotic disorders that can be found in women's histories and experiences.

The obstacles to the ability to conceive and sustain plans seem fairly connected with a denial function that psychic ostracism toward women causes at the level of the affective codes. In this case, what can be observed is a mortification of affective pluralism and its varied composition, which produces a stereotyped specialization. The expectation/attribution dynamics tend to channel the potential forms of expression and end up regarding all affective manifestations of women which don't comply with the standards. There are many personality disorders that come from a deprivation of expressive potentials, in particular those caused by the women's needs to be accepted.

If we consider the ways by which younger girls, adolescent girls, and women invent themselves, i.e., by paying attention to the archetypes of their individuation, psychic ostracism seems to act strongly in the autonomy/dependence balance. What we observe is a particular limitation of the possibilities for expression of the specific feminine in subjection. Although everyone needs dependence as a condition for autonomous self-realization, in the case of women, submission to male archetypes seems to be dominant, so much so as to condition individuation. Among all the male archetypes, the most influential one in this psychodynamic process appears to be the paternal archetype. In addition to that, conditioning does not carry only the archetypical dimension. Through the therapeutic relationship it is possible to find, especially in primary relations, some traces that damage female autonomy. The story of female individuation is therefore marked with signs of subjugation and submission which sometimes reach such levels that it is difficult to establish what kind of individuation might have occurred had it been informed by more autonomy and less subjugation.

The implications of psychic ostracism regarding individuation are closely connected with those generated at the level of bisexuality. A particularly relevant indicator is vulnerability. If the last-mentioned

can be associated with the capacity for containment, it might express female aspects of sexuality. The importance of those aspects for the good exercise of authority is determinant, as a circular balance with a mainly male manifestation of sexuality persists. When psychic ostracism ends up relegating and characterizing vulnerability as a weakness, it does not only reduce women's possibilities to express a balanced authority, but it open the way to bad forms of exercising authority that are based on a structure dominated by the male expression of sexuality. The individual and social costs of exclusion, domination, and monopoly in the exercise of authority are evident both in psychic and collective terms.

Psychic ostracism toward the female capacity for containing and working through ambiguity is the last provisional indicator that I have considered in this analysis. It indicates a tendency to a reduction and neutralization of the complexity of relational and experiential phenomenologies. A relative need to decrease ambiguity appears to be important in every decision and in order to be effective in any field. But simplification and specialization – that are in fact are translated into a denial of the ambiguous nature of phenomena and experience – often generate a significant number of psychic difficulties among women, as well as among men who put into place an ostracism about processing ways that might be advantageous, but when simplified in an apparently convenient way, end up causing stress, neurosis and disorders to men too. Psychic ostracism, depending on the partial indicators that have been analyzed here, takes up the characters of a relational pragmatics that has been historically validated but is particularly costly for those imposing it

Abstract

This contribution considers the evolutionary possibilities of conflict in gender individuation. Matching of differences is effective but only on the condition that each subject learns and develops a positive meaning of the conflict. This work, based on a few case-studies, presents women's failure to sustain long term projects in their lives, with durable change. Girls are not sufficiently stimulated by their mothers to continue investing energy in their everyday behaviour and gender roles. As a result the difficulty of relating to different affective codes and conceptions deriving from gender leads to a regressive stance and the alienation of one's own power, as a consequence of *psychic ostracism* . I have studied the inter-generational transferences of the female model which influences the reciprocal recognition of affective codes, of sexual development and of gender. I use psychoanalytical categories to understand specific problems about the difficulty of one's own individuation project. I refer to Italian psychoanalysts, Franco Fornari and Luigi Pagliarani, who both worked on the evolution of conflict. I utilize Fornari's concept of *affective codes* in relationships and Pagliarani's suggestion of the *bisexual nature* of every individual and collective project. The female plans have to be thought by the mother's and father's minds. At first, the female project asserts itself in the relationships of siblings. My study is based on Pagliarani's episteme of *puer* and his study of the *original lack* and the *affective ambiguity* in the psychodynamic processes of dependence and autonomy. I integrated the research on conflicts with Judith Butler's study on *psychic life of power* and *language speech acts*. Furthermore, this contribution creates a dialogue between Daniel Stern's study of *vital forces* and relational resonance in the traumatic experience of violence.

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