Multicultural Education and the Challenge of Ethnic Studies and Feminism: An Italian Perspective

Vita Fortunati

To a Western European scholar like myself, the debate on the meaning and the institutionalization of multicultural education that has taken place in the United States, especially during the past decade, is so heated and controversial that I have decided to approach it indirectly, that is, by analyzing the role played by issues of race and gender in a different context—the Italian academy. I hope that my reflections on the impact of those issues on Italian academic research and curricula will reverberate through, and prove relevant to, the multicultural debate in the United States.

Today in America, the debate on the role of the university in a society changing profoundly under the pressure of different ethnic groups and cultures is much more lively than in any other country. Even the boundary between liberal and conservative is being questioned. The questions arising from this debate are various and not easily solved. One such question we face: In what way must teaching change in response to revisions of the literary canon and curricula? In these difficult times, pressing dilemmas, which have always characterized the history of university knowledge, rise again in search of resolution: the contested relationship between tradition and innovation, between cultural and political engagement, between ethics and aesthetics.

The echo of this fervent debate has reached “the borders of the empire,” as Umberto Eco would say. In the last months in Italy, there have been heated discussions in our newspapers about the controversial theatrical play Oleanna by David Mamet, which explores the censorship of words and terms according to a “politically correct” agenda. Discussions also center on the tense atmosphere recalling witch-hunts, and on the dangerous wave of Khomeinism, taking form, for example, in the dogmatism and the extremely polarized terms of the “P.C.” debate, which is supposedly sweeping American academia. It is the urgency of this debate which forces us to compare the European and
the American situations. Currently, Europe is troubled both by extremely serious ethnic problems, connected to the rise of dangerous nationalisms (the civil war in the ex-Yugoslavia, for example), and great waves of immigration. Issues of gender as well raise many unsolved problems, such as the question of abortion, which in Italy still provokes heated and dramatic debate, or the status of civil rights for gay men and lesbians, which have not yet been given full recognition.

By reading material related to this debate, I understand that socio-political problems have a strong influence on the American university. There is an inevitable struggle to balance the relationship between what used to be considered unacademic, namely, politics and social reform, and what is intrinsically academic, namely, education and scientific research. In the United States, the pressing political debate on civil rights has entered the cultural debate. As a result, the boundaries between the discrete fields of scientific knowledge and political knowledge have been called into question. Obviously, because social problems are so urgent in the United States at the moment, it is very difficult to find a balance between two positions—the neo-conservative and the radical—which both turn out to be dangerously extreme and ideologically dogmatic. As some American intellectuals have proposed, a viable solution is to promote the coexistence of tradition and innovation, according to the idea that inside the university, political engagement means, first and foremost, genuine intellectual work and professional, quality education.

Tradition and innovation must, therefore, go together. The canon, to paraphrase Stephen Greenblatt’s eloquent argument, is changing not because we have forgotten the past but because our knowledge of the past has become wider and deeper, because our and our students’ interests are changing, and because the world, including the world of imagination, is different from that of past generations.1 This difference must be regarded as a source of pleasure, not as a source of apocalyptic fear and anguish for the loss of cultural and national identity.

One of the basic points in the debate on university reform is freedom of teaching. But, as David Bromwich reminds us, in the context of so-called liberal education the word “liberal” acquires a double and ambiguous meaning. In Italy, this freedom of teaching is an inviolable right decreed by our Constitution: it means the free, dialectic circulation of ideas and is the basis on which our university tradition was founded, a tradition which has never died, not even during the dark

---

years of Fascism. The values of our humanist culture, which are rooted in individualism, are positive because they give room to individual creativity and to the expression of one’s own skills and knowledge. This freedom from state control has its disadvantages as well, since it often leads to a lack of coordination between disciplines, and gives rise to professorial disengagement and a lack of academic professionalism. In Italy, university education is conceived of as a social service, and therefore, selective admission criteria are applied only in a very limited number of cases; moreover, fees remain very low when compared with the real cost of teaching and facilities. The great number of students as compared with professors requires self-reliance on the part of Italian students. The size of the university also affects the involvement and control which the institution and professors have with respect to the quality of teaching. Moreover, it seems to me that most of the time, in Italy, university knowledge does not keep up with international research standards, a result both of insufficient economic resources and inadequate updating on the part of professors. One often has the impression that university knowledge in the Italian academy is stuck in a musty provincialism, which has not been refreshed or challenged by other traditions and cultures.

In spite of the intellectually challenging presence of numerous feminist theorists and scholars, Women’s Studies, for example, has not yet become an institutional reality in Italy. While I believe that Women’s Studies departments cannot and should not be the sole sites for the production of feminist scholarship, I am also keenly aware that the absence of such institutionalized spaces creates serious problems for the elaboration and distribution of feminist theory. In Italy, as I am sure has happened and maybe still happens in the United States, the common practice of including only a token woman author to “update” traditional courses remains a most popular fiction of “universal” intellectual openness. Such a practice does not problematize issues of gender because it leaves untouched established (patriarchal) interpretive frameworks that continue to marginalize women. In other words, while I am concerned that Women’s Studies departments run the risk of becoming de facto disciplinary ghettos in academia, I also believe that they serve crucial functions, in that they open an academic space that otherwise may not exist and create opportunities to “raise the consciousness” of generations of students and specialists. They provide more than simply structural or bureaucratic advantages; they safeguard the continuity of Women’s Studies as a discipline and promise to reduce the danger of invisibility that threatens women both inside and outside the academy.

If gender, as a category of scholarly analysis, has been able to negotiate only a marginal space in Italian academia, the discourse on race
and ethnicity seems to survive on even weaker institutional grounds. The situation is very complex. On the one hand, the socio-economic problems that have resulted from waves of emigration from Northern Africa, former Italian colonies, Eastern Europe, and Asia have led to sociological research examining the impact of cultural differences on the “integration” process of the immigrants, and to an interest in developing culture-specific pedagogical strategies, especially in teaching Italian as a second language. On the other hand, discussion about the long-term significance of this “integration” and about the multicultural future that awaits Italy has been muted. The illusion of cultural homogeneity, which has already survived the complexities of the “Southern Question,” seems to create a widespread and, lately, rather voluntary obliviousness to the changes in the ethnic composition of the Italian population. Indeed, even the reactionary political plans of right-wing parties that propose to restore the cultural and ethnic “purity” of Northern Italy are informed by rather anachronistic beliefs in the possibility of reversing a process of creolization that is already well under way.

Discourse on race and ethnic difference in Italy has yet to spark even the interest of those Italian academics who deal with people of color abroad, especially in the United States. For instance, since the 1960s Italian scholars have been interested in African-American culture, especially in the dialectic of oppression and resistance viewed as central to its literature. This well-researched interest in an American minority group, however, has not resulted in a “domestic” (so to speak) awareness of racial and ethnic issues. The literary production of African-Americans in a racist social context has become a topic of scholarly (and often rather formalistic) analysis, but it has failed to prompt a comparative examination of modes of exclusion and literary resistance within the Italian cultural context. In part, this situation can be attributed to the institutional weakness of American Studies in Italy (it is often subsumed within English departments), to the need of legitimizing individual research projects, and to the resulting rarity of oppositional interpretive frameworks. In part, however, interest in racism abroad results from a complacent obliviousness to prejudice at home.

This situation has not been transformed by the aforementioned changes in the ethnic makeup of the Italian population, nor by the many serious, increasingly frequent and violent episodes of racism, especially against immigrants of color. In the academy, the study of Anglophone literatures (a symptomatic euphemism for postcolonial literatures) and the literature of people of color in the United States continues to contain “exotic” as well as esoteric overtones. It would be too simplistic to explain this scholarly reality by arguing that, as of
yet, there is no African-Italian or Asian-Italian literature to be studied. To recognize the necessity of theorizing the impact that a world-reality of postcolonialism has on Italian culture would nevertheless require a problematization of our ethnic and national identity. 

Feminist criticism partly shares this academic ethnocentrism and belief in scholarly “racelessness.” Some of the most influential Italian feminist scholars reveal flawed tendencies to decontextualize, to ignore cultural differences, and to speak for all women. Muraro’s Introduction to Il cielo stellato dentro di noi is a particularly telling example of the “colonial” critical approach I am examining. Muraro chooses to start her piece by mentioning Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club, and proceeds to subsume and erase any attention to cultural differences within a more “universal” discourse on motherhood and the symbolic order.

It seems necessary to clarify that my purpose is not to paint the situation of multicultural education in the Italian academy in dystopian terms, but to emphasize the useful scholarly function served by institutional spaces that privilege the study of race and gender issues. In the United States, I understand, these spaces are under siege. The much publicized debates on the intolerance of political correctness and on the “disintegration” of academic curricula do not yet have an equivalent in the Italian academy. In a sense, they would seem to be a rather premature academic “luxury,” in that they presume a readiness for cross-cultural dialogue that does not exist in Italy or in Europe. I wonder if a readiness for cross-cultural dialogue exists in any widespread form in the United States.

While I am aware of the dogmatic excesses of some forms of oppositional discourse, I am also very familiar with the academic close-mindedness of universalistic positions that rely on the absence of “others.” I am also aware that such universalistic positions are in danger of speaking for “others,” however sympathetically, without opening a space for a dialogue with them. In 1994, our Department of Modern Languages, together with Centro di Documentazione, Ricerca e Iniziativa delle Donne and Associazione Orlanda, will organize a feminist conference, which can be seen as a step in a new direction: a dialogue between African-American, postcolonial, Northern- and Southern-Italian feminist scholars. The decision to invite African-American and postcolonial scholars was not intended as an attempt to “keep up with the politically correct Joneses,” or to engage in a form of scholarly affirmative action. On the contrary, in a femi-

nist academic context homogeneously populated by white, European, and mostly privileged women, I see it as a scholarly necessity, as an attempt to go beyond talking about, but never with, absent "others." Ethnic and racial location does not determine meaning and truth, but it does bear on meaning and truth. To confront it is a necessary first step in learning to see and listen to the "others" among us.\(^4\)

At the turn of the millennium, the problem of multiculturalism forces Europeans to give new definition to the concept of literary Europe. The comparison with emerging cultural identities is bringing about a reconsideration of our identity as Europeans and of the traditions that we have in common, a reconsideration which is based on the dialogue with *dissimilarity* and on the formulation of a possible common destiny. The problem of multiculturalism is, therefore, not only cultural but political, as we are tragically learning.\(^5\) The true comparison between different cultures is, as Edgar Morin says, "cultural dialogics," the ability to establish a dialogue.\(^6\) To save the right to multiplicity and difference means to acknowledge that identity is produced by dissimilarity. For this reason, future Europe must be a cultural community born from the convergence of national heterogeneities.

---

