

Teaching in a Gender Perspective

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The gender perspective as an opportunity for change

Gender Policies, the subject I teach at the University of Padua, is not a very common topic in Italian Academia for at least three reasons. The first is that in our country there is little recognition of the category of ‘gender’ from the perspectives of both political science and political history (Stabili, 2015). The second is that this reception – or ‘cultural translation’ – is, in most cases, distorted, as it tends to be superimposed on the biological category of female sex. Therefore, **as a category of analysis, the gender perspective appears to be greatly weakened**. Today, while normally taken into account when discussing topics such as violence or migration, on other issues there is a persisting mistrust of gender as a category of political analysis and, unfortunately, there is no revolution underway to change this way of thinking.

There is also a third, more practical reason, which is that ‘gender’ is not a real subject to teach, but it is rather a perspective, a point of view, a cross-cutting category (Scott, 1986). Teaching in/with a gender perspective is therefore more like using a particular type of glasses to look around and see things differently. Through the lens of gender students are asked to take a deeper look at life around them, at the society they are living in and – possibly- reconsider some of their own beliefs and understandings. Taking ‘gender’ into account as a category of analysis, they are asked for example to re-think their research interests for their final dissertation. The aim is to make them aware of the differences – “through a gender perspective I see *this*, without this perspective I see *that*”- and aware of the fact that, in a high percentage of the cases, the gap between ‘this’ and ‘that’ is an issue of gender discrimination. In this scenario one of the main goals of courses like *Gender Policies* is to highlight that there are differences in the outcomes of policy-making that simply derive from gender differences and these should be considered and taken into account. As stated in the Introduction to this themed issue, it has been recognized that **putting gender into the research agenda offers new ways of understanding social, cultural and political processes and structures through which societies and the relationships between sexes that substantiate them are organized**. The gender perspective is therefore a critical look that makes clear and emphasizes differences between sexes not in the biological sense, but in how women and men participate and take part in the making of everyday ‘facts’, how they are affected by the political choices of national as well as local government, and this has nothing to do with the ‘point of view of women’ or with ‘gender as women’s stuff’, as it is usually interpreted in our culture.¹

Since there are no specific and institutionalized degree courses dedicated to gender in the Italian academic system, students who decide to attend a class like *Gender Policies* may come from very different backgrounds, such as human rights or political science; many of them also from economics, science, medicine, urban planning, or law. In this particular

case, the class I teach is attended not only by Italian students but by a lot of foreign students coming from all over the world – from Europe to North and South America, from Africa to Balkan and Asian countries. This ‘attraction’ is very positive in my opinion, and is certainly due to the fact that, since 2013, at the University of Padua a number of courses in the field of Political Science – including *Gender Policies* – have been offered in English. Like in the past, when the course was held in Italian, the main objective is to introduce students to the very basic concepts in the approach to gender studies, but what has changed in the last three years is the territorial perspective. A much broader approach is now necessary, taking into account the different experiences of the students. In class we start discussing basic concepts like the meaning of sex, gender, gendering, gender system (patriarchy), power, homophobia – in terms of effectiveness of policies at international, national and local levels. We introduce concepts like heteronormativity, we address the importance of gender awareness in decision-making and we discuss the implications if a non-discrimination perspective were to be taken into account in the implementation of policies, especially in the urban context (‘engendering the city’).

We also reflect on the role of the European Community which, despite the resistance of local institutions, in the last ten years has strongly pushed for gender issues to be mainstreamed in all fields of research and aspects of life in academic environments. In order to increase the personal sensitivity of the students in a non-prescriptive way, the lessons are not organized as traditional lectures. The presence of foreign students is a great opportunity to use different sources and methods, which has led me to review the structure of the course, framing each lesson as a sort of interactive workshop, where it is easier to discuss, to share knowledge and exchange views depending on the interests and the personal sensibility of the participants, without imposing my personal orientation. At the end of the course I ask all the students to prepare not only a term paper but also ‘a lesson’ for the rest of the class on the topic they have been most interested in. To foster the students’ curiosity, during the lessons guest lecturers are often invited to present their books and papers; specific seminars on ‘how to write a good final dissertation’ with the support of librarians from the faculty and experts on digital resources are organized and, during the course, students have the chance to attend seminars and activities organized by the University Center for Gender Studies – CIRSG – on topics of their interest.

The opportunity to teach in English allows us to go beyond English as a means of communication and refer broadly to the international environment in which the issues we deal with have emerged. At the end of this third year of teaching in English I recognize that I made a great effort in renewing the contents of the course as a consequence of the language change: switching to English means switching to another way of thinking, of organizing topics within the lessons and the type of lessons themselves. This different perspective is very useful when talking about gender: **the center is represented by the students, who are women and men, by their unique and different stories, their backgrounds, their experiences that the new pair of gender glasses have made richer, deeper and more productive.** The challenge proved to be a great opportunity for the course to become a real multicultural space for discussion, sharing experiences, listening to different voices and, most of all, for fruitful mutual learning.

When the students are not (only) academic

This type of educational perspective, very fruitful in academic courses does not exhaust its potential with a mark or with a final dissertation. ‘Gender glasses’ are very useful also outside University, to analyze the challenges emerging from each specific local context and the dimension of life-long-learning that accompanies women and men at any stage of their life, in their working dimension, as well as in the social and political commitments they decide to undertake, up to the decisions they may take in their private life. It was in this perspective of offering learning opportunities on ‘gender policies and equal opportunities’ to people outside academia that, in 2004, the Italian government, decided to fund a National Project entitled ‘Women, Politics and Institutions’. The ultimate aim was to help create cultural and educational conditions in order to increase the participation and presence of women in political life, both at national and local level, in elected assemblies, in councils and consultative committees, where women are typically absent (Forcina, 2003).

Involving the Ministry for Equal Opportunities and a number of Universities, the project included 100 hours of training a year, directed both to undergraduate students and to people outside the academia with a strong interest in gender issues. There was no tuition fee and there were two tests, one mid-term and one at the end of the course, with a final grade and a certificate of attendance. The aim of the project was to raise awareness of the importance of women and men participating together in the public sphere and in political life, both at national and local level, in elected assemblies, in councils and consultative committees, where women are usually under represented (Folke-Richne, 2014). This was driven by the belief that it is “mostly the cultural factors that prevent a broader participation of women in politics and in all decision-making bodies” (Asti et al. 2008).

Focusing on the formal structure of national politics, on the knowledge of how decisional arenas work and leaving the analysis of local dynamics to the universities involved (especially to the scientific coordinators responsible for the implementation of the project, one for each university, chosen for their specific skills, personal experiences and some of them for their long-feminist militancy), it was possible, in part, to go beyond the stereotype of a clear role division between sexes – the institutions with their rituals, occult mechanisms and male tested schemes on the one side and the social and reproductive roles of women on the other. Considering the ‘institutional box’ together with its political content of practices was the new and decisive element. **Inserting the point of view of gender equality in an apparently neutral scenario was certainly a difficult task of mainstreaming, but a harbinger of good results**, giving the participants an idea of ‘politics’ from all possible points of view: as a path toward the conquest of rights for women and men that differs both in achievements and in chronology; as a growing difficulty in maintaining these achievements; as a real impossibility to access certain spheres of political power for no other reasons than sex. This course was a platform of awareness and recognition in short, offering not mere acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but an active ‘tool’ to propose and suggest, allowing participants to identify the crucial issues of how to enter and remain in the political arena, to understand how to propose changes to the access mechanisms and to find a position given the skills acquired.

Fourteen thousand applications arrived for the first two editions (2004 – 2006) and about seven thousand participants took part in the project, involving 44 universities across Italy. The experience continued with these high numbers until 2012, organized with the formula of co-participation (and co-financing) of Universities and the Ministry. Then, in 2013, the government funding stopped and the organizational and financial burden ended up on the shoulders of the universities, who were able to carry on one or two more editions of the project, in collaboration with local institutions in some cases with the help of a sponsor.

A negative implication of this is that **the government has clearly lost interest in this type of initiative; but a positive one is that this type of course still exists today in many universities under various and different labels** – as postgraduate training, or as professional development, continuing to create bridges from academia to the territory and to promote knowledge sharing. As Carmen Leccardi, coordinator of the project at the University of Milano-Bicocca since the very beginning, stated: “These courses are the only time when the university actually opens to the territory, fulfilling in this a vital function” (Leccardi, 2012). The formula of the project, mixing students and people interested in the topic of gender equality² has clearly shown that the desire for gender-aware knowledge, aimed at acting in the public sphere, is very strong. Second, it has contributed to educating a generation of young women who look to politics as an opportunity to express their personality and skills, and as a career option.

From the point of view of the results achieved by the students, because the course took place in the universities and involved a lot of academics, it has put in place an important mechanism of recognition of the knowledge acquired. It was not just a course ‘sponsored’ by the academic institution, or hosted in a university classroom. It was a project entirely organized within the universities. The importance of this recognition of authority is twofold, because on the one hand it has connected the university to its territory, placing it at the center of an osmotic circulation of knowledge and skills. Secondly, it has encouraged the participants to get passionate about its contents, asking for further information, additional classes, advanced courses, as well as requesting academic spaces where they can hold meetings and self-managed seminars, beyond the margins of the course itself. It was a chance to re-create a positive imagery around academic knowledge, no longer seen as separate from the practice of everyday life, but in dialogue, towards the concept of a University open to training throughout the course of life (lifelong learning), which is the foundation of a modern and European conception of academic places.

Gender perspective as ‘expert knowledge’ in policy making

It is a fact that after the Seventies many occasions of ‘speech’ for women in Italy simply closed. For a long time, their participation in the political life of the country took place underground. The place to present themselves in the decision-making public arena was missing, due to political circumstances, to the ‘resilience’ of a patriarchal society, and also due to the fact that part of the feminist movement was (and still is) hesitant if not reluctant about a real participation and involvement of women in the institutions (Del Re, 2008). Today the situation has partly changed: the place does exist, women want to participate, and yet what prevents them from doing so is mostly the burden of the care activities that is today (as it was thirty years ago) mostly on their shoulders, without any real chance to share it

with men. A burden that holds them back a centimeter, just one centimeter, but decisive. Discriminating.

The issue of the crisis of the forms of citizenship and of the political representation of leadership is the focus of the current political debate and compels us to rethink the past as well as the present and maybe also to redesign the forecasts for the future. For this purpose, **a gender perspective in policy making could be a key of great help to interpret and solve many problematic issues**. It is about taking responsibility and having the courage to reformulate certain categories of values: the gender perspective should be considered as ‘expert knowledge’ to be taken seriously into account inside and outside academia. Recognizing the importance of the presence and the action of women in the public sphere – not just in terms of numbers, but in terms of thoughts, opinions, expertise – is a matter of *justice*: this is the type of ‘cultural work’ that academic institutions should provide to students and to the whole society, and it is what a democracy should adopt as a target priority to achieve.

Notes

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¹ An example that shows how simple it can be to misunderstand what gender really means: “women in the labor market” is completely different from studying “the labor market from a gender perspective”. Although both take women into account, only the second considers the interaction of the sexes and the different perspectives from which women and men are affected by the policies and the rules of the labor market. This may seem to be a minor difference, but it is not; there is, indeed, a considerable cultural and political distance between the two.

² In the first edition (2004-2005) the course was delivered only to women. Then the subsequent editions were open to the participation of both men and women.

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