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Comment on Elena Giomi and Fabrizio Tonello/1. The boundaries at stake: towards a structural understanding of femicide as moral panic

(doi: 10.2383/75773)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2013

Ente di afferenza:

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Comment on Elena Giomi and Fabrizio Tonello/1

The boundaries at stake: towards a structural understanding of femicide as moral panic

by Chiara Bertone

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A great merit of Giomi and Tonello's article is that it calls attention upon the fruitfulness of the concept of moral panic, and upon Cohen's classic in critical sociology, first published in 1972 and recently re-published under Routledge Classics [Cohen 2011]. Indeed, the critical constructionist turn in the sociology of deviance to which Cohen's book contributed, and which makes for the specific meaning of book at the time of its publication, is now more established and shared (see the introduction to the book's third edition, included in its recent re-issue). However, positivistic approaches to deviance and to issues like the one addressed by Giomi and Tonello's article, namely violence against women, are always resurfacing and require a steady engagement with critical approaches.

1. The Social Construction of Femicide

Pitch [2008b, 138] has argued that the centrality of the victim status that characterises our "prevention society" bears the risk of a return to positivist approaches: "the production of crime and deviance can and must be also seen from the perspective of the social construction of problems, while assigning and taking up the status of victim is not so much investigated, just seeming the result of having suffered some kind of crime or damage."

In the article the authors provide a thorough analysis of the media construction of women as victims, identifying which women have access to a victim status in media discourse, and discussing how this status is constructed. At the same time, however, they anchor their analysis upon data that they consider as accounting for a precise number of “real” victims, focusing upon “all the murders of women that took place in 2006.” This choice allows the authors to make a strong case for disproportionality: the fact that the number of victims and the contexts of the murder are given makes the disproportion between the actual features of femicide and their visibility in the media indisputable. In this respect, the choice is convincing, but it needs to take account of the fact that what have been identified are the “official” victims, recognised as such by the legal system; they do not include women who have disappeared (it could be the case especially for legally and socially more invisible women like migrant sex workers) or women whose death has not been legally defined as murder, but could be considered a consequence of male violence.

Most significantly, this choice leaves out a discussion about the very definition of femicide which is badly needed in the Italian debate. We need to ask, in fact, not only which kinds of murders of women are given centrality in the media and which ones are made invisible, but why murders of women by individual men is the chief form by which violence against women is represented in the media, and discussed in public and political debates. And, correspondingly, which forms of violence are instead silenced.

Spinelli [2008] gives an overview of how controversial the definitional debate on femicide is, showing how different definitions lead to very different directions of political action. Broadening the definition means moving away from the appeal of criminal justice, and from its effect of reducing the complexity and ambivalence of relations between women and men to the perpetrator/victim binary [Pitch 2008a], towards a more structural understanding of gender-based oppression.

One of the definitions reviewed by Spinelli considers as “femicide” all deaths of women because they are women, including “those situations when the woman’s death represents the outcome or the consequence of misogynist attitudes and practices” [Spinelli 2008, 131]. In the case of these deaths, who are the victims, and who are the perpetrators? The picture gets more complex, and the actors more numerous. We need to consider forms of behaviour having more comprehensive effects in terms of structural violence, but where the damages made and the collective victims involved are more hardly recognisable, rather than concentrating on a certain kind of crime, where the victim is an individual and can be clearly recognised.

A recent Italian collection of essays on male violence [Magaraggia and Cherubini 2013] explores its structural dimensions. Writing about a context, contempor-

ary Turkey, where institutional support to violence against women is more apparent, Koc [2013, 155] reminds us that structural violence also includes institutional violence, and that “in the fight against femicides, we need a feminist critique of institutions, besides a critique of direct male violence.”

As part of this critical perspective, we need to ask what are the effects of policies based on a certain construction of femicide as a social problem. As it has also been pointed out in the recent debate on the law against femicide in Italy, current ways of dealing with women’s growing social vulnerability in terms of security policies actually contribute to reinforcing this vulnerability.

The positioning of migrant sex workers is revealing in this respect. Why are sex workers so invisible as victims of femicide, although they are, in proportion, a group at high risk? Crowhurst [2012] argues that migrant sex workers in Italy are “caught in the victim/criminal paradigm,” failing to be recognised as subjects. Those who fail to embody the powerless, subjected victim eager to be redeemed and to follow the path of a more respectable life, are treated as illegal/criminal migrants and as disturbing subjects in the public space. They represent, then, part of the problem that policies aimed at improving the security and decorum of the city need to address, those very policies that create the conditions for migrant (sex) workers’ greater vulnerability to violence [Pitch 2013]. A recent case of police harassment against a NoTav activist, and the repressive measures included in the recent law on femicide, have also given visibility to concerns for measures regarding violence against women being used as a way of legitimising repression of social conflict, with women activists failing to be recognised the status of victims (see e.g. the debate in <http://femminismo-a-sud.noblogs.org>).

Connell [2013, 15] also argues that “we don’t have to stop looking at the structural sources of violence and at the global role of the rich and the powerful,” and points to the link between neoliberal globalisation and the hegemony of a specific form of masculinity: the competitive, ruthless man embodied by the business community, taking decisions without worrying about their impact on human lives. Therefore, she argues, the promotion of new models of masculinity, freed from violence, needs to be grounded upon “social reforms which can secure decent living conditions to both young men, and young women, out of the culture of exploitation and violence” [*ibidem*, 17].

This discussion, which might appear as a digression here, has much to do, I think, with the interpretation of the wave of moral panic that Giomi and Tonello describe, and of the present one at which they hint.

2. Explaining Moral Panic

Cohen's [2011] work suggests a further step into the critical enquiry on social reaction to violence against women. A step beyond description, towards explanation.

In order to explain why waves of moral panic emerge, Cohen argues that we need to analyse "the relationships between moral indignation and the social structure" [*ibidem*, 224]: what do the folk devils that are constructed "stay for?" Moral panic works at setting boundaries in ambiguous situations. In the case of the fights between the Mods and the Rockers troubling the strands of Brighton, a middle class holiday site, moral panic contributed to policing class boundaries in times of rapid social change and the emergence of mass teenage culture. Cohen mentions a telling comment by a magistrate: "Delinquency is trying to get at too many things too easily [...] people have become more aware of the good things in life [...] we've thrown back the curtain for them too soon" [*ibidem*, 218].

Giomi and Tonello also engage with the wider implications of the wave of moral panic they analyse. The individualisation and racialisation of violence, they argue, work at de-gendering violence against women, concealing its connection to "the larger structure of patriarchal domination and control." Under these premises, their explanation of the specific wave of moral panic created between 2006 and 2008 as a political strategy by the centre-right aimed at gathering consensus for the forthcoming national elections, besides needing more support from empirical investigation, only tells part of the story. The move towards urban security policies, implying a move from promoting rights to meeting the needs of victimised, normalised and individualised subjects, has actually largely been shared by centre-right and centre-left local and national governments.

Moreover, as Giomi and Tonello rightly argue, a new wave of moral panic is emerging today, with elements of the women's movement contributing as moral entrepreneurs. With all the cautiousness about a phenomenon that needs to be researched more systematically, my impression is that it seems to be taking less ethnically-cis undertones and to be giving greater visibility to (ex-)husbands and (ex-)boyfriends, hinting at a more general picture of intimate relations as a potential site of violence against women, bearing even deadly risks for them. We might ask, then, what are the boundaries at stake in these waves of moral panic?

Some suggestions for identifying these boundaries can come from works like the recent one by Pitch [2013, 80] on the "politics of decorum." Pitch identifies in the emergence of this kind of politics in Italy another declination of the politics of urban security, contributing "to depoliticising public discourse and to leading it back to the narrow boundaries of the division between the good and the bad, the deserving and

the undeserving, the respectable and the unrespectable.” The form of social control expressed by this kind of politics has a clear class dimension. While imperatives of “decorum,” including respect for women’s dignity, are “proposed and imposed to an impoverished and fearful middle class” [*ibidem*, back cover], the rich and the powerful do not need to impose limits to themselves, and behave in ‘decent’ ways. Nor are they held accountable for the structural gender violence they are enforcing.

Giomi and Tonello discuss how female decorum is played out in the access to the status of victim, and show the tensions deriving from the interplay of gender and race/ethnicity. They convincingly show, as well, the interplay of gender and race/ethnicity in the construction of the image of male perpetrators created by the media. However, as Meyers [2004], one of the authors quoted in the article, has argued, analyses of media representations of violence against women need to take “the inseparable and overlapping nature of gender, race, and class” into account. We would need, for this purpose, more information on the class dimension of the construction of both perpetrators and victims in the media representations analysed by Giomi and Tonello. In relation to the more recent shape the moral panic on femicide is taking as well, it would be interesting to understand if, and how, the construction of dangerous masculinities has something to do with the policing of class boundaries, as historical studies have shown in relation to other waves of moral panic [McLaren 2004].

Cohen’s [2011, 232] work ends with a call for political awareness, arguing that sociologists must take the responsibility to face the policy implications of their sociological accounts: “The initial step is one of unmasking and debunking [...] Once the real as opposed to the surface legitimations of the societal reaction are exposed, there is a possibility of undermining them and devising policies that are both more effective and more humane.” In this crucial moment, when gender policies are framed by rhetorics on femicide, Giomi and Tonello are engaging in a very timely and important work in this direction.

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Abstract: Cohen's work reminds us of the steady need for a critical engagement in questioning positivistic approaches to deviance, which also applies to femicide and to the definition of its victims. By exploring its construction as a social problem we can understand how more structural understandings of gender-based oppression get silenced, as the authors have shown. Their analysis might then be taken a step further in explaining why waves of moral panic emerge. Given that moral panic works at setting boundaries in ambiguous situations, which boundaries are at stake in the wave they have analysed, and in the more recent one they hint at? The commentary calls for greater attention to class in these processes.

Keywords: Femicide, violence against women, security policies, moral panic, class.

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