

Discourse, Truth, Government

Angela Putino

translated by Elena Basile

L'auteure considère dans Vérité, discours, gouvernement deux problèmes qui sont reliés : les rapports entre le discours et la vérité et la relation entre le discours et le gouvernement. D'abord, Putino suggère que dans le discours féministe actuel, la vérité ne se situe pas comme une pratique de confession qui fait état d'un moi authentique, mais plutôt comme une pratique critique qui témoigne du système sémiologique dans lequel les femmes vivent et en même temps s'interrogent sur les implications problématique de ce discours sur leur vie. La vérité, dans le discours féministe, s'inscrit dans l'éclairage de savoirs disciplinaires marqués par une position genrée. Ensuite, Putino indique qu'un tel éclairage est nécessairement politique et qu'il met en évidence les liens sous-jacents qui commandent les stratégies de savoir sur les pratiques de domination. Dans cette perspective, Putino réévalue les relations discursives du pouvoir à l'oeuvre dans le mouvement italien des femmes, et met en garde contre une assimilation trop facile des féministes dans les discours sur la gouvernance, qui remontent aussi loin que jus qu'au 16^e siècle et qui prétendent « guider », tandis que les relations entre les femmes sont mises à l'abri de la critique dans la mesure où elles sont considérées comme restreintes aux confins du pouvoir mâle. Putino insiste sur le caractère intransigeant de la liberté des femmes, liberté qui s'exerce aussi bien entre elles que dans l'ensemble de la société, permettant ainsi à une certaine créativité de s'exercer dans les interventions qui mettent en jeu les relations de pouvoir contemporaines.

Translator's Foreword

I came across Angela Putino's short essay on governmentality a year ago while writing a long essay on the translation and dissemination of Italian feminist discourse(s) in the Anglo-American academy. I decided to translate it after considering that hardly any translation of Italian feminist writing has appeared in English since a happy, if short-lived, flourish of publications in the early 1990's, such as those by De Lauretis, Bono and Kemp, and Anderlini-D'Onofrio and O'Healy. Beyond, however, a desire

to redress an imbalance in the direction of the cultural exchange between Italy and North-America, my translation is specifically motivated by Putino's text's relevance to an ongoing inter-national feminist dialogue on issues of power and governmentality. Putino's critical analysis of the power-knowledge nexus characterizing Italian feminist discourse is relevant to other local contexts (particularly where feminism has gained relatively stable institutional recognition) for both its methodological approach and for its passionate insistence on the creative potential of what she calls "intransigent freedom." Her essay makes creative use of Deleuzian and Foucauldian analytical tools while remaining grounded in the materiality of feminist political practices.

The second half of the 1990's – Putino's article points out – has witnessed a general "settling in" of the political victories of preceding decades. Generally, feminist initiatives now enjoy enough cultural recognition to be able to negotiate their spaces and economies within institutions and markets. This "settling in" is rendering more urgent a rethinking of the ideological implications of certain practices, and requires a renewed effort to rearticulate them according to evolving relations of power. Putino critically re-examines the discursive relations of power at work in the Italian women's movement and warns against a too easy assimilation of feminist practices to discourses of governmentality, and of "guidance," which date back to the 16th century. She argues that the Italian movement's hegemonic emphasis on an originary "maternal" symbolic order, with its connotations of care and nurture for the living being, sits in an uneasy proximity to contemporary strategies of biopower, and effectively shelters from critique relations of power amongst women, because the latter are understood as operating beyond the confines of the death-oriented "law of the Father."¹

To counteract such a tendency, Putino insists that feminists keep exercising an "intransigent freedom" both amongst themselves and in society at large. For Putino, such an "intransigent freedom" involves practices of agonism and parrhesia, notions which imply, respectively, a practice of "reciprocal incitation and struggle" (Foucault 222), and a practice of telling the truth by means of "telling everything" (Putino). Putino suggests that it is through such practices that creative interventions in contemporary relations of power are rendered possible, thus allowing for a permanent questioning and shifting of the very grounds of contemporary biopolitical hegemony.

A note on my translation of “libertà femminile” and of “sessuato.” In Italian “femminile” has both biological and social connotations. However, in conjunction with “libertà” this word has come to indicate a historically saturated political concept, tied to the here and now of feminist political practices. The political notion of “libertà femminile” is historical – rather than exclusively biological or exclusively social – because it exposes and explodes the contradiction at work in the genealogy of modern liberal individual freedom, whereby the apparent gender-neutral nature of the individual turns out to be historically gendered in the masculine. It is quite a challenge then, to convey the peculiar historicity of such a notion in English, particularly when Anglophone feminist discourse has been careful to build a vocabulary that would distinguish – and oppose – “sex” from “gender,” the biological “reality” of sex from the social construction of gender. In English “femminile” can be translated either with “female” or with “feminine,” and since its first appearance in the early 1990’s “libertà femminile” has alternatively been translated by De Lauretis with “female freedom,” and by Holub with “feminine freedom” (in Miceli-Jeffries). Generally, I prefer to follow in the wake of De Lauretis. However, I have also found a third way, which is to translate the concept with “women’s freedom.” I have used this translation when Putino emphasizes women’s historical agency. As for “sessuato,” although the word can and has been translated with “sexed,” I have preferred to translate it with “gendered.” Putino in fact consistently uses “genere” (which is a recent Italian importation of the English “gender”) as a synonym for “sessuato.”

Discourse, Truth, Government

Discourse and truth

Within feminism, it has become of crucial importance that we consider truth as a critical competence in discourse. This means, first of all, that in telling the truth we have no intention of bringing to the surface what is secret or hidden in our gender, but that we address only what constitutes a problem for us on social, communicative and symbolic planes. We intend to tell the truth about “man,” about relations of power, and about the systems of signs we live in. It is only from here that we can derive the truth of our position. Somehow, what we bring into focus about ourselves does not stem from a process of self-revelation, self-confession or self-knowledge; rather, it is the effect produced by an act of withdrawal: we do

not add to what others say about us, what is important to us is to investigate and control the different kinds of knowledge² we find ourselves involved in and on which, of course, we depend. This means that we take as our points of departure the conditions of possibility of thought, the forms of disciplinary knowledges, their formation and their boundaries. It also means, however, that we do not treat any of these conditions or forms as an uncontaminated foundation, but that we consider them in their effects of change, which we ourselves have already rendered possible. It is in this latter sense, and through this process, that a female genealogy acquires value,³ in that it functions as a critical awareness of disciplinary knowledges carried out from a gendered position.

We, women, are the "people" who have marked a crisis of functioning. The crisis has had its genesis in forms of political practice, that is, in discursive relations among women, which have allowed us to focus on a series of questions pertaining to existing institutions, knowledges and powers. We noticed that what had been silently accepted before no longer held. On the contrary it became an object of concern, and it was formalized into a problematic discourse: we worked on what had until then functioned through silent acceptance.

If we cannot then, in my opinion, speak about a feminist hermeneutics, but about a configuration of the gendered position of discourse by means of constantly altering given hermeneutics – a form of nomadism within them – it is also true that we cannot understand the significance and the critical dimension of the thought of sexual difference without making reference to a plane which radically differs from a strictly cognitive one. The problematization of the question of gender is rendered possible by recourse to, and intersection with, what has been called "political practice," that is, the plane of relationships among women.

On Conduct, or, On the Government of Things, Souls, Communities

If we carefully analyse what the exercise of power is (and set aside the notion of power as something that can be possessed as property – Foucault's lesson cannot be forgotten here), we see that power is nothing but conduct, in that it guides, or leads by the hand, people's possibilities of action. This means that power, today, is not to be recognized for its violence, but for an exercise which implies answers, and thus presumes some freedom of action in those it exerts itself upon. There is, therefore, no power in relation to slaves: when determination is absolute, we are not in

the presence of power, but of coercion. The best way to explain power is to link it directly to a capacity to respond. Power produces a range of consequences and possibilities; it is thus to be understood as government, in the meaning this term assumes – as Foucault reminds us – in the sixteenth century: “government’ did not refer only to political structures or the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed” (Foucault 221).

The exercise of power, then, is government in that it allows the structuring of people’s possible field of action. Today power has to be located on this plane: essentially it refers to the manner in which one guides and directs the actions of others. It is an action upon actions. This makes it necessary that the guided subjects have before them an open space of projects, reactions, effects, inventions. As paradoxical as it may sound, it seems to me that often only this kind of relation – a relation with the relations of power – produces important creative results; probably also because desire measures itself against a process of resistance. In short, we need to keep open the set of possible combinations which, grafted onto power games, move from an inclusive compliance with “guiding” towards an inventiveness apparently driven by an “outside,” an “exteriority.” This is what Virginia Woolf already understood of women as “outsiders.”⁴ In short, especially where it functions as guidance, we should understand government as neither self-sufficient, nor self-embodied, at least if we are aiming at moments of invention. I say this because it seems to me that if we separate the axis of power from that of government, and make woman assume an originary capacity to govern while confining man to an abstract “power,” we risk reaching a dead-end of creativity and desire in the relations of “knowledge and government” amongst ourselves.⁵ Returning to Foucault: it may be useful to recall that we are always coming to terms with behaviours that are guided and directed, and that we are everywhere entrenched in a complex set of reciprocal relationships with modalities of government, be they assessed globally or locally. In this regard, no space should be sheltered from a permanent capacity of analysis and diagnosis (not even the space of relationships among women). Nor is it possible to assume the existence of uncontaminated and originary spaces, even when they move towards forms of management of conduct – particularly when they appear as an attempt to reduce rules and regulations.⁶ We cannot assume that these latter can be sheltered from critical awareness, that is, from the risk of truth. What has by now become a problem – and thus needs

theorization – within the spaces of relations amongst women (but, we should explicitly add, also within those spaces of female government where different registers of knowledge, communication and finalized activities intersect) is a necessity to ensure that even here female freedom act with its own intransigence and not comply with that lack of agonism⁷ that masks itself as non-competition. Desire, even female desire, feeds upon a capacity for agonism, which is frequently one with courage; truth, no doubt, lives in courage and agonism. In what, then, has women's freedom been intransigent?

On the theoretical plane, female freedom has acted with cautious diffidence towards current hermeneutics and traditional "guides" offered by "professional" ideologies and fields of knowledge. This has allowed us to work on a discourse of truth which was built from within the registers it nonetheless discarded.⁸ We realized that cuts were possible only if we admitted to the preliminary condition and provocation constituted by our connection with a series of fields of knowledge, institutions, cultures.

It has become more and more important to consider female extraneity as the outside of an inside. At the same time it has also been vital to see one's own resistance to consenting to internal bonds. One's own resistance, then, is precisely gender specific.⁹

This phenomenon has, in turn, been accompanied by a subtle awareness of the networks connecting practices of government to strategies of knowledge and to communicative and symbolic processes. Although Foucault has persuasively pointed out such a nexus in a few well known texts, I believe, however, that it is women who have examined in detail and with obstinate passion the main connections and the dangerous implications of "disciplines," that is, the welding together of systems of communication, powers and objective aims.

There has existed among women a desire for truth, a necessity to understand their own present condition – also read as the space and the procedures within which they work – which has been expressed as a necessity to remain loyal to it, free from both illusions and disillusion. Relations with other women were sought, not only to confirm and verify this "outside of an inside," but also to keep the field of practice connected to a field of knowledge in the process of becoming clearer and more easily communicable. These practices intersected and sustained, or articulated, modes of communication and criteria of truth – we should ask, in fact, whether the practice of "starting from oneself"¹⁰ can be understood as a

criterion of truth made to emerge when a form of female knowledge began to settle in. It is here where practices, communication and knowledge are kept together, that a form of resistance, which is also a form of intransigent freedom, acquires meaning. This, after all, seems to me the value we have assigned to female freedom.

Today we run risks at the level of truth: how to tell it and with reference to what. If I guard feminist studies from a loss of critical awareness, it is because I want to intensify the problem where I think it is more important: within relations among women. Relations are now moving from the level of practices and authority – aspects which have been fundamental in our critical elaboration – to generalized forms of government, also in small settings such as groups and communities, even if only in the form of a sapiential guidance of souls.¹¹ For this kind of government there is a female demand that corresponds to a more general need to find comfort and safety in governments and in rules of “guidance” rather than of control. Women’s politics today risks being welded to the exigencies of government. I am not, however, questioning women’s participation in institutional or governmental structures in the narrow sense. I am, instead, pointing out that we find ourselves within a specific relation of power, guidance, concerning the conduct of others (men and women). Such a relation assumes many different facets, local and general dimensions, forms of “guidance” that cover, reveal and assess people’s modes of answer and action. I wish to underscore that once forms of finalization, which exceed those raised in a dialogue between only two people, are in place, all of us (men and women) are implied in a form of government activity. As guardians of souls, families, children, immigrants, communities, we govern – that is, we structure the field of action of others. In this framework of “guidance,” rather than emphasizing an originary and maternal female capacity to “guide,” we should instead insist on the refusal of freedom to submit to governments; we should concentrate on the unconditional desire for female freedom, which also means critical conscience. We need to resort to that mode of telling the truth whose ancient origin lies in the Greek word *parrhesia*, which means “to tell everything.” We must leave no space exempt from an obligation to tell the truth, only because it bears an originary aura of authority. There will be risks, but there is, today, a kind of nostalgic acquiescence for originary spaces, deprived of agonism, flattened into the dimension of “government.” Such spaces constitute a paralysis of invention, of desire, and of politics.

We can ask ourselves many questions. One of them, although of liberal origin, resonates differently when asked in the context of the freedom we are pursuing. The question is: “why is there a need to govern?”

Notes

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¹ This latter point is further expanded and argued in Putino’s latest book, *Mie amiche isteriche*.

² In Italian: “conoscenze e saperi.” The difference between “conoscenza” and “sapere” is close to the difference between “connaissance” and “savoir” in French, where the former indicates a pragmatic and/or intuitive experience of knowledge while the latter emphasizes its disciplinary status. Putino consistently uses both terms in the plural and frequently together. Depending on the context, I have sometimes emphasized the difference by translating “saperi” with “disciplinary knowledges.”

³ See note 5 for an explanation of the political context of this statement.

⁴ The exact wording in Italian is “estraneità femminile,” literally “female extraneity.” Putino uses here a theoretically oriented – and extensively utilized in Italian feminist discourse – translation of Woolf’s notion of women as constituting a “society of outsiders” (*Three Guineas* and *A Room of One’s Own*). I prefer Woolf’s original wording because of its familiarity to Anglophone readers.

⁵ Putino’s criticism is directed at the discursive effects of the “practice of sexual difference” where it is framed within “the symbolic order of the mother” – such is the title of an influential book (*L’ordine simbolico della madre*) written in 1991 by one of Italy’s most prominent feminist thinkers, Luisa Muraro. Following in the wake of Irigaray’s call for the inscription of sexed genealogies in culture, in the early nineties Italian feminists produced a discourse of sexual difference whereby a diffused and varied political practice of consciousness-raising in women-only groups was brought into the orbit of a highly theorized maternal symbolic. Crucially, such a discourse invoked a political foundation in the imaginary field of maternal care and nurturing, and constituted itself in opposition to a patriarchal exercise of power founded on the death-oriented “law of the

Father." Putino criticizes this discursive strategy because it tends to erase the specificity of power games at play in relations of governmentality, in which women themselves are actively implicated.

⁶ Again, Putino's reference is to the invocation of an originary maternal symbolic space as a model of political practice "above" or "beyond" the Law. "Sopra la legge" is in fact the title of one of the issues of *Via Dogana*, a popular feminist monthly.

⁷ Putino is here using another Foucauldian term taken from the Greek "agonisma," which means combat. The term implies "a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation" (Foucault 222).

⁸ Putino is here making reference to the two disciplinary and political fields within which Italian feminists have produced original work: philosophy (the Diotima Group which has worked on the Thought of Sexual Difference), and the ex-Communist Party (now D.S., Democratici di Sinistra, "Left-wing Democrats") within which the feminist movement has been the most vocal (see Bono and Kemp).

⁹ [author's note:] "Teresa de Lauretis' *Sui Generis. Scritti di Teoria Femminista* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1996) seems to me to be, amongst others, a book that thematizes this "outside of an inside." [The book Putino refers to is an anthology of translations of De Lauretis' representative essays of the last two decades – trans.].

¹⁰ Putino is here referring to a popular discursive practice in Italian feminism during the eighties, that of "partire da sé," which chronologically follows after the "consciousness raising groups" (gruppi di autocoscienza) of the seventies. It is a practice whereby a critical analysis of a social and political situation acquires discursive legitimation only through a careful positioning of the speaker's own present position in it: how she is affected by it and also how she affects it. It could, to some extent, be compared to the practice of "strategic essentialism."

¹¹ "Guida d'anime o sapienziale." The reference is to the kind of pastoral exercise of power typical of the Catholic Church in Italy since the 16th century. Putino is here referring to a tendency common to Italian feminist groups in the nineties, which consists of identifying a wise "elder" whom other women constantly refer to, and ask for advice. Putino identifies such a tendency as counterproductive to feminist creative intervention in contemporary relations of power.

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