Global Feminism and *undecidabilities:* Beijing' 95 and beyond

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Abstract

This paper engages with the philosophical underpinnings of the Beijing Conference on women's rights that took place in 1995. Drawing on Derrida's concept of undecidability – which becomes here both a method of analysis and a political strategy – it critiques the universalising aspects of Beijing' 95's. In so doing, it aims to provide a remodelled strategy for a feminist global politics, one that be able to maintain feminism on the undecidable terrain of the binaries 'Woman/Man', and 'Woman/women'. This strategy, it is argued, allows the project to be at once open to difference/particularism and always prepared to universalise its aims, offering women the possibility of fighting as 'humans or women', and as a 'universal woman or particular women'. Bearing this in mind, I try to show how Beijing' 95 de-politicises the binaries I have referred to by 'closing' their undecidabilities, rendering any attempt to politically engage with them impossible a priori.

Keywords

Beijing' 95; Deconstruction; Global Feminism; Humanism; Undecidability; Universalism

Introduction

The Beijing Conference on women's rights, which took place in 1995, has been constantly construed as a watershed regarding 'global gender politics'. Having culminated with the signing of the *Beijing Platform for action* by 189 national governments, the conference established a commitment to achieve *gender equality* and/by the *empowerment of women* globally. To this end, its final report expressly called upon all the international community to take strategic action in a plethora of areas related to gender, ranging from education and economic inequalities to war and violence. Moreover, a broad and explicit 'platform for action' was designed during the meetings in order to ensure the effectiveness of what was being agreed upon. Its universal dimension and goals, it has been claimed, have propounded a fruitful political and institutional framework upon which feminists can engage globally and, so, implement real changes in women's lives (Moser and Moser, 2005).

Nevertheless, despite the way the Beijing Conference has been celebrated by (mainly liberal) feminists all over the world, a great deal of critiques has been addressed to both the Conference's aims and its ideational bases. Chief among these critics are poststructuralist and postcolonial feminists. These two groups – sometimes similarly, sometimes distinctively – have been critiquing the 'universalist' and 'essentialist' claims proposed by this novel platform for action. Mohanty, a postcolonial scholar, for instance, might point to the ethnocentrism underlying such a project, for it would be built in accordance with the 'old' principles of European humanisms, in which the Other (non-Western women) must be salvaged from its inferiority, a fact that ends up re-affirming the superiority of the West(tern Woman) (Mohanty, 1988, p. 81). In a similar vein, a range of poststructuralist feminists has been exposing the dangers and paradoxes of feminist liberal projects, which usually end up both essentialising and universalising a *particular* understanding of woman (Holm and Cilliers, 1998; Parens, 1989).

Mindful of those discussions, this article aims at providing a remodelled strategy for a feminist global politics, providing an answer to the question: 'can we rethink Beijing' 95's *main goals* and *strategies of operationalisation* without entirely disregarding its importance to a Global Feminist Project?' Grounded on the works of Derridean and post-colonial feminists, then, I intend to critique both the major *goals* of *Beijing's 'platform for action'* and its universal *operationalisation*. My criticism, however, *must not* be confused with a complete distrust of this liberal feminist project. Instead, considering the ontological instability of hierarchical binaries (a term to be explained shortly), I propose a political strategy rooted in a perpetual negotiation that takes place in two fronts: an *argumentative strategy* that takes the choice between 'Woman/Man or Human' into consideration; and an *operationalisation* that truly tackles the necessary choice between 'Woman/women'. My methodological framework, in its turn, goes hand in hand with Derridean deconstructionism, in that it tries to critically address those two binaries, evidencing the paradoxes that underpin their

structures, and seeking to come up with possible strategies to deal with – and not to extinguish – those binaries in a political manner. This is undertaken via the usage of what I term, drawing again on Derrida, 'undecidabilities'. Finally, my main argument is that this remodelled feminism promises to offer a better response to both the *multifaceted environment* where it takes place and to the *multitude of heterogeneous situations* it is required to face daily.

In order to render the article more intelligible, therefore, it will be divided into three main parts. First, I seek to give a brief account of Derrida's concept of 'undecidability', highlighting the way the decision for one of the terms in a given binary is always political. This discussion grounds my major argument explained at the end of the first section. Second, in light of the writings of Kate Nash and Drucilla Cornell, I intend to make use of the notion of the insurmountable *undecidability* between the terms 'Man or Human/Woman' to address the Beijing Conference's main goals. This idea will help us expose how a project that constantly negotiates between the *affirmation of sexual difference* and the *erasure of this difference* can be of great importance to a 'Global Feminism'. Third, I seek to offer a critique of the operationalisation of Beijing' 95. To that end, I give an account of some postcolonial critiques of the liberal idea of *universal woman*, a term which has been undergirding a doctrine of universal application of feminist politics. This critique will be followed by the proposal of another undecidability, this one more closely related to the movement's *operationalisation*: that of 'Woman (as a Western universal)/women (as plurality and particularity)'. Finally, my conclusion will resume this incipient project as well as give a brief account of its potentials.

Deconstruction, undecidabilities, and International Relations

Derrida's strategy of 'deconstruction' was introduced into the discipline of International Relations (IR) by 'the first generation' of poststructuralists' in the 90's. Those authors were mainly engaged in producing a metatheoretical critique of the discipline as a whole, interrogating the naturalness of some of the binaries that structured IR. Amongst those scholars, we may certainly include the works of Ashley (1988), who addresses what he termed 'the Anarchy *Problematique'. En bref*, the author, through the usage of a deconstructive strategy, tries to unearth the paradoxes underpinning the oft-unquestioned binary 'sovereignty/anarchy' in the discipline. According to him, the sovereign state has been construed as the source of all meaning and agency in IR, *as if* its boundaries were indeed fixed and a-historical, a sight where order and social stability reign supremely. Nonetheless, as he argues, this image of the sovereign state – which is akin to the figure of the 'modern man' – can only make sense of itself through pointing to the existence of a 'place' of pure disorder, a 'locus' that represents the very opposition to sovereignty, namely, anarchy. After all, as Ashley comes to realise, despite the fact that anarchy had always been grasped in the discipline as the 'outside' of sovereignty, the very opposition of presence, order, and stability; sovereignty could

only make sense of itself by referring to anarchy as its opposition, its very 'degradation'. Anarchy, therefore, becomes what is sometimes conceptualised as the 'constitutive outside' of sovereignty, the 'other' that offers intelligibility to sovereignty. This springs from the fact that, although anarchy is constantly portrayed as the degradation of sovereignty, it is, at the same time, what 'signifies' the sovereign state by contrast. In this sense, although sovereignty is often conflated with 'presence' (order, stability) whilst anarchy tends to be equated with 'absence' (chaos, disorder), he ends up concluding that the 'presence' of sovereignty can only become effectively *present* through the 'absence' of anarchy. As if presence and absence could no longer be ontologically distinct.

What is paramount in the work of Ashley, one of the first authors to introduce Derrida in the discipline of International Relations, is the 'logics of binaries' underwriting the divide 'sovereignty/anarchy'. As Derrida makes it clear, the Western Philosophy and thought in general has tended to be organised around 'binaries', such as Self/Other, Good/Evil, Language/Matter, Nature/Culture, and the like. Those divides often present a privileged term that suggests 'presence, purity, authenticity', and a deviated one that is usually understood as the degradation of the former (impure, supplement). What a deconstructive reading then tries to do is to interrogate and scrutinise the coherence of those binaries, rendering visible the way the privileged term can only exist as such through the existence of the deviated one, as if its purity necessarily required a trace of 'impurity' in order to become intelligible (Derrida, 1981a, p. 128). As a result, none of the terms in a binary can stand alone, they are always already in a relationship with each other, for their meanings depend on a process of constant exclusion of the other term. That is why Derrida argues that the deviated term is both a menace and the condition of possibility of the 'pure term'. After all, the process of exclusion of this 'outside' ends up being exactly what constitutes the presence of the first term. This trend can also be noticed in the works of Walker (1992, 1995), who addresses the binary outside/inside in IR; in Doty's writings (1997), in which she deconstructs the opposition 'agent/structure'; and in Zehfuss (2012), who takes the divide 'human/non-human' as a point of departure to analyse 'humane warfare'.

If none of the opposing terms in a binary has an independent existence whatsoever and their meanings can only be established in opposition to each other, then, there is simply no ontological grounds – no transcendental guarantees – that can justify the choice for one of the terms. After all, as Derrida (1998) points out when addressing the divide nature/culture, the outside (culture) is constitutive of the inside (nature) as much as the opposite is true. Consequently, to say that something is cultural or natural is always to decide upon an 'undecidable' terrain. In other words, if nature and culture are not given entities, but always presume and imply each other, the binary becomes an 'undecidable structure', one 'that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary

opposition), resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics' (Derrida, 1981b, p. 43). It follows that any choice to define something as 'natural' or 'cultural' is not just an act of attesting something, but it is always involved in a *political* decision *par excellence*, one that is always taken on a terrain where both sides can be picked, an *undecidable* terrain *a priori* (Edkins, 1999). The moment of undecidability, then, is, aporetically, the moment when a decision is taken, despite the lack of necessity of choosing for one side.

Undecidability is not a vague indeterminacy, it does not mean that anything goes, it is always a 'determinate oscillation between possibilities' and it is necessary that there should be a decision, but there is no necessity for the decision that is actually made. (Nash, 1998, p. 17)

A deconstructive strategy, nevertheless, in no way aims at 'destroying' those binaries. After all, as Derrida acknowledges, any attempt to overcome the binary ends up reinforcing the binary itself. Rather it tries to work within the logic of those binaries, rendering those 'political decisions' visible, and, finally, taking profit of their '*politicalness*'. In this sense, it suggests that we keep questioning the naturalness of the entities of a given binary, using the ontological instability of its terms in our favour (Derrida, 1999). Deconstruction, thus, works exactly to ensure that those binaries remain open to novel decisions, to novel reformulations of its content. It revolves around the acknowledgment of the fact that what we take as given when it comes to binaries such as culture/nature is instead always the result of a *decision*. However, and this is pivotal, because those decisions are never stark enough to dismantle the instability of the binary, deconstruction suggests that we *keep deciding* upon the undecidable, without ever 'freezing' – de-politicising – today's decision. After all, the acceptance of the binary as something natural and, then, unquestionable, ends up effacing its *politicalness* and, hence, naturalising political and historical situations of violence and dominance. This commitment to decision, then, is what makes deconstruction into an essentially ethico-political endeavour (Baker, 2011), one that recognises the importance of rendering 'the political' visible, working not against politics, as one might argue, but hand-in-hand with it (Derrida, 1994, 1999; Campbell, 1994).

Undecidability: a theoretical framework and a political strategy

In light of this brief introduction of Derrida's notions of deconstruction and undecidability, I argue that those two notions can offer both a fruitful theoretical framework through which we can analyse how feminist policies are being undertaken, and a paramount strategy that can be imported by feminist projects, especially by those which aim to act 'globally'. This stems particularly from the fact that a feminism that aims to expand its frontiers towards the globe has to deal necessarily with two pivotal undecidabilities. On the one hand, a formulation of global feminism needs to address the binary 'Human or Man/Woman'. On the other, such a project has to grapple with the binary 'Woman/Women'. The former suggests that the very concept of woman is always already involved

in a relationship with the concept 'man' – a term that has been historically privileged and conflated with 'the human'. Whilst the latter points to the always politically relevant distinction between universal and particular politics. In brief, are we addressing 'a universal wom*a*n' or 'particular wom*e*n'?

That said, my argument is that instead of defining a priori which side of those binaries will be privileged once and for all, feminists should embrace the undecidability that underpins both binaries. This is not to say that the project will suffer from a 'paralysis', but that there must always be a *political decision* rather than an acritical acceptance of the binary as it is stated *today*. For undecidability, as Derrida (1999, p. 66) has argued, is fundamental for politics: '[F]ar from opposing undecidability to decision, I would argue that there would be no decision, in the strong sense of the word, in ethics, in politics […] without the experience of some undecidability'. Mindful of that, this article advances the idea that a deconstructive strategy, one that takes the undecidability of binaries seriously, seems to be the best way to ensure the emergence of a global feminism that remain at once open to difference and attentive to the ethical necessity of deciding and acting globally, respecting the plurality of situations it is required to face daily as well as the multifaceted environment in which it is supposed to act. The major difficulty of this understanding of politics, and I acknowledge it, stems from the fact that it resists being apprehended by a sort of final 'programme' which only requires an (usually blind) application of its content (Culler, 1982, p. 156). Another idea of politics is required, one which can find some 'comfort' in remaining on an undecidable terrain.

Having said that, the next sections will address both undecidabilities, in an attempt to formulate strategies for a global feminism, which is here understood as (*a) feminist project(s) that keep(s) constantly questioning – without necessarily completely dismantling – national and other types of borders in favour of a global approach to the situations of women*. The subsequent section argues that, since there are no ontological grounds that can finally justify the existence of 'woman' or 'man' as such – in that they are always implying and excluding each other – women have the possibility to use the undecidability that underpins this binary in their favour, sometimes arguing for a politics that includes woman in the concept of 'human', sometimes fighting for a politics that privileges the sexual difference, *as if* women were indeed ontologically distinct from men. Finally, I address the existing undecidability of the concepts of Woman/Women, which is grounded on the opposition 'Universal' and 'particular'. It is argued that, once more, feminists can take advantage of the undecidable structure of this binary, in some occasions privileging the category of woman as being 'universally valid', and, in other cases, privileging the internal plurality of the concept. This will be undertaken via a critique of the philosophical underpinnings of the Beijing Conference in 1995, which will be criticised – *although not entirely dismissed* – for its attempts to finally resolve the undecidabilities I have been referring to.

'Human or Man/Woman': the first undecidability

Women's rights are *human rights* (UN, 1995, p. 3).
'The evidence is increasingly in that empowering *women* empowers *humanity*' (UN, 2015).

The Beijing Conference, in conformity with the previous conferences on women, is very clear as to its main purpose: to reach *gender equality* globally. In other words, states and institutions are called upon to empower women up to a point where the gender distinction can be, if not completely undone, at least starkly undermined. After all, as its full report constantly repeats, '*women*'s rights are *human* rights', which basically means that women, *as men*, are humans *above all* (Bunch and Fried, 1996, p. 200). Within that framework, the Beijing Conference ends up equating the concept 'empowerment of women' with an idea of '*humanisation* of woman', driving us to believe that the only way through which its results should be judged is by an account of how equal women are to men in a given point in time. Bearing this in mind, we are led to conclude that the conference's main goal is to transcend all the 'violent remnants' of sexual difference, by bringing women to the (usually public) spaces that only men were supposed to occupy (UN, 1995, p. 3).

This trend still seemed to remain unchanged twenty years after the implementation of the Platform, as we can see in 'The Beijing Declaration and Platform for action turns 20' (UN, 2015). Throughout the document, it is possible to notice that gender equality remains perhaps not the only but indubitably the most important objective to be reached by the Platform for action. In this regard, the document recognises that progress has been made since Beijing' 95. On the one hand, it affirms that women have been gaining a wider access to education, to the job market, to national parliaments and even to methods of contraception all over the world. On the other, laws concerning violence and other important subjects have become more equalitarian in terms of gender, diminishing considerably the violence against women worldwide (UN, 2015). The concern with gender equality becomes even more noticeable when the topic of 'human rights of women' is addressed. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the 2015 version reaffirms as well as requires a greater focus on its commitment to women's rights *as* human rights: 'The Platform for Action makes clear that the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by women and girls is essential for achieving gender equality' (UN, 2015, p. 36). Once more, the fundamental commitment is to transforming women into humans, bringing them to a certain sphere of humanity. Those results, indeed, should be celebrated by feminists, and must not have their importance diminished. What should be perhaps questioned is if the conflation of feminist progress with the idea of 'humanisation of woman' that seems to ground both the Beijing Conference and the Platform for Action that has been implemented since then.

The idea of humanity – especially human rights – within the framework of the Beijing Conference, therefore, seems to point to a sphere of 'neutrality' that would precede the very sexual

distinction between man and woman. Based on this ideal, then, feminists, articulated in different levels, have been engaging politically in the global arena. Their engagement, especially via institutional actions (e.g., the World Bank, the UN Women, NGOs), has undoubtedly resulted in important changes in favour of women in a range of areas, such as war and violence, humanitarian disasters, economic empowerment, and so on (UN, 2015). Nonetheless, despite a robust international acceptance, those feminist politics have been criticised for being unaware of the essential masculinity the idea of humanity as neutrality carries (Nash, 1998, p. 2). It has been argued, in short, that the way the opposition 'Man/Woman' has been constituted throughout (especially Western) history, has maintained the category of 'man' as *the* representative of rationality and, most importantly, neutrality (Cornell, 2017, p. 200). As a result, the idea we should bring women to this pretence neutral domain of humanity has been framed as 'masculinist' as well, for it does not seem to provide room for a politics based on *sexual difference*, in which women can fight *as women*.

This debate, opposing those who argue for a non-differentiation between man and woman, and those who prefer a strategy that points to the *feminine difference*, has been part of feminist discussions – whether in academia or in politics – for a long time, particularly after 'Feminism's second wave' (Nash, 1998, p. 126). An answer for this challenge, however, has never been accorded. After all, on the one hand, by subsuming women into a *human identity*, 'we lose the specificity of female diversity and women's experiences; we are back, in other words, to the days when 'Man's' story was supposed to be everyone's story' (Scott, 1988, p. 45). Whilst, on the other hand, to fight for *sexual difference* seems to risk essentialising the sexual distinction itself, as if there were an actual feminine space, a 'truth of woman' (Derrida, 1982, p. 67). Mindful of this dilemma, Nash (1998, p. 140) argues that the concept of woman seems to be at the very same time included and excluded from our liberal frameworks, as an *undecidable* between 'woman, the inferior term of the binary opposition between the sexes, and 'human' or 'man' the superior term, the bearer of the 'universal' liberal rights to freedom and equality'.

To claim, then, that the concept of woman is always an undecidable between man/human and woman herself is, essentially, to recognise, in accordance with Derrida, the impossibility of achieving 'transcendental guarantees' when it comes to oppositional categories – the binaries I have referred to in the preceding section. After all, 'the characteristics which are supposedly proper only to the degraded term *(Woman)* and excluded from the privileged one *(Man or human)* are actually necessary to the constitution of both and of the difference between them' (Nash, 1998., p. 12). Thereby, it follows from that that neither an understanding of woman as a 'truth', an essence apart from man, nor her dissolution into a pretence neutral sphere of humanity can be fully justified (Parens, 1989, p. 292). Consequently, we should be circumspect of any attempt to *finally resolve* this

opposition, for none of the concepts is able to transcend the system of hierarchical opposition in which it is inscribed once and for all.

Nonetheless, once we admit the existence of this undecidability, the impossibility of a final either/or decision, to paraphrase Cynthia Weber (2016, p. 19), how can a global feminism effectively act as a political project? Before formulating an answer, it is pivotal to make it clear that when I claim there is no final exit from this dilemma between equality and sexual difference, I am not implying that there should not be an effort to work *within* this system. After all, as I have argued in the preceding section, a deconstructive project has no intention to 'destroy' the binaries themselves nor to pretend that it 'is free from the form, logic, and postulations of metaphysics' (Parens, 1989, p. 293). In other words, this remodelled global feminism, by being faithful to the undecidability of woman, foregrounds *the decision itself*, all the while it acknowledges that 'to decide' is, essentially, to ontologically affirm *either* humanhood *or* womanhood. What is pivotal, however, it the fact that the decision concerning whether to affirm or to efface the sexual difference between the concepts 'woman/man or human' do not be taken nor crystallised in advance. The decision, I argue, must always await the arrival of the event, after which it can be taken. The undecidability of the binary, thereby, must be preserved.

Beijing' 95: re-opening the undecidability 'Human or Man/Woman'

To sum up, what I am proposing here is a feminist politics that accepts and embraces the undecidability that the concept of woman carries. This proposition stems from the fact that it is only by bearing in mind the existing paradoxical relationship between 'the hu(man)' and 'woman' that feminists can be aware of the viability of a negotiation between these two poles, a process of 'calculation' that comprehends the contingency and *singularity* of the decision to include or exclude woman from 'humanity' (Cornell, 2017, p. 207). The negotiation between these two poles is important in that it gives feminists the chance to appropriate the *politicalness* of this particular binary in their favour, sometimes fighting as 'humans', sometimes fighting as 'women' instead of only 'programmatically' choosing to pursue one side of the binary, without negotiating.

Beijing's Platform for action, nonetheless, by stating that '[T]he advancement of women and the achievement of equality between women and men are a matter of *human rights*' (UN, 1995, p. 16), and *human rights* only, ends up closing the 'undecidability' I have been referring to. Consequently, any feminist politics that truly follows its dictates simply renounces its capacity to negotiate between womanhood/humanhood, as the choice for a non-negotiable humanist strategical argumentation is not, at least apparently, open to reformulations (Cornell, 1991, p. 95). In so doing, Beijing Conference presumes that humanity is indeed a neutral sphere, ignoring the masculinities

circumscribing such a notion. For neutrality, as I have exposed, has been historically conflated with masculinity, a place where violence towards women is rendered invisible.

My criticism towards Beijing's humanist goals notwithstanding, my position is not a complete distrust of the liberal project which has been implemented since 1995, for, as Nash (1998, p. 2) problematises, 'are we to give up such a powerful weapon?'. As an example of Beijing's platform for action's empirical strength, then, I may point to the initiatives promoted by the UN Women designed to end violence against women (McQuigg, 2017, p. 4). In this area, particularly, the usage of gender equality as an alternative to address humanitarian emergencies in conflict and post-conflict situations have indubitably brought about a plethora of advancements recently (Ahmadi; Steans, 2011, p. 228). Besides, projects buttressed by the UN Women's Global Flagship Initiative, such as the celebrated 'Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces', launched in 2010, have been utilising the concept of women's human rights as a strategy to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in a range of countries, such as Ecuador, Egypt, India, and so on. (UN Women, 2017).

However, despite the apparent success of this humanist approach, there are times when its employment may not be sufficient. If we briefly consider the attempts to deal with HIV in Africa during the last decade, for instance, we may be led to think that 'women's rights as human rights' can sometimes not be the only possible answer (HIV/AIDS & STD Strategic Plan for South Africa 2000-2005, 2000). Initially, because the disease was shared by men and women *equally*, it seemed that a reasonable approach for a feminist project would require the *humanisation (*empowerment) of those women. After all, by empowering them – and, hence, making them into humans – activists thought they could *include everybody* in the scope of the project and, so, tackle the problem at once (Cavanagh, 2005, p. 18). Nonetheless, because we can never know for sure when women are *empowered enough* to be considered *humans*, this pretence neutral approach ended up rendering part of the sexual violence they were facing during the programme invisible. Two outcomes merit our attention here: first, despite having been granted humanity, women had much more trouble than men to 'say no' to unprotected sexual relationships, a fact that gave to men the main responsibility in avoiding the spread of the virus (Cavanagh, 2005, p. 18*)*; second, although the prevention of mother-to-child transmission was actively combatted, the focus seemed to rely much more on the children's health than on the mothers (Cavanagh, 2005, p. 19*).* In both cases, this neutral approach was not enough to prevent women from being perceived as *not quite humans*, no matter how often they were claimed to possess the same status as men. Perhaps another approach should be envisioned here, one whose main goal is not to lead woman from sexual distinction towards humanity by empowering her, but to strategically fight *as women* and *for* women, *as if* they were essentially distinguishable from men.

That said, I conclude this section by stating that Beijing's Platform for action should surpass what I call 'the programmatic use' of its humanist strategy. Put differently, the fight for bringing women towards the neutral realm of 'humanity' must not become something unquestionable, insofar as it seems to ignore the masculinity underpinning the very concept of 'human'. This is not to say that this goal must simply be forgotten, and that women should only privilege sexual distinction. On the contrary, I argue that because there are no transcendental guarantees that can finally resolve the distinction 'woman' and 'hu(man)', women should profit from this undecidability and make a political usage of it. This understanding suggests that feminists be always ready to redefine its strategies, respecting the circumstances of the event, rather than trying to come up with a final decision. After all, as I have argued, the multifaceted character of a global feminism as well as the contingence of the plurality of situations should be reminders that the project must always be exposed to self-critiques (Cornell, 1991). This move asks us not to 'close the door' to sexual difference – as the Beijing Conference seems to have done. Instead, the project's most incessant political battle should envision the very right to remain on this strategical terrain of undecidability, where women can maintain their *right to decide*.

'Woman/Women': the second undecidability

… determined to advance the goals of *equality*, development and peace for *all women everywhere* in the interest of all humanity (UN, 1995, p. 2).

The first undecidability addressed in the previous section, some authors might argue, would have the ability to undermine – *never to overcome* – imperialistic projects designed under the banner of a global ethics. After all, as Cornell indicates, by refusing to have a final decision concerning its content and, hence, rejecting all kinds of 'ultimate identity', this reformulated feminism, promises to be truly open to the *Other(s)*. Put differently, this could be a project that, for being always ready to reformulate itself, to decide differently, has the potential to embrace the radical contingence of each situation (Cornell, 1991, p. 113). Yet – and this is noteworthy – Cornell does not say that such project can avoid, once and for all, the imperialistic violence that stems from any form of identity politics, for the decision is still made in conformity with ontological dictates (Cornell, 1991, p. 110).

Even though I agree with Cornell on the importance of a feminist praxis that preserves the undecidability of 'Human or Man/Woman' as a strategy to act politically, it seems that its *global-ness* still requires us to take into consideration another undecidability, this one probably more related to the process of *operationalisation* of such a global feminist politics. This second undecidability – despite the impossibility of being entirely separated from the first one – opposes 'universality' (usually a synonym for the 'Western' experience) and 'difference or plurality' (usually a synonym for non-Western 'others'), in which the former comes to be the privileged term over the latter (Spivak, 2010).

This particular hierarchical binary has been undoubtedly perpetrating feminist projects, especially when feminism has tried to extend its frontiers towards the global level – as does the Beijing Conference –, for *Western ideas* on *woman* have constantly given birth to *universal ideals* – or *telos* – to be followed by *all women*. Consequently, we have not seldom seen universal fictions of womanhood that ignores its incapacity of effectively including all women's experiences in its scope (Ang, 1995, p. 193).

Some answers have been given to this operational deadlock. Mohanty (1988, p. 81), for instance, addresses this challenge via a critical postcolonial perspective, in which she compares the operationalisation of this global feminism with a 'violent humanism', in which Western women essentialise other women – third world women – as inferior beings that must be brought to a Western ideal of womanhood. In so doing, she argues, feminism has been constantly ignoring the tense relationship between *Woman* as an ontological ideal, and *women* as the 'real, material subjects of their collective histories' (Mohanty, 1988., p. 62). Nonetheless, the major problem for Mohanty is not the idea of universalism *per se*, but its excluding and Western content. In other words, she does not discredit all kinds of feminist solidarity across borders. Instead, she believes in the possibility of developing a non-colonising global project via a *better* and more *accurate* understanding of women's specificities (Mohanty, 2003, p. 224). In short, Mohanty's politics is to be conceived in universal terms insofar as this universalism is 'fair' to all women.

Ang, in her turn, offers us a different answer. Accordingly, rather than insisting in a feminism that can include all women, we should accept the essential *partiality* of feminist politics. In her view, no matter how inclusive a global feminism intend to be, its 'reparation strategies often end up appropriating the other rather than fully controlling the incommensurability of the difference involved' (Ang, 1995, p. 193). Therefore, in order to take differences seriously, feminism would need to engage in a process of constant limitation of its scope, respecting the incommensurability of women's sufferings. Full universality, accordingly, is bound to be another aspect of appropriation and, hence, colonisation of other women's cultural backgrounds (Ang, 1995., p. 196).

Nonetheless, rather than coming up with a final answer in favour of universality or plurality – or a synthesis of both – I claim that a better strategy for Global Feminism, is, again, to remain on the terrain of undecidability. After all, 'Woman/women' – the former representing a (commonly Western) universal understanding of Woman, and the latter the representative of the *other women* – seems to preserve the same undecidable structure of 'Man or Human/Women'. This similarity stems from the fact that, if on the one hand, the inclusion of all women in a global feminism seems not to pay enough attention to the discrepancies amidst them, on the other, their exclusion of this global woman's identity ends up essentialising the distinction itself, as if both sides were ontologically stable

and distinct. Put differently, and assuming once more there are no ontological guarantees justifying a choice for universalism nor plurality – no final either/or decision – none of these possibilities can be understood as ontological necessities (Nabers, 2015).

Beijing' 95: re-opening the undecidability 'Woman/Women'

Bearing this in mind, when the document 'The Beijing Declaration and Platform for action turns 20' states, for instance, that '[E]fforts need to be strengthened to ensure *universal* ratification and full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women worldwide' (UN, 2015, p. 37), it seems to be presupposing a certain universal notion of what women are like, or, at least, of how women should be. This understanding is what legitimates the Conference's ambition of speaking in the name of all women, on their behalf. The paradox here is that, by deciding to speak on behalf of *all women*, extending its policies throughout the globe, it ends up – perhaps unintentionally – paradoxically excluding all those *other* women they aim to include, for there is simply no room for difference no more. After all, is it still possible to address difference within a framework that claims that 'to be transformative, the future agenda must be *universal*' (UN, 2015, p. 54)? The fact that this movement, as other types of universal movements, is imperialistic in some terms, must be recognised, for, as I tried to make it clear before, it ends up appropriating the other by assimilating her into a universal self, not allowing her to 'speak' as someone apart from this totalisation, as Spivak's (2010) *subaltern woman*. Beijing' 95, then, and this is pivotal, not only fights for *women*, it fights for a 'specific woman', it creates a route towards a certain kind of 'womanhood' that is grasped as being universally valid.

The universal aspect of the Gender Framework propounded by Beijing' 95, thereby, can and has brought about some imperialist consequences during its implementation. First, the universalist basis can and, as a matter of fact, has been combined with other 'Western universal ideals' such as democracy, neoliberalism, and the like (Eunhye, 2012). Due to the universal aspects that underlie the structures of those 'ideals' – or 'ideologies', to paraphrase Žižek (1989) – those projects have been so densely combined so that it sometimes becomes impossible to define the precise boundaries of each of them. This trend is shrewdly illustrated by Purewal (2015), to whom Beijing' 95, especially its educational concerns, was used as a neo-colonial tool to legitimate the 'war on terror' during the last decade. According to her, Gender Rights were 'evoked in the 'war on terror' as evidence of the need for intervention' (Purewal, 2015, p. 51), not seldom disregarding the agency of the women in those societies. Second, the characteristics that constitute the 'ideal woman' according to Beijing are not only not able to justify its universalism, but also, tantamount to the concept of 'human' above-mentioned, they are not neutral. In other words, because what is considered to be universal tends to be conflated with the West itself, this implies that the West is always already portrayed as superior,

and as 'the one' to be followed. This understanding ends up legitimating cases of cultural, racial, and other forms of superposition, in which the agency of the 'other women' are routinely denied (Wilson, 2011). Projects destined to combat poverty amongst women in third-world countries can be taken as examples. In such cases, there is a tendency to presuppose certain ideals of 'richness', economic inequality, well-being, and the like, that, non-coincidentally, follow the predicates of Western ideals which may not be – and, as a matter of fact, are not – true everywhere (Morley, 2015; Chachage and Mbilinyi, 2003).

In light of this, I claim that a movement towards plurality, an act of asking 'to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally or definitely who he or she is' (Butler, 2005, p. 43) should remain as a possibility in our political horizons. More accurately, a global feminism should always remain prepared to sometimes waiting for the *Other Woman* to reveal herself, to *speak* and to *decide* for herself (Butler, 2005, p. 43), which implies in not defining the 'other' *a priori,* as if one could know the other better than herself. More accurately, in lieu of deciding in advance for a universalism as the project's (only) form of operationalisation when it comes to a global feminism, as if all women were already included in the project, feminists should fight in order to keep the undecidability of the concepts Woman/women open. The argument, again, is that a *multifaceted* arena as well as the *infinitude of discrepant situations* related to women all over the globe can be better addressed once the project preserves its capacities of deciding situationally – even though aware that any response may entail ontological and violent consequences. Within this framework, thus, its policy can sometimes be not to speak *on behalf of all women*, but rather to embrace singularity, to wait for the other women to speak first, a decision that in no way exclude a *future decision* for universality (Butler, 2005, p. 42).

Finally, this strategy need not be though as an attempt to entirely undermine the political framework that originated in the aftermath of the Beijing Conference. After all, its universal ideal of operationalisation has proved to be very useful in some situations. Areas related to 'women and healthy', for instance, have been starkly benefiting from universal ideals of operationalisation, as the raise in six years in women's life expectancy, since the Conference, possibly indicates (UN Women, 2015). Nevertheless, and this is not a novelty, policies addressing, for instance, poverty and global development, massively criticised in *academia* for purportedly imposing Western ideals of woman's prosperity upon others, could – and not must – rethink its universal scope. That is, an effort to wait for the *other* women to reveal herself first, respecting their singularities and our essential incapacity of including everybody. There must be space for the other women to speak, even if that means we must sometimes strategically assume our differences as being essential for this to happen. That is, by and large, what Spivak means in her first engagements with Derrida's philosophy, when she comes up with the notion of 'affirmative deconstruction', an understanding that claims that the third world

should appropriate the political logic of the binary in which it is inscribed in order to politically act in the global sphere, sometimes as a whole, sometimes as particular entities. Following her take, then, I conclude this section by claiming that the other should be allowed to occasionally assume a temporary ontological identity, a position through which she, *as a third-world woman, as a black feminist, or as a Brazilian woman,* can speak first (Spivak, 1987, p. 207).

Conclusion: Global decisions

In this article I have argued that rather than insisting in a 'global feminism' that chooses a priori for a humanist and universalist approach, feminists should take advantage of the undecidabilities that underwrite the concepts of Hu(man)/Woman and Woman/Women. Drawing on Derrida, I pointed out that those concepts configure hierarchical and undecidable binaries, in that they: 1) have a 'privileged term'; and 2) each side of those binaries have no transcendental guarantees and cannot 'stand' alone, being always signified by the exclusion of its opposition, which makes those binaries undecidable a priori. That said, I tried to show how a political approach that make usage of the undecidability of those binaries in order to act globally can ensure feminism always remain open to difference and contingency without ever giving up on its universal ideas once and for all. In other words, this particular notion of global feminism promises to be better prepared to face the multifaceted reality in which it is embedded as well as better equipped to understanding the particularities of each situation that requires its action. What is pivotal here, thereby, is that feminists be always prepared to decide following the event, privileging the event, on its undecidable terrain. Those strategies, though – and I am aware of it – do not fit straightforwardly into common notions of politics, in that it is more focused on its very application – decision – than on its content. As a result, they do not subscribe to the literature that intends to foreclose the undecidabilities of those binaries by giving a definitive answer either in favour of humanism and universalism or in support of sexual difference and particularism. This literature, as shown in the text, is not restricted to liberal feminists, but can be found even in post-colonial, constructivist and even poststructuralist feminisms, groups that sometimes fall short in acknowledging the political-ness of the terms with which they are engaging. Drawing on Derridean feminists, then, I reiterate that straightforward answers always end up de-politicising the debate by naturalising particular situations of violence and dominance that can and do buttress universalist and imperialist projects.

In order to advance my ideas, I opted for engaging with Beijing' 95 and its philosophical underpinnings. Rather than using the Conference as a 'simple' case study, I chose to use it in order to better construct my argument throughout the text. In this sense, the article then tried to make clear that Beijing' 95, perhaps unconsciously, ends up de-politicising the binaries I have referred to by *simply deciding once and for all* for a *humanist* and *universalist* approach to the issue of 'women' all over

the world. In so doing, the conference on the one hand: 1) ignores the violence and the non-neutrality that are inherent to the concept of 'human'; and 2) impedes that women fight *as and for women*, making using of a strategy grounded on sexual difference. On the other, it: 1) downplays the imperialist consequences of an acritical universalist approach; and 2) it renders any attempt to effectively deal with difference – the other women – virtually impossible. This stems from the fact that Beijing' 95 has systematically 'closed' both undecidabilities – Hu(man)/Woman and Woman/Women – so that any political involvement with these categories becomes unimaginable. There seems to be little or no room for decisions in those regards, and the project seems then to be armoured against self-critiques and reformulations.

This incipient project, nevertheless, should not be construed as a novel feminist *theory*. It is rather an attempt to formulate political-oriented strategies for a global feminism that intends not to ignore the need for continuous self-critique. In this sense and disagreeing with those feminists that discard the importance of poststructuralism – especially deconstruction – as a vehicle to (re)think politics, I claim that this 'deconstructive ethos' should be construed as 'an expressly *political* activity which ought not to be separated from politico-institutional problems' (Holm and Cilliers, 1998, p. 378). To conclude, I reaffirm the notion that undecidability must not be grasped as 'the lack of decision'. On the contrary, it is a rather strategical acknowledgment that we can never have a final decision, which is the same as *a call for decisions*. Furthermore, this framework, for also being conscious of its incapacity to end violence and imperialism once and for all, as Hooks (1986) also seems to acknowledge, enables us to keep imagining remodelled forms of diminishing violence – whether external or internal to the movement – whenever we are called to engage politically. That said, I reiterate that those strategies need not be thought of as a radical rupture with Beijing's platform for action. I still believe that Beijing's focus on *humanity* as well as its *universal ideals of operationalisation* are sometimes fruitful ways to act in the global arena. Its major problem, however, comes from its incapacity to grapple with both the multifaceted arena in which global feminist politics takes place and the radical singularity of each case. Hence, we should consider a global feminism that goes beyond the programme, accepting its eternal task of negotiating and, most importantly, deciding.

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