

FEMINISMS: WHERE DO WE COME FROM? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

# Fina Birulés: 'If we fight those who shout, we will only end up shouting'

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Fina Birulés is probably one of the people in Catalonia who best symbolizes the legacy of feminisms of the 1970s and the threads of continuity with current feminisms. She is a Philosophy professor at the University of Barcelona and is part of the *Seminari Filosofia i Gènere-ADHUC* (Philosophy and Gender Seminar. Research Centre for Theory, Gender, Sexuality.) Birulés is an author and a co-editor in numerous essays about Hannah Arendt's works and other contemporary female thinkers. When asked her at what moment she became aware she was a feminist, she claims that she has always been one, but that there was a key experience that made her realize that feminism was something in which she had to get involve herself in: entering the professional world. 'Up until that moment, naively, I thought there was enough in trying to do things right to have the same options. However, the work environment, in my case at the university and in a faculty as masculine as philosophy, made me realize it was not the case.'

## **Feminism(s). Plural or singular?**

Nowadays, plurals are in trend. I am okay with that. However, I do not know if is always possible to deal with all the problems by adding a plural. It is true that in the 70s people talked about 'the woman' and probably that was a very ambiguous or excessively normative category. The addition of the plural improves things a little, but I think there is still a lot of

work to do.

**One of the main concepts in your work is that of difference. How would you define it? How does it relate to feminism?**

We cannot define 'difference'. It depends on a relationship, on a particular case, and, therefore, no definitions can be given of what it is to be a man, a woman or what sexual difference means. Feminism often confuses equality with freedom. Equality refers to the claiming of rights, or the fact that we are all born different and we choose to treat each other as equals in a framework of justice. When laws do not respect this equality, discriminate. Freedom, on the other hand, is about difference or diversity. A diversity that cannot be reduced to definitions.

Attacks on the freedom of women and people -because this applies to both feminism and racism- are gender-based and racist manners. If we do not consider this, we will not understand anything: we have laws that punish these aggressions and it turns out there are still more. What is happening? Are they the result of discrimination? No, they are not; we need to change respect for difference or diversity.

**How do the discourse of equality and parity complement and interrelate with the discourse of difference? At what point do they meet?**

The question of equality is not exactly the same as for parity. To give an example: years ago, the Spanish penal code has to be changed because assaulting a man was a crime, and assaulting a woman was a misdemeanour, which meant different sentences or fines. When this changed and it became a crime to assault anyone, no more laws were needed. What is needed is either to enforce them or to modify the preconceptions, the symbolic order through which people consider that if a woman has been assaulted, perhaps she was where she should not have been or was doing what she should not have been doing. This is not so simple: it is not changed neither with more parity nor with penal populism. Nowadays, politicians are in a rush to try to show that they are solving a problem, and immediately demand more penal code. What is needed is to change the forms and spaces of relationships.

**In this sense, you often described and written that freedom is the ability to move physically or symbolically.**

Exactly. If someone is in prison, this person cannot move freely from the place assigned. Women, and people from certain races, quite often have assigned places, places where can and have to stay in. If they move away from this place, it can be considered that they are breaking non-established rules and that this can accept violence. This fact does not change with more laws. It is even more difficult to change and it has to be done with policies that go beyond rights policies.

**Has the equal rights perspective become too dominant?**

It is good that it is present, but it is not enough. It is not enough, for example, to understand why violence persists. How can we explain the continuing existence of violence in societies where equal rights are practically recognised?

**Does the debate on freedom, specifically political freedom, have enough space within feminist thinking?**

There is a part which is not reflected upon, but which is practised. Political freedom has to do with the presence in the public space of diverse forms of relationships, which are not limited to those of equality. Freedom should not only be understood as the freedom of will, that everyone can do as they please, but also the freedom to move in the public space and not to be where one is expected to be. When someone assaults a woman, people say ‘she was in an uninhabited area, how could she think of going there at that time of the day?’ It is not only: ‘and where is she going in those clothes?’ Freedom is the possibility of not being where you are politically expected to be. This is not the fact of choosing between two given options, but being able to move. This applies to women, to anti-racist resistance, and so on.

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It is wrong to give away the word freedom to the right wing. We are not talking about the same thing. Even though they don't use these expressions, I think that part of the feminisms that are now called ‘racialized’ are not only demanding equality—for example, citizenship— but the possibility of not being where they expect you to be, even from the point of view of your own identity. Feminism has brought it to the table. Women have shown that they wanted to get out of the house, but getting out of the house was not just about getting out of housework. The law already says that we are equal, but in reality there are pre-conceptions that we often pass on indirectly and we do not realise we are doing so. In this sense, I think that political freedom is something that must be demanded, and it is no obstacle to also demand equality. However, legislation does not solve all the problems.

**To what extent can we understand political freedom, this possibility to move physically or symbolically, as a political participation in a broad sense?**

Politics in the broad sense includes movements of displacement of the spotlight. However, in generally speaking, politics is currently understood as a representative politics. I think

that there is an important part of all of us, especially young people, who want to participate. To participate means to have willingness to introduce projects, that not everything is reduced to proposals from a supposed power that rather excludes citizens from participation. The 'we' in the feminism of the 1970s did not claim to represent all women. The intention was to say, 'we want to do this'. There is the possibility that you fail and do the same as what the government is doing at your side, without innovating in any way. The other possibility is to build an experience and a social structure that is much more inhabitable. Participation in some collective movements gives an experience that I do not have otherwise.

**It is the idea of community, of collective action.**

Yes and the idea of freedom in the sense of introducing something new: participation in an alliance. From the alliance comes power, which is not the power of politicians. It can change afterwards.

**As you explain in *Entorn del pensament, la política i el feminisme* (2014), consciousness-raising groups from the 1970s were a key experience, as they generated real and symbolic spaces for women to meet and exchange. Could social networks and digital sites be today's equivalent?**

It is very different, but then again, maybe it is. Consciousness-raising groups and meetings were women's withdrawal from participation in left-wing movements; they suddenly got together as a form of political participation. It was not a way of saying 'we will leave, you will do it to yourselves'; it was something else. History has been all about saying what is feminine. Let us discuss it ourselves, let us decide what it is. Let us stop letting others say who we are, let us decide from our own experience. Social networking is another kind of relationship, another kind of support: there is a lot of difference compared to the 1970s because there is a lot of interference.

**In this regard, what differences are there between the feminism of the 1970s and the feminisms of today?**

Whatever feminism was in the 1970s, we could say that it had a very important success: it managed to bring issues such as abortion, desire, the body, which had never been the subject of political reflection or laws, into the public eye. It seems very normal to us now that they are, but they were not. They were the ones who brought them into focus. They were the ones who placed it in the political field of debate.

We could now talk about other issues, including those linked to the critique of how these issues were placed in the public eye. There is no immediate continuity, but the work that was done at that time was very important. There is a legacy, but the circumstances and contexts are also very different. They were in a given period; we are in the midst of neoliberalism, which reduces everything to the laws of the market rather than to the laws of equality; to freedom understood as hyper-responsibility for oneself. You must be the entrepreneur of yourself, the responsible for everything that happens to you.

**Was there a stronger commitment to practice and performance in the ordinary world?**

It was not so much a commitment to practice, as it was a practice. Certainly, there were those who theorised, but that feminism was meeting, discussing, fighting each other, sitting in the street. Feminism in the 1970s was a praxis. Those of us who dedicate ourselves to intellectual tasks are used to thinking that in order to act we must first have a theory, and this is not true. Normally those of us who think about what is happening are the ones who follow those who take action. Afterwards, people began to theorise. However, there was a commitment to the ordinary world: they were not just trying to improve women's lives; they were trying to rethink and re-decide the forms of relationship. Because politics is not just about who has to rule whom; politics has to do with forms of relationship -which can be equal, like those of justice- or forms of relationship that do not necessarily have to be reduced to equality, as in the case of a school. There is no relationship of equality between the person who teaches and the child, nor needs to be. The idea is to think of different forms and patterns of relationship, and this is what feminism did then and I would say that it is also trying to do now.

**Do you think feminism has managed to rethink the community, to create new languages and ways of representing the legacy of the movement?**

I would say that in a significant way relationships have changed. I do not know if it can all be attributed to the actions of feminism, but relationships have changed, and a lot, and the ways of life of women and men. Relationships between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters have also changed. There is a part of redesigning the common world, but there is also an attempt to think about how to make the politics of politicians more feminist. Normally, it is considered that this can only be achieved with institutions such as the *Institut Català de les Dones* (Catalan Women's Institute) or the *Instituto de la Mujer* (Institute of Women). I think that is good, but it is not enough. Institutionalisation always has a high price.

**What price?**

It is a high price. Suddenly, it is necessary that the question of women remains, rather than women questioning. All of a sudden, you find yourself for the umpteenth time seeing 'cheese triangles' of those who count how many women start a career and how many finish it. It is good that this is done, but it only underlines the character and identity of women as potential victims. This seems to be very dangerous to me. It is good, because it is good for public policy, but it is also very dangerous and boring. I think it is good to avoid discrimination, but if everything is reduced to this, it is problematic. Suddenly, first-person participation is distorted in order to fit in within the constraints set by the grant, for example. I do not mean to say that this is constricting, but there is an important part of the loss of spontaneity. Feminism is not linked to representative politics, but to participatory politics. It is not the same to speak on behalf of women as for women to speak. Sometimes they say things that were not meant to be said, neither by feminists nor by the other side. When you bring up the issue of prostitution, do you have to speak on behalf of prostitutes?

As if, the prohibition of prostitution were their protection. Maybe not, maybe you have to feel what those who practice prostitution and who have thought about it should say.

**Who has more say in defining what feminism is, currently? Do racialized feminisms have enough of a voice?**

It is difficult to generalise. I do not care what feminism is. It is great that someone finds a definition that encompasses the whole world, but I will not do it. On the other hand, feminism or feminisms have been one of the movements capable of reshaping many things in the public area, and at the same time of having strong disagreements, which is very healthy, because unanimity is usually the result of tyranny or fanaticism. It is much more interesting to have discussions than to argue. For example, we must question public policies, but not necessarily exclude the possibility of thinking of them as feminist.

There is also a series of questions that arise after one realises that feminism, as Western and North American women presented it, was a Western and white woman's feminism. When U.S. emancipationists demanded the right to work, black women said: 'I would like to have less work. Or to have it paid.' It is interesting this lack of attention or lack of awareness of other perspectives and other life situations that allow us to think about things in a different way. Nowadays, in Barcelona there are many feminist women's groups that question traditional forms that interrupt discourses that challenge us. On the other hand, it must be said that in the 1970s there were also African-American feminists such as Angela Davis or bell hooks, to mention the most well-known.

**Feminism has often been criticised for focusing only on gender and not taking into account other axes of discrimination, especially racial and economic diversity.**

There is one thing that needs to be said before agreeing with this statement: one never tells whether environmentalism is racist. Never. Neither is the gay movement. In other words, it seems that it is only in the case of feminism that it needs to represent the good of all humanity. It is worth noticing. At the same time, it is good. It is a sign of the capacity to allow oneself to be challenged, even if it may be conflicting, by other forms of exclusion or other forms of life or by certain actions that feminism itself should rethink. On the question of intersectionality, I think that as a theoretical model it is very weak. What is interesting is the concrete analysis of cases. For example, applying intersectionality to groups of migrants arriving in Barcelona from a certain country, of a certain gender, of a certain ethnicity... The analysis based on practice is very productive for diagnosing problems and ways of solving them.

**In any case, does intersectionality extend feminism's capacity for action, or does it limit it?**

As long as we do not want to reach a conception of a fair world —which is a total paralysis— it is okay. I think it is positive. We always act with no guarantee: we risk putting something up for debate, but we do not know if it will result in an improvement or if we will have repeated what we have already done. This is the risk of action in general, not just for

feminists.

### **To what extent are cultural references and legacies important to feminism?**

A few years or decades ago, many of the women who wanted to write, do science or think in the field of culture felt that they were the first or the only ones; that they had to start from scratch. The proof of this is the masculinisation of the 19th century; for example, Víctor Català. This has changed, and an important part of the work has been the recovery of the work and the figure of women from the past. Not so much because we have to continue a supposed tradition, but because if there is no tradition, if it has not happened, we do not know what it means to preserve and what it means to innovate.

From a heritage, there are those who expand it, there are those who 'smoke it,' there are those who do not use it at all. However, to position ourselves between the past and the future is this: what do we take from the past? What do we innovate? How do we make the heritage grow? To make the heritage grow, from a creative point of view, is to be faithful and unfaithful at the same time. An inheritance does not grow by repeating what Virginia Woolf did almost literally, but there is the possibility of distancing oneself a little and then re-approaching; taking a part of the heritage as material from which to create. This game of fidelity and infidelity, of dialogue —sometimes critical dialogue— is interesting.

### **What can we learn from thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil or Françoise Collin? Why is it important continue deepening our understanding of the politics of memory?**

Philosophy and the Faculty of Philosophy are highly masculinised environments. When asked if there had been no female philosophers, the answer, apparently, was no. However, there were enough when you start looking around, which is what we did for many years at the *Seminari Filosofia I Gènere*. There are Pythagoreans, Epicureans. Making this restoration allows us to build a legacy on which we can place ourselves, which does not mean merely imitating.

### **The feminist movement has been massive in the last demonstrations in the International Women's Day and has occupied the public space. Does the fact of achieving transversality and a certain democratisation of feminism imply a folklorisation, a feminism of slogans?**

Democratisation is not folklorisation. All of a sudden, young people have demonstrated and they have done it in a different way, not only by occupying a place, but also by making a non-standardised demonstration. This indicates another way of being in the public area, which is similar to the demonstrations of young people for climate emergency. Another thing is neoliberalism, with its market criteria and its praise of freedom to conduct businesses. Feminism and women are an important target for all this. The media need to be fed. Is it a slogan? Of course it is. The market appropriates everything, but this does not mean that it is necessarily negative for the policies, decisions or interventions that women can make. We live in a world where almost everything is swallowed up.

**What should be the reaction to the so-called counter-revolution against feminism?**

It does not seem like a great counter-revolution to me. I do not think it matters to them. They shout a lot and what we should not do is to give them a voice or give them an amplifier. These are attempts, of course, which in some cases are dangerous, because with this aggressive propagandistic discourse, they can cause someone to attack someone else, but we have to keep in mind that everything that is being done by feminism and social movements is introducing changes. If we fight those who shout, we will only end up shouting. Apart from giving them a space they lack.

**It is true; however, there is a rise of movements and leaders such as Trump or Bolsonaro who are declaring war on gender ideology.**

There are important changes taking place and surely, there are many people who are worried about them or do not like them at all, because they question the privileged and comfortable place they have had all their lives. Most of the men of my generation were feminists, but they were feminists for their daughters, not for their wives or partners, in case they had to move from where they were. I think this reaction indicates that there have been very important changes. Instead of talking about the real issues that are troubling some people, all of a sudden it is gender ideology. The attempted assault against Judith Butler was last year, before Bolsonaro won the election. There were I do-not-know-how-many thousands of people protesting because Butler was going to give a conference at the university. That was organised by the evangelist movements, who have power because there is someone who gives it to them. They support each other; they shout more than anyone else and they distort everything. It is important to fight them, but to fight them by not giving them a voice. Otherwise, in the end the only thing you do is to feel them, to intoxicate yourself. Because they intoxicate.

On the other hand, this also indicates that there are certain movements that continue to use women's issues as a bargaining chip. For example, people talked about women's rights to justify the war in Afghanistan, but nobody cared about them. It was a way of justifying a military intervention. Certain right wing or extreme right-wing groups pass bodies around with other political parties: the bodies of women, the bodies of gays or the bodies of immigrants. In reality, they are not interested in women, gays or immigrants; they are interested in appearing in the public eye with these shouts. It is opportunism or defiance of the other parties. There is quite a lot, for example, when you think what they did in France a few years ago, when they started to discuss whether the headscarf should be worn or not. Suddenly, it turned out that the laity of the republic depended on the fact that a poor girl went to school wearing a headscarf. Do you mean you are concerned about this child's rights? No, you are not. You are making the girls and young women go through an issue that has nothing to do with them: the laicism of the republic.

**You have often talked about the role of the norm. How do you think it is possible to make a more profound change and re-signify it?**

Everyone is born into a society that was already there, therefore, becomes part of a world

of norms and relationships that they have not chosen. In order to be understood, they must participate in these norms. The first thing that people ask when they see someone expecting a child is 'is it a boy or a girl?' It could be another question. The child is born and finds itself re-described in terms of what is understood as feminine or masculine. If you go too far from the norm, the price is that you are not recognized. There is a lot at play in the game of normalisation and critique of the norm; it is not just a matter of getting rid of prejudice. To give an example, the law on same-sex marriages: it means the implementation of a law but at the same time, some changes that will have consequences on the forms of normalisation of gay couples and couples in general. Society is made up of norms that, through actions and rules, we can try to make more inclusive. Nevertheless, there will always be a norm and, if you step out, the risk is that you will not be visible, that you will be monstrous, that you will not be understandable. The solution does not have to be that we are all the same and there is no prejudice. What we sometimes achieve is that there are forms of normality that are more inclusive than others are. We have to do it. There is no other way.

### **Does education have an important role to play?**

One of the traits of our generation is that we adults take no responsibility for anything and like a poisoned legacy, we pass it on to the next generation. When there is an aggression against women, people consider that 'schools need to reinforce civic or democratic content'. Suddenly, we do not do anything and let them do it better. It is a perversion: it is presented as a policy of responsibility, and in reality, it is a form of taking it away. It is up to adults in our world to try to be able to deal with the problems we face. Can we solve them? Maybe we cannot. However, we can make it better and not hand the responsibility to the next generation.

Arendt explains this very well in a text that was quite controversial at the time. She referenced to the first school where the process of non-segregation between black and white children took place. In Life magazine, a publication from that time, there was an image of a black girl surrounded by screaming white fools and police officers who were protecting them. Then, Arendt asked 'but have they gone out of their minds? Why give all the responsibility for the end of segregation between blacks and whites to the children of the school?' At that time, there was a prohibition of same-sex marriages. Adults are the first to take the lead. It is true that an important part of the modification sometimes goes through schools, but it goes much more through mimesis and contamination between adults and children. In other words, very often children learn by seeing how others behave and interact with them. To pass all the responsibility to the school is a great perversion.

### **As adults, how do we deconstruct ourselves?**

By making the effort to try to face certain problems, to sit down and discuss them. To think about how we can transform certain forms of relationships, such as racist forms of relationships. It is not enough to say that boys and girls learn that we are all equal.

### **When we talk about feminism, what should we ask ourselves today? What question**

### would you have liked to answer?

There is a series of questions regarding the idea of being in transition, with the question on gender binarism. It is not about someone wanting to change from man to woman or the other way around, but this idea of being in transition, neither one place nor another, emerges powerfully. For example, being in a situation where a person has had hormones but has not had genital intervention. Who am I? This is what challenges the norm, but also ways of life. I do not know the correct question, but it is a topic that I find interesting. You are questioning the norm and you are changing the current ways of normativity through the idea of being in transition. How do you do it? How do you say? Is this a man, a woman...? Perhaps what is intended is to challenge this question.



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