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Feminist Practices, Radical Politics

Feminism seems to be gaining momentum in many countries, but most organisations and groups are still working on the basis of patriarchal standards. The 'feminisation of politics' includes different elements, which all aim to change the way activism and politics (in a broad sense) are done. A feminist way of organising includes considerations such as gender balance, building power through cooperation, collective leadership, democratic decision-making, care (for peers, for dependent beings and for oneself), intersectional understanding of issues, and non-violence.

‘In the midst of the feminist revolution, we need to make a decision about whether our projects and organisations let themselves be permeated by it or if they try to hold it back and suppress it.’

(Caren Tepp, city councillor and activist of Ciudad Futura – Rosario, Argentina)

We live in a patriarchal society where certain men have privileges, and this is true also for the political left. These are white CIS men, not poor, educated, and so on. But privilege is not an all-or-nothing feature. It is a matter of degree, and works through many dimensions, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, origin, cultural background, age, physical aspect, and many others. Some people are more privileged in one or more dimensions, while less privileged in others. Knowing where people are located in terms of privilege can become messy and it depends on the context. But privilege is a real thing.

The good news is that feminism seems to be gaining momentum in many places, although in some of them it is harder to use the feminist language, and it aims at addressing these kinds of inequalities (and oppressions) that go beyond class. One of the challenges of our times is how we can go from simply understanding feminism as a matter of ‘giving women more space’ to changing different sets of practices based on different axes of privilege. The argument of this paper is that feminism, understood as a theory and a practice that has the elimination of privilege as its main aim, should also permeate activism and political action. It should help give unprivileged people (not only women) a greater role in politics, and help those with privileges adapt to the ways of doing that are more common among the less privileged ones. In the domain of politics, it should incentivise the implementation of feminist policies, but also, and mainly, change the way we build relationships with each other, so that everyone can feel at home in making political decisions and building social change.

Here, politics and political action are understood not only as institutional politics but as any activity related to achieving change in our communities, to deciding together about how we want to live together. This element is key for a feminist perspective, since the distinction between public matters and private matters is seen as problematic, regardless of where those boundaries are set. The patriarchal order is built and sustained through institutional decisions and legislation where ‘public’ decisions (according to a liberal framework) have a great impact on our private lives, although they are supposed to refrain from that. And at the same time ‘politics’ are sustained through practices of collective organising and also of daily individual interactions. The way we run our families, friendship relationships, neighbourhood interactions, activism, public communication, advertising, and so on can also help reinforce a patriarchal order, or achieve the opposite. Therefore, these domains are also, in some sense, political.

I write this paper from a perspective of a feminist researcher, but also as a committed activist. The reason why this is made explicit is that I do not believe that it is possible to detach one element from the other, and in that sense the article is both prescriptive and descriptive, as well as situated. I am writing as a

Latin American woman living in the Spanish Kingdom, who is both a university researcher and lecturer, but also an activist in the municipalist movement. Most of the reflections in this paper are the product of a learning process that goes far beyond myself: different groups I used to participate in at Barcelona en Comú, a network of municipalist activists working on the feminisation of politics where I am active at the moment, a long list of researchers and activists with whom I had and still have the enormous luck to relate with, among others. My aim here is to share some thoughts that come from political practice and also from more traditional research, and to contribute to an ongoing discussion about how to make politics and activism more feminist.

In addition, before we dive into the topic, a remark about the relationship between feminism and municipalism must be made. The municipalist movement⁰¹ has been reflecting and experimenting on the topic for some time and I do not think this is a coincidence. There are at least two reasons why this connection has been a natural (although not easy) one. On the one hand, the local level is a privileged arena from which to start implementing a feminist agenda, and this is the domain where municipalism works. It is much easier to implement feminist practices in small-scale political projects than it is in, for example, national political parties or movements. On the other hand, both feminism and municipalism share the goal of transforming, not only political outcomes, but also political practices. They share the principle of changing the way politics is done.⁰² In this sense, feminism also helps municipalism in achieving its aims by providing a framework for changing political practices. Nevertheless, the fact that such a natural connection exists does not mean that the ideas and practices of the feminisation of politics are not relevant to how we do politics in other kinds of collectives and organisations beyond the municipalist area; quite the opposite. I hope the reflections in the following sections contribute to the debates in those domains, too.

Why 'feminisation' of politics?

As introduced above, feminising politics is not about simply having more women in positions of visibility or responsibility. It refers to changing the way politics is done. Then you may wonder, why using the word 'feminisation' instead of 'feministisation' of politics, or 'depatriarchalisation' of politics, as some have argued? Leaving aside the issue of how difficult it is for a human being to pronounce these words (which is not a minor issue), I believe using the term feminisation still makes sense for several reasons.

But let us first focus a bit more on why the use of the term 'feminisation' is problematic. To start with, there is always a danger of using language to give visibility to certain people and not to others (e.g. why would we focus

01 <http://fearlesscities.com/en>

02 For further reflections about the relationship between municipalism and feminism, see the report 'Feminise Politics Now!'

<https://www.rosalux.eu/en/article/1586.feminise-politics-now.html> and article 'Municipalism and the Feminization of Politics' <https://roarmag.org/magazine/municipalism-feminization-urban-politics-in-Roar-Magazine>.

on women and not on disabled black women or trans women? Why are we choosing the axis of gender and not the one of class?). Furthermore, talking about feminisation is a reference to women that not only hides the diversity of experiences within the category, but also assumes that there is such a thing as ‘women’, where in fact gender is a continuum (Butler 1990) and even our brains are a mosaic of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits (Joel and Vikhanski 2019). In addition, gender roles are socially constructed and – the critique says – they should be deconstructed instead of taken as given when suggesting ways of deconstructing the privileges associated with them.

Nevertheless, we do live in a world where there are enormous differences between women and men and where social roles do exist, both from the perspective of social expectations and from one of individual experience. Statistically speaking, people who define themselves as women do feel more comfortable with certain ways of doing things (cooperation, care, and so on) and people who define themselves as men do feel more at home with other things (agency, confrontation, and so on). This is something that even the gender mosaic account mentioned before recognises and paying attention to current social roles does not deny the mosaic thesis, focused on individual brains. Ignoring these facts and acting as if there were no distinct social roles would be similar to denying trans people their legal rights because we would like to abolish gender. That said, the feminisation-of-politics approach defends that while we struggle to change gender roles and stereotypes it is a good idea to fight for men having to adapt to the ways of doing that are more common among women, because this is a real (and huge) axis of privilege and oppression.

Two additional reasons why it is important to have men assuming at least some traditionally feminine ways of doing are the following. First, these ways are intrinsically desirable for everyone: it is better to work on the basis of cooperation and compassion than on that of confrontation and individualism. One could reply that if these features traditionally associated with ‘the feminine’ are based on universal values, then the fact that women are more inclined towards them does not matter, and we should simply refer to those values.⁰³ Again, such an argument misses the point, because the information of who is usually incarnating those values and being punished for it is not irrelevant. Second, under a logic similar to affirmative action, it is only fair to have men adapting to a certain extent to the ways of doing of women after centuries of women adapting to masculine ways of doing in certain domains, like politics.⁰⁴

03 Actually, some features that are ‘more feminine’ like ‘Against Empathy by Paul Bloom’ (Bazalgette 2017) might be less desirable and some that are ‘more masculine’ might be important, such as leadership. Nevertheless, I believe that this discussion depends to a great extent on

different understandings of the terms, like the discussion about leadership and power will show below.

04 Here I use the term politics to refer to the traditional uses of the term, as something connected to public life.

What is the feminisation of politics about?

Feminising politics, as mentioned before, is not about feminine ways of doing as such, and it is not based on a superficial understanding of those differences. It is not about simply being nicer or smiling a lot, like ‘good girls’ do. It looks at how and why certain people behave in certain ways and which of those ways are more valuable for a political environment where everyone can have a space.

In addition, it is not, like some versions of liberal feminism may argue in public debates, about having women acting like men: having more CEOs, more prime ministers or more visible leaders in social movements. Quite often, the reason why certain women are able to reach those spaces and break the glass ceiling has to do with the fact that they adapt to the masculine ways of behaving and also with the fact that they are usually already privileged to some extent. The glass ceiling may be broken by white educated middle-class women, but not by any woman, by people of non-conforming gender, by racialised men, etc. As long as the rules of ‘success’ are defined by patriarchal standards, only a few will be able to ‘succeed’, and they will only do so as long as they adapt to those pernicious practices. Also, those who adapt and succeed are probably less likely to incarnate the values that we want to bring into politics.

Third, feminising politics is not something for women. It is a project for anyone who is interested in having more open, horizontal, and accessible ways of doing politics. This usually generates quite a lot of debate among different strands of feminism, where different positions are held about whether and to what extent feminism should focus on women or not. I believe here the project is concerned not so much with situating oneself within those debates (which is useful and interesting), but more with looking at some common elements that are connected to the practices of any such trend. Even radical feminists would argue, at least theoretically, that certain ways of doing are more connected to patriarchal standards and that these need to be rejected and reformed, both within the movement and beyond. Whether it is more useful to claim this is done for the sake of women or for all those less privileged is, in my view, a matter of strategy. Nevertheless, by no means can I address such a complex (and interesting) issue in this short text.

The feminisation of politics is concerned with changing structures, relationships, languages, times and priorities. It should be understood as a cross-cutting issue, affecting all the activities and areas of action of political (in a broad sense) organisation, and not just a goal that a group of obsessed feminists should struggle to pursue. It is a matter of democracy and fairness, and a project aimed at taking care of relationships in politics, and not simply aimed at achieving social, economic, or environmental justice.

The problems with power and leadership

There are many dimensions to the project of feminising politics and they are all connected. Some of them are the ones identified in the report *Feminist Politics Now!* (Roth, Zugasti Hervás, and De Diego Baciero 2019), where we analysed feminist practices in municipalist organisations. These dimensions

are: gender balance, care, power, leadership, democracy, intersectionality, and non-violence. Here I will focus on two of them, power and leadership, which are closely linked to the core of patriarchal politics and where reflections from a feminist point of view are especially useful. These two elements have, of course, been analysed and practiced in the past by feminists. Nevertheless, mainstream practices in current political organisations, movements, and collectives still do not manage to shift towards more feminist ways of practicing power and leadership. Therefore, discussing them again cannot hurt.

In patriarchal politics power is understood as the ability to impose one's will on others and leadership is understood as a trait connected to commanding others. Leaders are those who have the political power and they are infallible, rational, strong, and executive. These are all characteristics that social role theory associates with men, while female roles have been traditionally connected to the communal, the nurturing, the 'doing the work behind the scenes' capacity, the sensitive, the emotional (Eagly 1987).

This means, in practice, that women (and other non-privileged people) have a hard time when trying to seize power or practice leadership. They feel less inclined to practice patriarchal leadership, compared to their male peers (Maier 1999) and they usually feel less at home with the confrontational political practices and discourses that are at the core of how political power is understood (Ennser-Jedenastik, Dolezal and Müller 2017; Pratto, Stallworth and Sidanius 1997). In addition, when they try to adapt to patriarchal ways of leading, they suffer a *backlash effect* by, for instance being seriously penalised whenever they express emotions, as well as when they express no emotions at all (Brescoll 2016). In addition, because of *impostor syndrome*, a condition that affects women more than men (Clance and Imes 1978), it is hard to find women willing to step up and lead if they feel that too much is being asked of them. It is quite common for women to feel less qualified than their (sometimes less qualified) male peers to take on certain responsibilities or jobs.

At the same time, it is easy to identify some intrinsically negative features of that kind of leadership. Although it can be useful in moments of crisis and where quick reactions are needed, it is less stable in the long term (everyone depends on the leader), it is more prone to making mistakes (since it is not based on collective intelligence) and it makes the group more vulnerable (an individual is easier to attack than a collective) and traditionally tends to be power-centralizing and aggressive towards individuals contributing to de-mobilise people, especially those who might be more critical and less submissive (reinforcing, again, the probability of making mistakes).

Something similar happens with the patriarchal conception of power. When power is treated as a scarce resource (if I have more power, you have less), competition is the rule of the game. Confrontation becomes the main practice and the goal of politics of achieving justice becomes a battle. Such an environment is not only negative for those involved (highly stressful and aggressive), but also for political communities for several reasons. First, because often battles (especially political battles) end up focusing on what is not important, for example personal characteristics of the people involved, issues that generate a purely emotional response, and so on. It becomes just a matter of strategy and efficiency, and not a matter of principles. Second,

because it is also less stable: if the only thing that holds together a group is its enemies, then as soon as there is no enemy to defeat, the group is likely to discover its internal conflicts.

Feminist power and leadership

But power and leadership can be understood in other ways and I believe it is a great idea for feminists to re-appropriate those terms. It is not a matter of doing politics without leadership, but a matter of finding other styles of leadership. It is not a matter of renouncing power, but a matter of understanding power in a feminist way.

Feminist leadership is based on, among other things, recognising and giving importance to vulnerability, the visibilisation of interdependency, recognising the existence of conflicts and the need to coordinate and inspire others, but without imposing our will on them. This conception of leadership is very close to what Ronald Heifetz refers to as ‘adaptive leadership’. According to the author, political problems are usually not technical problems with just one right answer. Normally, the answer is not clear (and usually, even the problem is not clear) and we are dealing with an ‘adaptive problem’. In these scenarios, leadership is the quality of people who are able to mobilise others to find solutions to those challenges, in spite of the disagreements and the uncertainty about the situation. In the words of Heifetz (Heifetz 2010, 21):

‘Leadership that mobilizes adaptive progress requires ongoing reality testing and a public honesty that mobilizes people in polities and organizations to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity and the need to take responsibility for tough trade-offs in their lives. We need people to lead who dream well, but who also plant their feet in reality and test reality daily for new information that demands midcourse correction, and sometimes a revision of the overall mission and strategy’.

Political power can also be understood in a constructive and non-confrontational way that is more in harmony with a feminist project. Power can be built with others, by sharing, empowering, strengthening relationships, and mobilising collectively. This clearly applies to those who are part of ‘our team’ but also to the rest of society. Exercising feminist power to achieve social change does not aim at destroying an enemy, but at including as many people as possible, in spite of the differences. But this does not mean ignoring those differences. Quite on the contrary, it means giving visibility to them, making space for conflicts to be understood and processed in a constructive way, and learning from them. It also means sharing responsibility, trusting others and actively listening to their points of view.

Conclusions: How to move forward?

In practical terms, many things can be done in order to start shifting our practices towards more feminist ways of doing. Within organisations and institutions, a basic element is establishing clear rules and structures that

favour feminist leadership and power. Having collective executive bodies, clear democratic decision-making mechanisms, rotating responsibilities, creating mediation devices to deal with conflicts in a constructive way, and so on.

In addition, many other supplementary measures can be taken, such as organising activities that can help strengthen relationships between comrades, mapping expertise beyond the visible faces and usual suspects, training (even mandatory ones), mentoring, changes in communication strategies, and many others.

But the real question or challenge for most people interested in changing these practices within their organisations, collectives, or institutions is not what to do, but how to start moving. How can we introduce these discussions and goals in our inherited patriarchal contexts? I do not believe there is anything like ‘the best strategy’ but as a concluding reflection I will share a few ideas that may be helpful.

First of all, we should never go into the fight alone. If feminist changes need to occur within a collective or institution, the first step is to mobilise a group of people who will support the project and especially those involved. This is important, not only to make a proposal, but also to support and defend those who might ‘get into trouble’ because they are challenging traditional ways of doing. These people are usually catalogued as ‘problematic’ and they need collective support. That is the case, especially in the case of organisations or collectives that see themselves as progressive, because usually everyone pays lip service to feminist values and criticisms about the distance between theory and practice are normally difficult to digest.

Second, and also connected to the previous point, we may want to open a strategic discussion about the issues, in the right context, instead of (just) focusing on daily practices. Reminding comrades and colleagues of how we would like to do things in a feminist way on a daily basis is important, but our energies might be drained by doing only that. Making sure feminist values and goals are included in the strategic planning of the collective is key and as this strategic long-term planning does not usually occur, the first step is to create that space. Within the strategic planning, two more elements are to be considered. First, resources (time, budget, and so on) need to be assigned to changing feminist practices. And second, prioritisation is key: finding a way of making feminist practices a priority, when these issues come into conflict with other considerations. One way of doing this is by making concrete decisions and having clear rules that will regulate, for example, how subsequent decisions are going to be made, when certain activities are going to happen, who will be responsible for what, and so on.

Third, asking for external help is very useful. Sometimes having someone from outside of our organisations analysing what we do, sharing their knowledge or supporting our activists is advantageous because our internal dynamics may become too difficult to address from the inside alone. Building networks with other organisations and activists, learning together and staying in touch with people with the same interests and facing similar challenges is a good idea, not only in terms of what we can achieve for our organisations, but also to feel that there are others asking the same questions and struggling to change patriarchal practices. Just like us.

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