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Comment on Bandelli and Porcelli/2. The Politics of Knowledge Production in the Field of Violence Against Women

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Comment on Bandelli and Porcelli/2

The Politics of Knowledge Production in the Field of Violence Against Women

by Elena Pavan

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In their article “Femicide in Italy. ‘Femminicidio’, Moral Panic and Progressive Discourse” [2016], Daniela Bandelli and Giorgio Porcelli explore a very sensitive and pressing topic – that of *femminicidio*, which is nothing less than violence against women (VAW) in its more definitive and brutal form.

Bandelli and Porcelli’s article is motivated by the overall will to contribute to ongoing critical reflections on the “increased politicization” of VAW [Introduction; par. 3]. More particularly, it builds on extant researches like the one realized by Giomi and Tonello [2013] about moral panic triggered by media narratives that instrumentally sacrifice VAW for other, more wide-echoing political arguments. Thus, the authors adopt a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective and consider a set of media texts dealing with *femminicidio* and published in the period 2006-2013 in order to

[1] ascertain when the term became popular, [2] understand the scope of its media exposure, and [3] how its’ appearance and popularization can be read in light of the contemporary political context [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 10].

Moreover, authors seek to

identify in which types of news the word “femminicidio” appeared: what were the news subjects, who were the claim makers, what were the recurrent themes of “femminicidio” coverage, and finally which meanings and recurrent themes were associated to the term [*ibidem*].

Finally, authors aim to provide insights on how political actors appropriate the discourse on *femminicidio* in particular during the electoral campaign around 2013 Italian political elections. To this aim,

the third stage of analysis focused on statements made by two categories of claim makers: activists of feminist social movements and nationally renowned politicians [*ibidem*].

Certainly, the authors engage in an ambitious research task. Indeed, I see Bandelli and Porcelli's research effort as an attempt to investigate what I would call the *politics of knowledge production* in the field of VAW. They do so first of all by approaching VAW as an object of high political relevance and upon which women's and feminist movements have developed a specific knowledge in order to unveil and break down the reproduction of oppressive and discriminatory relationships [Motta and Esteves 2014, 2]. Secondly, they do so by *problematizing how VAW gets publicly known*, that is, they problematize the public narrative of *femminicidio* and wonder about how it is strategically constructed and *politicized* in the Italian public discourse. Thirdly, they do so by focusing on the *intersections between the political and the politicized knowledges about femminicidio* to shed light on if and how

feminist discourse can become hegemonic through narratives of VAW [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 2].

Ultimately, investigating the politics of knowledge production in a field like that of VAW entails bringing to the surface "invisible power relations" [Padovani and Pavan 2015] that not only structure relationships between genders but also the ways in which these relationships are publicly represented.¹ To be sure, researching power is (and, in fact, has always been) a highly challenging task. When power dynamics are invisible, like in this case, it can even become tricky. In response to this situation, Bandelli and Porcelli set up a good plan of research that addresses both the practices and the substance of knowledge production about *femminicidio*. Alas, they are rather shy when it comes to translating this plan into practice.

First, in relation to the dynamic unfolding of the mediatized political discourse on *femminicidio*, the distribution of articles reveals that attention towards the issue peaks between 2012 and 2013. While retrieving and plotting longitudinally the number of items per year may have helped us understanding when *femminicidio* became a matter of public attention, there is no benchmark in the text (for example, police reports as it was in the case of Giomi and Tonello's work) against which assessing, as

¹ See for example the effort made by WACC and its "Gender Media Monitoring Project": <http://whomakesthenews.org/>

the authors do, that this peak of media attention actually corresponds to an “overexposure of a stable phenomenon.”

Moreover, I am not convinced that Bandelli and Porcelli provide an effective explanation of the “appearance and popularization” of the topic in light of the surrounding political context. In the period considered by the authors (2006-2013), Italy has witnessed three political elections – in 2006, 2008, and 2013 – and thus three electoral campaigns. Certainly, elections in 2013 were peculiar in comparison to the previous ones: they were the first after the resignation of Silvio Berlusconi from its fourth government but were also the first after a sequence of appointed cabinets (first the technical one led by Mario Monti and after the political one guided by Enrico Letta). In this sense, the Italian political context was certainly in a peculiar state when *femminicidio* began to receive an increasing media attention. However, setting the boundaries of the “contemporary political context” only in correspondence to internal political dynamics conveys in my opinion a biased picture – one for which the peak of attention on *femminicidio* was almost entirely instrumental to discuss Italian politics in isolation from gender issues and VAW as a true policy fields.

In fact, in 2012 Italy *had* to begin to pay a more systematic attention to VAW – as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Rashida Manjoo, asserted in the conclusions to her report on the Italian situation that

achievements have not led to a decrease in the femicide rate or translated into real improvements in the lives of many women and girls [UNGA 2012, par. 91].

Also, in 2013 the Italian Parliament ratified the Istanbul Convention and approved the law 119/2013, the so-called “*legge sul femminicidio*” that contained several provisions to prevent and contrast VAW. Both these processes, although not exhausting the totality of the official political agenda, did in fact occupy a clear space within it and, therefore, within the public narration of official political activities. While one cannot exclude a priori that the electoral competition boosted attention on the issue of *femminicidio*, its actual relevance should have been assessed in a broader and multilevel political context shaped by national and supranational political dynamics unfolding inside and outside the policy domain of gender issues.

Second, the thematic analysis performed by the authors conveys a partial understanding of the *contents* of the *femminicidio* discourse. On the one hand, the article scratches only the surface of the “types of news” that channeled the word *femminicidio*. Certainly, a critical analysis of 5737 news items is a daunting and, perhaps, unnecessary mission to engage in. In this sense, I second the authors’ choice to identify peculiar moments that function as “critical junctures.” Thus, while I welcome the identification of critical junctures that can better represent the socio-cultural dynam-

ics under examination (in this case, the peculiarity of the Italian context), I think that moments in time that are loaded with great symbolic value for a movement should not be excluded without a clear reason – if anything for their capacity of stimulating the convergence of different agents on a common cognitive and symbolic terrain [Breiger 1974; Diani and Kousis 2014]. In this particular case, not accounting for news items produced around the *International Women’s Day* or the *International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women* may have yielded to intercept a specific part of the political discourse around *femminicidio* – one that excludes substantial aspects of VAW in favor of more bone-dry and strategically constructed discursive choices. But is this specific part accompanied by anything else? Or, conversely, is it truly representative of the cognitive and symbolic dynamics that sustain the public discourse on *femminicidio* during the whole peak of attention?

On the other hand, authors do not provide any specification on how the nature of the news they consider was identified, nor they specify the range of claim makers or frames they could detect in the sample. In this sense, it remains unclear how the two thematic facets that Bandelli and Porcelli isolate as characteristic of the mediated political discourse on *femminicidio* – i.e., its political connotation around “mobilization campaigns, political parties’ events and comments made by feminists and electoral candidates” [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 14] and the predominant “domestic/partner violence framework” [*ibidem*, 17] – emerge and interact one another. Far from being solely a methodological issue, this prevents us from understanding the nexus between the public and the private dimensions of VAW and, ultimately, if and how the feminist discourse becomes truly hegemonic. In fact, after contributing to a crucial shift of paradigm from “accused to victims” [*ibidem*, 4], branches of feminist thought engaged in the effort of redefining the very idea of power to overcome its understanding solely as masculine domination [Padovani and Pavan 2015]. In this context, feminist power theorists like Allen pushed forward a more complex and transformative conception of power – one that is oriented towards personal empowerment (the so-called “power to”) and, at the same time, at enhancing positively the power of others (the so-called “power with”) [Allen 1999]. If a paramount thematic characterization of VAW in the mediated political discourse still recalls masculine domination, has the feminist discourse become really hegemonic? Or, rather, has it been strategically simplified to the core element of masculine domination to respond to cases of moral panic like those identified by Giomi and Tonello? In the absence of a more systematic analysis of thematic components in the mediated discourse as well as of their interplay, relevant questions like these remain open for further investigation.

Third, in the micro analysis they perform, authors seem to circumscribe the politicization of the discourse on *femminicidio* to the use that political actors make of

media – without at least acknowledging that media are not simply “spaces” but actors in their own right that play an active role in socio-political dynamics [see e.g., Pavan 2014]. Given their interest in the “direct contributions of activists and politicians” [Bandelli and Porcelli 2016, 11], authors decide to extrapolate direct quotes from national news agency wires arguing that

news agencies tend to give more neutral and standardized information than other forms of media [*ibidem*].

One does not need to go back to the 1970s and the international debates on the “free flow of information,” perhaps one of the most relevant cases in which the non-neutrality of press agencies has been denounced and criticized [Carlsson 2003], to realize that the very choice of wiring a specific event and not another, or giving voice to one actor rather than to another are in fact non-neutral choices regardless of the amount of comments added by the journalist.

We do not know how many claims the authors found in their dataset that came from the world of the feminist social movements. As a matter of fact, all the quotations that are reported as indicative of politicization dynamics were spoken by actors falling under the category of “political representatives” – such as the President of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini, the Democratic Party members Angela Finocchiaro and Pier Luigi Bersani, and so on. The only exception in the article is provided by a statement from Serena Dandini, a renowned protagonist of the Italian television and the “frontwoman” of the “*Ferite a morte*” initiative, which is nonetheless used to illustrate the prominence of the domestic/partner violence framework and not the modes in which political actors appropriate the discourse on VAW. It could be that authors decided to lean exclusively on statements made by official political personalities because of their representativeness also of the discursive strategies enacted by feminist activists. However, a more plausible thesis in my opinion is that the absence of activists’ direct contributions from the micro analysis connects to the absence of activists from the group of political subjects identified starting from news agencies wires. Not differently from other media outlets (e.g., the press or the television) news agencies tend to convey more visibility, resonance and legitimacy to the messages of institutional actors in comparison to those of social movements [Koopmans 2004; Ferree *et al.* 2002].

It is not primarily in the space of mainstream media, let alone that of news agencies, that movements build and translate into practice their alternative epistemologies [Chesters 2012]. Rather, it is in their daily environment, in the course of a continuous and, admittedly, difficult work to bind different constituencies beyond their immediate needs and agendas into a

cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by a dynamic interaction between different groups and organizations” [Eyerman and Jamison 1991, 55].

Unless one reduces a heterogeneous and multifaceted movement like the feminist movement to its most visible and media-broadcasted components and members, which would be problematical even in this context politics personalization [Bennett 2012], seeking to assess activists’ contribution to a broader political discourse starting from news agencies is at least troublesome. In this context, finding a link between VAW and the progressivist discourse on parties is not surprising, given the fact that the only speakers detected may have been institutional representatives or, at best, members of the Italian cultural élites.

Ultimately, Bandelli and Porcelli’s research provides a starting point to investigate the politics of knowledge production for how they are enacted by the so-called “strong powers”: party representatives, political and cultural élites, consolidated media actors that are free and in a favorable position to work according to their own selection and newsworthiness logics. Their approach can benefit from a more careful consideration of collective actors and thus of the relationships between the political and the politicized dimensions of knowledge production. Still, for the time being, their work is welcome as it begins to shed some light on the symbolic challenges that prevent us from acting effectively with VAW.

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Comment on Bandelli and Porcelli/2

The Politics of Knowledge Production in the Field of Violence Against Women

Abstract: In this commentary Elena Pavan reviews Bandelli and Porcelli's "Femicide in Italy. 'Femminicidio,' Moral Panic and Progressivist Discourse." While Pavan sees this article as a starting point to address what she calls the *politics of knowledge* production in the field of VAW, she also outlines the necessity to better account for several other factors. These include: the broader national and supranational political dynamics in the gender policy domain, the peculiarities of the women's and the feminist movement beyond their points of contact with political institutions, and the very media logics that regulate how public discourse is shaped and violence against women is thus framed and conveyed to the public.

Keywords: Politics of Knowledge; Feminist Movement; Media Logics; Gender Policy Domain; Movement Knowledge.

Elena Pavan is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Scuola Normale Superiore. Her most recent research interests relate to the relationships between social movements and social media. In this area, she is working interdisciplinary to study the interplay between media logics, materialities, social action and meanings, in particular through network analysis.