

Interview with Chiara Bottici

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Chiara Bottici is professor of Philosophy and director of Gender Studies at The New School for Social Research and Eugene Lang College in New York. She is known for her work on feminism and anarchism. She is the author of several books, including *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), *Imaginal Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2014) and *Per tre miti, forse quattro* (Manni, 2016). With Jacob Blumenfeld and Simon Critchley, she has also edited *The Anarchist Turn* (Pluto Press, 2013) and in Spanish she has published *Manifiesto anarcasfeminista* (Ned, 2021) and *Anarcasfeminismo* (Ned, 2022).

LAURA LLEVADOT: *First, I would like to ask you about the title of your book, Anarcasfeminism. Regarding the question of anarchism, and then about the question of feminism, at first glance, the title might lead us to think that it is a text that attempts to reconstruct a sub-tradition within the anarchist tradition or a specific current of feminism that would be characterised, in contrast to liberal feminisms, by its anarchist postulates. But already, in the introduction itself, you problematise these questions. First, you tell us, it is not a question of reconstructing any tradition, since the very concept of tradition presupposes an arche, and that would be contradictory to your purpose. You say, then, that anarchism is not a tradition but a method. Could you explain to us what kind of methodology this is and how you have applied it yourself in the research you carry out in your book?*

CHIARA BOTTICI: When I first began researching for this book fifteen years ago, my desire was to reconstruct the anarchy-feminist tradition. That desire came from a sense of political urgency, even desperation. Even though the book is 300 pages long, I still think it is mainly a long and painful cry of desperation. Why? Because neofascists and right-wing politicians know very well why they have to attack women's rights, queer rights, transpeople's rights, workers' rights, racialised minorities, and even the defenders of the rights of

the earth. And yet, on the left, we are split and most often in conflict with each other: trans-inclusive versus trans-exclusive feminists, white versus black feminists, workers' rights versus migrants' rights, or even workers versus the rights of the earth. We are unable to relate across differences, because we always put in front of the false alternative between universalism versus particularism, a false dichotomy that reflects the West's will for power and its desire to classify all cultures and lifestyles that do not fit the modernity paradigm into a particularism destined to be swept away by the homogenising forces of history. It is within this context that reconstructing the history of the feminist tradition within anarchism seemed to me a promising way to break away from that false alternative and emphasise how, from its very inception, anarchists have been pretty consistent in emphasising that freedom is indivisible and thus we cannot be free unless everybody else on the planet is also equally free, which is another way of saying that Europe, the West or even women cannot be free on their own.

And yet, the more I researched, the more I realised that that very intuition animated a whole series of studies and philosophies that did not explicitly called themselves anarchist or anarcho-feminists, and yet articulated that point very clearly: intersectional feminists, like Audre Lorde or bell hooks did that for instance. Secondly, it also became clear to me that most anarcho-feminists were less interested in setting up a canon, or even a tradition, than they were in articulating possibilities of liberation in the particular contexts in which they operated. An example is Emma Goldman, who did not even call herself anarcho-feminist, because, in the context in which she was writing, feminism was associated with white, bourgeois movements such as that of the American suffragette, from which she distanced herself: If "feminism" means simply extending the privileges of a few bourgeois men to a few bourgeois women, while the great majority of people still live in a miserable condition, then I am not interested in "feminism". Hence the reason why, in my work, and since the very title of the book, feminism is combined with the prefix "anarcha", 'without *arche*', thus pointing to the necessity of rethinking feminism within an anarchist conceptual framework. What is that framework? That there is no *arche* that can explain, and thus also explain away, the oppression of women and LGBTQ+ people, with a variety of factors mutually reinforcing each other, so that you cannot fight sexism without addressing at the same time other forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, and speciesism.

All these forms of oppression have in common the idea that some bodies are ontologically superior to others and thus entitled to dominate: sexism, says Audre Lorde, the superiority of certain sexed bodies over others; racism, the superiority of people endowed with a certain biological traits; classism. Speciesism, we should add. That is what I meant by "anarchism" as a method: it is an invitation to look at the way in which different forms of oppression reinforce each other in different circumstances.

LL: *The second obligatory question is about your concept of feminism. On the one hand, you call into question the very concept of woman, advocating a queer feminism, which I think is certainly anarchic, and you prefer to speak of second sexes that encompasses all of us who are not cis men. But, on the other hand, you keep the 'a' of anarcha, which refers to some specific meaning of the feminine and seems to re-establish binarism. Why this apparent contradiction?*

CB: I speak of “second sexes” in the plural because I want to emphasise that it is not only women who are the object of oppression, but all those who are excluded from the category of (cis) man, meaning the only bodies who enjoy the privilege of counting as both the general name for humanity and as a specific sex. This position of privilege is still largely reflected in languages such as Italian and Spanish, where the masculine form counts as both the masculine and the neutral. If I had used anarcho-feminism, which is the most common expression, I would have reproduced a manocratic order, meaning a symbolic order where Man counts as both the neuter and a specific sex. Give the affinity between my position and queer theory, the most natural alternative would have been to use “anarchistx-feminism”, and some people have done that, which is a good idea in my view.

And yet, in this book, I am interested in addressing the specific way in which women (all kinds of women: transwomen, queer women, cis and heterosexual women) are the object of systematic discrimination. Notwithstanding the important turn of queer theory, and in particular its insistence on the fact that the very category of “woman” can itself be a source of oppression for women themselves, I think it is still pivotal to underline that are bodies today which are oppressed because they are perceived (whether rightly or not) as women’s bodies. Even within trans communities, it is unmistakable that transwomen are the object of discrimination and harassing, so much so that the term “transmisogyny” has been coined to argue that transphobia and misogyny can actually mutually reinforce each other. Look at children: if a little girl acts in a “manly” manner, she will be called a “tomboy” and praised for her audacity. If a little boy acts in a “feminine” way, he will be called a “pussy” and made fun of all the time. If a woman acts badly, she is a “bitch”. If a man acts badly, he is the “son of a bitch”. No matter what, it is women’s fault.

Can we then do both, anarchist feminism, to emphasise that some people perceived themselves as neither female nor male, and “anarchafeminism” to emphasise that some people perceive themselves as feminine and that the feminine is still considered a second sex? More than a contradiction, or a tension, I see this as a multiplication of possibilities. It has also been my strategy with language itself, particularly in Italian. There is a huge debate on whether we should use neutrals signs, such as the schwa, or the asterisk, instead of both the masculine and feminine form. I actually practice all possibilities: at times, I use asterisks and other neutral signs, at times the feminine for both men and women. For me the crucial point is not so much which strategy one

decides to adopt: the essential move is to question the use of the masculine as the uncontested gender that gets to count for the entire spectrum of human possibilities.

LL: *From the second part of your book you embark on the articulation of a 'trans-individual philosophy' that would try to think reality beyond hierarchies and binarisms like individual/collective; culture/nature; man/woman, etc. In the first instance you resort, partly as Deleuze did, to Spinoza and then to Simondon's concept of individuation and ontogenesis, to then end up in a conception close to that of the new materialisms. Could you explain how your 'transindividual philosophy' differs from that of Karen Barad, for example, and why you think it is necessary to articulate it in view of anarchafeminism?*

CB: My transindividual philosophy is, first and foremost, rooted in a critique of western metaphysics, and, in particular in a critique of the idea of the great chain of being. Ever since ancient Greek metaphysics, being has mainly been thought in terms of individuated being and arranged on a hierarchical ladder that placed Man on top of Woman on top of Slaves on top of Animals on top of Plants on top of inanimate matter. The two presuppositions that made such an idea so powerful and so persistent in its capacity to hierarchically order beings are methodological individualism (considering being primarily as individuated beings) and the body versus mind dualism.

As Sylvia Wynter, among others, argued, it is precisely the dogma of the non-homogeneity of substance that made it possible to order every being according to how closely they resembled the top – Man as an ethno-class, as the carrier of the *logos* and authority, according to the Greeks, Man as the creature done in the image of God, according to Christianity, Man as the superior civilised species that has the right to dominate the other beings according to the European humanist tradition.

By questioning both assumptions (methodological individualism and body-mind dualism), my transindividual philosophy invites us to look at bodies as processes, as transindividual processes of individuation that occur at the supra-, inter- and infra-individual level. Karen Barad's work has been one of my sources of inspiration in this process, particularly for their questioning of the assumption that something like a purely inanimate matter could ever exist. The main difference consists in the different toolboxes we draw from: they are inspired by quantum physics, whereas my main tool boxes, besides Spinoza and a critique of western history of philosophy, has been decolonial feminism.

LL: *The logical link between anarchism and feminism is clearly established in your text. You quote, for example, Lynne Farrow, who said that 'Feminism practices what anarchism preaches'. Your argument goes further to formulate that insofar as anarchism questions all oppressions, as does intersectional feminism, 'Feminism can only achieve its goal of women's liberation if it becomes anar-*

cha-feminism'. The critique of both capitalism and the state is therefore absolutely necessary for the liberation of women that feminism advocates. My question, in this sense, is about the term 'abolition' that you use. It is a term quite often used in the anarchist tradition: 'abolition of the family' (Sophie Lewis), 'abolition of the political parties', 'abolition of the state', etc. However, we do not see how it would be possible to abolish the institutions that subject us, and at the end of your book you mention Simon Critchley's 'infinitely demanding' anarchism. Could you explain to us how you approach this question, that of abolition, that is, the classic 'what to do' in the current context?

CB: The “abolition” question is certainly one part of the “What to do?” question. In my view, there is not – and there should not be – an a priori agenda for what to abolish, how and when. For me, anarchofeminism is a method, one that invites us to look at the way in which different forms of oppression reinforce each other: capitalist exploitation, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, speciesism. More than producing a to-do list, anarchofeminism invites us to organise according to the metaphor of the tangled knot: precisely because every form of oppression is based on the idea that some bodies and forms of life are superior to others, we have to take care of the single most pressing issues without forgetting that every thread that we undo is part of a larger knot, so we will not be free until the entire knot of domination will be undone.

This is another way of saying that we cannot be free unless everybody else is also equally free. And ultimately this is due to the fact that life is so interconnected that we cannot even properly say that we have ever been individuals: We are transindividual, that is beings that individuate not despite others, but through others – including the other-than-human. As a consequence, if the other is not free, I cannot be free either. It may seem “infinitely demanding” or even an exaggeration to say that unless the entire planet earth is free, then I cannot be free myself. And yet, in an epoch in which the lifestyle of a handful of super-polluting countries may determine the fate of life on this planet, it seems to me a very useful regulative ideal. As a single person, I may only be able to add a few drops to such a sea change. But let us not forget that the sea itself is nothing but a myriad of drops.

LL: *Finally, I was pleasantly surprised by the appearance of a double writing in your book. Although most of it has an academic style in which you argue and discuss the sources, recreate the debates and critically intervene, there are also two 'Intermessos', In nomine matris and Itinerarium in semen, where another writing appears, partly biographical and partly literary, where you talk about the mother, illness, migration... Taking into account your later publications, for example, Mitologías feministas (Malpaso, 2023), I perceive a certain oscillation in you with regard to writing. What do you think of academic writing, and do you think it is compatible with the anarcho-feminism you propose?*

CB: In *Anarcafeminismo* (2022) I mainly write in an academic format, using the rhetorical device of a neutral subject who is writing from nowhere, because that is the way in which western philosophers have mostly been writing, as if they did not have a situated body, a subjective experience, a particularity. Women, on the contrary, have often been relegated to their own particularities, their own situated emotions and feelings.

If I were to write only as an academic man, I would write as if I had not been a sexuated being. If I were to write only poems about my personal experiences as a woman, I would be stuck in a particularity that risks only reinforcing the universality of the neutral subject. Thus, I decided to practice both as a way to show that they are both rhetorical devices.

In *Anarcafeminismo* (2022) I interrupt the flow of an academic book with fragments of the lived experiences of a situated body, while in *Mitologías feministas* (2023), I alternate between a hysterical writing with the body and through the situated body, with fragments of abstract philosophical theorising. In both cases, I practice a double form of writing that reflects my own ontologically bisexual being.