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THE PROBLEM THAT HAS A NAME: ON “MAMA GRIZZLIES” AND CONSERVATIVE FEMINISM

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Abstract: Despite an overall tendency to dismiss some of the struggles associated with second-wave feminism under the theoretical assumption of post-feminism, numerous issues related to women and their rights are yet to be resolved. In the USA, problems such as unequal payment and lack of proper work-family support, together with a steadfast conservative endeavor to hinder reproductive rights, prove the urgency of feminist critical stances. While fostering a culture of life, several conservative groups have been appropriating feminism in order to endorse their pro-life policies; Sarah Palin, for instance, while speaking at an antiabortion gathering, recently sparked a heated debate due to her use of the terms “mama grizzlies” and “new conservative feminism”. By focusing on Palin’s speech, this essay intends to explore how feminism is being redefined by U.S. conservative women so as to reinforce patriotism and reinstate an idealized and institutionalized motherhood.

Keywords: post-feminism, conservative Feminism, motherhood, culture of life, reproductive rights.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2010, Sarah Palin, former Alaska governor and Republican Party nominee for vice president in the 2008 presidential elections, was invited to speak at a breakfast gathering of the Susan B. Anthony List (or SBA List), a pro-life group seeking to elect antiabortion candidates for political office. Though the main goal of Palin’s speech was completely political, seeking to gather votes for the midterm elections in November 2010 and making sure that Washington would be overwhelmed by an “invasion of pink elephants”¹ (Palin, 2010), it actually caused a much heated debate on issues such as motherhood, reproductive rights, women in U.S. politics, and feminism.² In spite of Palin’s conservative

¹ The elephant is the traditional mascot of the U.S. Republican Party.

² See, for example, Collins and Schiff (2010); Holmes and Traister (2010); Roberts (2010); and Traister, (2010: 221-284).

positioning – against same-sex marriage, pro-life, pro-abstinence, and a devoted member of the National Rifle Association – she considers herself a conservative feminist or, in her own words, a “tough gun-toting pioneering feminist” (Palin, 2010). Camille Paglia, a pro-choice Democrat and a prominent contemporary feminist, has already expressed her fascination with Palin, seeing her as “an explosion of a brand new style of muscular American feminism” (Paglia, 2008a), adding that Palin, “as a pro-life wife, mother and ambitious professional represents the next big shift in feminism” (Paglia, 2008b).

Paglia’s statement, albeit seemingly absurd and contradictory, is actually in line with a contemporary post-feminist reasoning, boundless in its acceptance of multiple ideological standpoints. In addition to substituting collective action for individualist stances, post-feminists reject the essentialist positioning of second-wave feminism, especially in terms of sexuality, politicization of personal matters, and reproduction rights.³ Post-feminism, as Nancy Whittier puts it, is not about negating feminism or neglecting the efforts of earlier feminists, understanding instead that the battle has already been won (Whittier, 1995: 227). By rejecting a former “victim feminism” (Wolf, 1993), post-feminism perceives women as fully empowered subjects whose lives are a direct result of their own free choices, welcoming a “do whatever you want” approach and providing enough space to accommodate Palin’s pro-life conservative feminism. Although I agree with Paglia’s claim that “[f]eminism, which should be about equal rights and equal opportunity, should not be a closed club requiring an ideological litmus test for membership” (Paglia, 2008a), I understand Palin’s conservative feminism as a symptom of her conservative agenda, seeking to reinforce traditional values instead of protecting women’s rights.

Believing that ours is a post-feminist era, and that every problem has already been solved, is itself a problem. As we are currently overwhelmed by a severe financial crisis, issues that have always affected American women, such as unequal payment and the lack of proper work-family support are gradually worsening. As stated by Molly Ladd-Taylor, the uncertainty generated by economic recession, war and terrorism, is “leading people back to the perceived security of the home”, which threatens to restore archaic conventional values (Ladd-Taylor, 2004: 11). This essay will address the need to discuss, from a critical perspective, the issues raised by Sarah Palin’s speech so as to demonstrate that feminism is still indispensable in the USA. By focusing on the recent U.S. conservative tendency to appropriate feminism in order to validate a culture of life, I will explore Palin’s use of the terms “mama grizzly” and “conservative feminism” as a vocabulary aiming to reinstate an idealized and institutionalized motherhood, striving as well to underpin patriotic values such as American exceptionalism.

³ For a complete and thorough account of contemporary feminisms, see Showden (2009).

WHEN WE MOMS AWAKEN: THE “MAMA GRIZZLY” MYSTIQUE

While addressing an audience composed of more than five hundred antiabortion activists, Palin was very adamant about the need to oppose the healthcare reform proposed by President Obama, on the basis of it not banning the federal funding of abortion. This healthcare bill, together with an overspending administration, are therefore the object of Palin’s harsh criticism: “these policies coming out of D.C. right now, this fundamental transformation of America, well, a lot of women who are very concerned about their kids’ future are saying, ‘We don’t like this fundamental transformation and we’re gonna do something about it’ (Palin, 2010). Speaking on behalf of American mothers who worry about their children’s future and the risk of their having to cover Obama’s overspending, Palin announces a “mom awakening”, an uprising of “grass-root Americans” and “liberty lovers” who are willing to fight against “the most pro-abortion President who ever occupied the White House” (*ibidem*). These are deeply apprehensive and dissatisfied mothers who, relying on their intuition, know that something is wrong and are prepared to do something about it; in fact, Palin issues a warning: “you don’t wanna mess with moms who are rising up [...] the mama grizzly bears, that rise up on their hind legs when somebody is coming to attack their cubs” (*ibidem*). Though “mama grizzlies” has a very specific meaning in this context, referring to conservative pro-life women who oppose Obama’s administration, I am interested in analyzing the implications of Palin’s language and word choice, especially the terms “mama grizzly” and “mom awakening”, pondering as well on the ideal of motherhood underlying her speech.

In the first place, Palin consistently refers to “mother” and “woman” as if they were interchangeable, an essentialist move that reduces all women to the category of motherhood on the basis of an erroneous tautological reasoning; as pointed out by Judith Butler, “surely all women are not mothers; some cannot be, some are too young or too old to be, some choose not to be” (Butler, 1992: 15). Besides its obvious imprecise meaning, employing “woman” and “mother” as interchangeable discloses the ideal of motherhood implicitly conveyed by Palin’s speech, noticeable not only in the metaphor of the overbearing “mama grizzly”, constantly watching over her children, but also in the assumption that motherhood is an absolute and permanent feature in all women’s lives. From Palin’s standpoint, enthusiastically shared by other members of the Tea Party Movement, motherhood is both natural and divine; therefore, voluntarily ending a pregnancy is not only unnatural, but also wrong and immoral. According to Palin, mothers act by natural instinct on the basis of their “mom intuition”, and all children are a divine blessing; even an unplanned pregnancy should be carried to term, and if raising the child is not a possibility, then adoption is also “a beautiful choice” (Palin, 2010). This “culture of life” is utterly indissoluble from a moral and religious belief in “the sanctity of life”, where

life at all costs is perceived as the righteous path, and abortion as the tempting, easy, and wrong one (Palin, 2010).

Together with the members of the SBA List, Palin claims to be part of a “pro-woman sisterhood”, a group whose mission is to tell “younger women that [...] they are capable to handle an unintended pregnancy and [...] in less than ideal circumstances, no doubt, still be able to [...] give their child life, in addition to pursuing career, and pursuing education” (Palin, 2010). Palin illustrates her point by referring to her daughter Bristol, who became pregnant at the age of seventeen but, because she was “strong and independent”, not only decided to chose life and have her child, but also became a speaker for sexual abstinence, using herself as a lesson to other teenagers. This was the hardest choice, Palin admits, as it exposed her daughter to public humiliation and caused a premature ending of her adolescence; as she puts it, having a child meant the “beginning of a whole new life, absolutely living for someone else, living for her son” (*ibidem*). Although Palin had previously mentioned that motherhood was perfectly compatible with work and education, her account of Bristol’s adaptation to motherhood, emphasizing how it made her “absolutely” live for someone else, contradicts her prior statement. In fact, rather than advocating the coexistence between motherhood and other productive activities, Palin is indirectly reinforcing a “feminine mystique” or, in this case, a “mama grizzly mystique”, restoring the 1950s myth of feminine fulfillment, denounced by Betty Friedan as the belief that “truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights”, and that their goals should be finding a husband, bearing his children, and *absolutely* living for their families and homes (Friedan, 1992: 13-16).

Palin’s culture of life is thus in line with a current conservative attempt to hinder reproductive rights and “restore the ‘good mother’ to American political culture”, as Ladd-Taylor puts it, which is part of a larger endeavor to retrieve early twentieth-century “maternal feminism” (Ladd-Taylor, 2004: 11). The “Motherhood Project of the Institute for American Values”, for example, has recently launched a campaign seeking “to put the importance of motherhood on the national agenda and to foster a renewed sense of purpose, passion, and power in the vocation of mothering” (The Motherhood Project, 2001).⁴ Understanding motherhood as a calling clearly expresses the project’s aim to restore the predecessor of the “feminine mystique”, namely the “Cult of True Womanhood”, a concept coined by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and which describes the nineteenth-century bourgeois ideal that viewed women as dependent and fragile beings whose sole vocation was motherhood and domesticity (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985: 13-15). By promoting the Victorian ideal of home as a safe harbor, the “Motherhood Project”

⁴ For a more recent account of this project, see Erickson and Aird (2005).

reinstates the dynamics of the separate spheres and reestablishes a distinction between the “mother world”, based on sacrifice and tolerance, and the self-centered values of the “money world” (The Motherhood Project, 2001). Since motherhood is perceived as a universal value, economic or racial matters become irrelevant. Similarly to early twentieth-century maternal feminism, the project understands that family should be a priority to working mothers, children need a two-parent, married (and heterosexual) family, and reproduction is encouraged among the elite, but discouraged among those who are young, poor, and single (Ladd-Taylor, 2004: 11).

Going back to the roots of the women’s rights movement and appropriating feminist history seems to be a strategy commonly used by the conservative maternalist revival, with the “Motherhood Project” drawing on Jane Adams, and Palin’s audience seeking inspiration in Susan B. Anthony. While commending the members of the List for their efforts towards fostering a culture of life in the USA, Palin thanks her audience for constantly emphasizing that the earliest leaders of the women’s movement were pro-life. Indeed, the SBA List is anchored in the conviction that those who fought for women’s suffrage and protective legislation were also pro-life, and that several activists, such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were absolutely against abortion.⁵ As conservative discourse appropriates first-wave feminism, claiming it as the original and authentic feminism, several problems emerge. First, this co-optation completely ignores and demonizes second-wave feminism, reducing its various achievements to reproduction rights. Second, it is a purely anachronistic and uncritical approach which neither acknowledges nor explores the constraints and specificities of the Progressive Era (Freedman, 2006: 181-182).⁶ The fact that early activists often invoked motherhood in order to validate their demands was quite ambiguous; on the one hand, it was a tactic they deliberately used in order to achieve their goals, but on the other hand, it also reflected the ideological limits of their time (Minow, 1990: 257-266). Progressive women knew that they had to move within certain boundaries, and that they could only claim authority as wives and mothers.

Maternal feminism did contribute to the political and legislative progress of the early twentieth-century, successfully striving for women’s vote and protective labor legislation. Nevertheless, since women’s rights were constantly demanded on the basis of family and motherhood, women remained members of a “disabled class” instead of individual citizens (Kessler-Harris, 1996: 202, and 2001: 31). Furthermore, and as pointed out by Alice Kessler-Harris, the goals of most Progressive activists clashed with the interests of

⁵ See Susan B. Anthony List’s website: <http://www.sba-list.org/>.

⁶ The Progressive Era was a period of women’s activism in the USA, flourishing from the 1880s to the 1920s, and which focused on political matters, such as women’s suffrage, and on social issues, namely protective labor legislation and welfare programs for children and women (see Delegard, 2002: 328-347).

working women: “in contrast to wage earners who wanted improved conditions, shorter hours, and better pay to make their lives easier, many of the more affluent women wanted to ensure the compatibility of necessary paid work with the health and morality required to sustain the family” (Kessler-Harris, 1981: 88-89). For maternalists, preserving women’s conventional roles was a priority, and work was a necessity rather than a right. Progressive reformers were willing to support programs like mothers’ pensions, a small aid for “good mothers” who were financially deprived, but were reluctant to endorse childcare or better salaries for women (Ladd-Taylor, 2004: 9-10). Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, for instance, remained negative about child day care, while Florence Kelley strongly opposed maternity leave, fearing it would motivate women to choose work over family (Gordon, 1995: 82; Kessler-Harris, 2001: 33). Most reformers were also against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), advocated by the National Women’s Party once women were given the right to vote; since the ERA prohibited any discrimination on the basis of gender, those who struggled for protective legislation were afraid that gender neutrality would undo their achievements (Minow, 1990: 256).

In the long run, the gains of the Progressive Era would become obstacles: protective labor legislation contributed to long-term gender segregation, and parenthood was constantly (and erroneously) addressed as a private issue concerning only women. Although maternalists succeeded in creating child welfare programs and in inspiring protective laws by appealing to motherly values, their policies did not lead to an empowering, equal, and reasonable welfare system; consequently, and as argued by Ladd-Taylor, “[w]e should leave mother-worship back in the twentieth century and set our sights in the twenty-first century on expanding mothers’ rights” (Ladd-Taylor, 2004: 13). The conservative co-optation of first-wave feminism fails in its attempt to restore values that are unsuitable for our current reality, and which threaten to deteriorate women’s rights. Despite this incongruence, conservative groups have been avidly seizing feminist imagery, from the women’s movement to feminist icons, such as Rosie the Riveter, for example, reinvented by a Tea Party website in order to inspire a “Call Washington Tea Party”, having replaced the famous motto “We Can Do It!” by “I Am A Cell Phone Activist!”⁷

In addition to an unabashed embracing of the term feminist, Palin’s speech uses several rhetorical elements commonly associated with second-wave feminism. Actually, in spite of completely disregarding “left-wing feminism”, Palin is herself a result of its achievements: she is a mother and a politician and, under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, a law banning gender discrimination in education programs, Palin

⁷ See <http://www.teaparty.org/callwashingtonteaparty.html>.

was able to access education and make her own choices (Traister, 2010: 274). Moreover, she speaks like a truly “old guard” feminist; besides regularly addressing her audience as “sisters”, Palin is visibly bent on empowering women on the basis of her candid personal account.⁸ By speaking about her daughter’s experience, and by sharing her own difficult decision to have a son with Down syndrome, Palin is not only offering herself as a role model, but also using her personal report in order to raise women’s awareness. This clearly resonates with the 1960s and 1970s consciousness raising (CR) activities, a group practice that constituted the organizational and theoretical core of the women’s liberation movement by carrying out debates and public discussions where women spoke about their daily lives, sharing and connecting their personal experiences to a larger political structure (Baxandall and Gordon, 2002: 417). Even her use of the phrase “mom awakening” is evocative of the growing awareness that feminists were experiencing fifty years ago, an exhilarating time described for example by Adrienne Rich’s groundbreaking essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971), as a “time of awakening consciousness”, with the sleepwalkers coming awake and stepping into a collective reality (Rich, 1979: 34-35).

The conservative trend to seize feminism in order to validate pro-life policies, albeit very popular and recurrent, is theoretically flawed. Looking at feminist history as if it were composed of two opposite blocks (the original and authentic feminism versus the radical and tainted one) neither contributes to reinforcing women’s rights, nor stimulates human progress. As we have seen, pro-life discourses, while arguing for a culture of life based on an absolute motherhood, are implicitly advocating the return of traditional ideals such as the Victorian “Cult of True Womanhood”, or its 1950s correspondent, the “feminine mystique”, myths that have already been exposed as unrealistic and incompatible with women’s real lives. Palin’s redefinition of feminism is manifestly a political strategy, a rather clever one, as Anna Holmes and Rebecca Traister point out, as her “infuriating ability to put a new twist on feminism – after decades of the word’s being besmirched by the right and the left – allows her to both distance herself from and accentuate the movement’s maligned reputation” (Holmes and Traister, 2010).

THE “NEW CONSERVATIVE FEMINIST MOVEMENT”: A CULTURE OF LIFE AT THE SERVICE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Palin’s speech is based on the belief that American culture is in dire need of conservative “common sense” women, manifestly yearning for truth and craving for “people with a stiff

⁸ The term “sisterhood”, though commonly used in the beginning of the women’s movement so as to reinforce a feeling of solidarity binding different women, is now a dated designation that has been abundantly contested for its omission of matters concerning race, economic status, and sexuality; for a brief but accurate account of this matter, see DuPlessis and Snitow (2007: 8-9).

spine” (Palin, 2010). This is a challenge that both Palin and the SBA List are ready to meet, as they actively participate in an emerging “new conservative feminist movement”, completely distinct from the infamous feminism of the “faculty lounge at some east coast women’s college” (Palin, 2010). According to Palin, this new feminism is in line with another feminist tradition, a “Western feminism [...] influenced by the pioneering spirit of our foremothers who went in wagon trains across the wilderness and settled in homesteads. These were tough, independent, pioneering mothers, whose work was as valuable as any man’s on the frontier” and, for this reason, men regarded them as equals. Unlike east-coast women who lived in more genteel homes, these tough foremothers were given the right to vote long before the 1919 federal amendment granting universal women suffrage. “These women had dirt under their finger nails”, Palin continues, “they could shoot a gun and push a plow and raise a family, all at the same time. These women, our frontier foremothers, they loved this country, and they made sacrifices to carve out a living and a family life out of the wilderness” (*ibidem*).

A few problems emerge from Palin’s description of this so-called “frontier feminism”. In the first place, it is profoundly inaccurate, since it certainly takes more than physical effort and survival skills to outline a conscious feminist positioning. Furthermore, Palin’s account of women in early American history is simplistic and romanticized, nostalgically elevating the “pioneering mothers” who, despite their noteworthy strength and perseverance, were not regarded as men’s equals. In fact, Palin forgets that, during the Early Republic, women were completely devoid of any citizenship status, both political and economical.⁹ Since only men were considered citizens, women did not have any public existence in the Republic, being excluded from formal civic roles and denied political responsibilities (Kerber, 1995: 24). The doctrine of “coverture”, imposed by the common law governing property and family, fully incorporated women into their husbands once they got married. While a single woman, or “feme sole”, had the right to own property and make contracts in her own name, a married woman, or “feme covert”, was legally indistinct from her husband: she could not own property, sign legal documents or make contracts in her name, and she could not get an education without her husband’s permission, nor keep a salary.¹⁰

Blissfully overlooking such historical quandaries, Palin remains mesmerized by the bravery of the frontier foremothers; having grown up in Alaska, she resonates with their muscle and resilience, considering herself a “Western conservative feminist” and a “tough

⁹ The Early American Republic corresponds to the period roughly comprehended between 1789, when George Washington was inaugurated first President of the USA, and 1823, year of the Monroe Doctrine, proclaiming that the Americas would no longer be colonized by Europe (see Kerber, 1980, and Zinn, 2001: 297).

¹⁰ On the doctrine of “coverture”, see Kerber (1980: 137-155; 1995: 17-35); and Little (2002: 48-65).

gun-toting pioneering feminist” (Palin, 2010). Palin’s recurrent use of these epithets ever since she was nominated by Senator John McCain in 2008 has been the cause of a much heated debate, with some supporting Palin’s new twist on feminism, and others opposing her appropriation of the term. As already mentioned, Camille Paglia is highly supportive of Palin, seeing her as “the next big shift in feminism” (Paglia, 2008b). Shelly Mandel, the president of the Los Angeles chapter of NOW (the National Organization for Women, the largest feminist organization in the USA), is also very sympathetic towards Palin’s redefinition of feminism; though supporting her personally and not on behalf of NOW, she did introduce Palin at a speech in California in 2008 by stating “America, this is what a feminist looks like” (Traister, 2010: 272). On the other hand, numerous voices in the media, such as Gail Collins and Stacy Schiff, as well as Anna Holmes and Rebecca Traister, just to name a few, have remained unanimously apprehensive about Palin’s “greedy grab at claiming feminism as her own”, bearing in mind her reluctance to promote women’s rights (Holmes and Traister, 2010).

In face of Mandel’s endorsement, Kim Gandy, the president of NOW, released a statement clarifying that NOW, as an organization, would not support Palin. While recognizing the importance of having women’s rights advocates (not necessarily women) at every level, NOW refuses to support Palin because she does not uphold women’s rights, especially abortion, even in case of rape and incest (Gandy, 2008). Palin’s position on equal pay for women is also problematic; besides believing in “equal pay for equal work” rather than demanding full equity, she stood by Senator John McCain when he opposed the Fair Pay Restoration Act in 2008.¹¹ Michele Bachmann, another prominent member of the Tea Party Movement, recently voted against a bill granting extended maternity leave for federal employees (Roberts, 2010). From opposing reproductive rights, to working against health care reform and labor policies that would benefit women, “common sense” conservative feminists are clearly not interested in endorsing women’s rights.

Even if Palin’s appropriation and redefinition of feminism is more of a political maneuver aiming to gather women’s votes, it does leave us with a pressing question: can feminism be pro-life? According to Paglia, “[t]here is plenty of room in modern thought for a pro-life feminism – one in fact that would have far more appeal to third-world cultures where motherhood is still honored and where the Western model of the hard-driving, self-absorbed career woman is less admired” (Paglia, 2008a). Regardless of the likely allure of this new feminist twist, I understand that a pro-life stance is not compatible with feminism, for it imposes a decision and denies other women the right to make their own choices,

¹¹ On “S. 1843: Fair Pay Restoration Act”, see <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s110-1843>.

whereas a pro-choice positioning encompasses and accepts both options. As Rebecca Traister points out, not believing in abortion personally is different from outlawing it as a legislative goal: “preventing other women from exerting full control over their bodies and health, assessing their value as lesser than the value of the fetuses they carr[y]” is “fundamentally antifeminist and antifemale” (Traister, 2010: 278). Not all women can afford to be “mama grizzlies”, bravely supporting life at all costs on their own without proper government assistance. As Paglia stated, there is room for pro-life feminism in modern thought; however, I am but forced to argue that there is no room for it in modern real life.

Palin’s conservative feminism is clearly more conservative than feminist, as she does not support women’s rights nor endorses progressive policies. Throughout her interventions on women’s issues, she is manifestly fulfilling her role of the Republican token woman. Not the least interested in feminism, Palin serves the purpose of reaching out to women voters, reinforcing as well a conservative patriotic ideology by intersecting it with feminism; as she put it in her 2008 speech in California, “equal opportunity is not just the cause of feminists. It’s the creed of our country” (Traister, 2010: 274). Her frequent references to Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher at the speech for the SBA List are therefore hardly surprising. Palin’s encouragement of a culture of life is deeply rooted in the conservative framework promoted during the Reagan – Bush era, illustrated for example by the “family values” slogan used in the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign to promote programs and policies that, in addition to opposing abortion, sought to strengthen the traditional two-parent family as the virtuous core of America: husband as breadwinner, wife as caretaker (Freeman, 1993).

In this sense, the culture of life fiercely advocated by Palin implies the revival of early Republican values, since an absolute motherhood is perceived as a patriotic site capable of reinvigorating the nation’s virtues. The “frontier foremothers”, as described by Palin, were noteworthy in their exceptional capacity to work like a man and raise a family like a woman, all because “they loved this country” (Palin, 2010). The intertwining of patriotism with a resilient motherhood is strongly evocative of the position ascribed to women during the Early Republic, when women’s true value lied in their ability to bear children, since only (white and wealthy) men were considered citizens (Kerber, 1995: 24). In the Republic, women could only exist as wives and mothers, meaning that their political existence was indirectly achieved through their husbands and sons. This “Republican Motherhood”, as Linda K. Kerber puts it, integrated political values in women’s domestic life as they nurtured the male citizens in their households and guaranteed the “infusion of virtue into the Republic” (Kerber, 1980: 11).

As an idealized motherhood is made responsible for safeguarding the nation, it becomes an institution itself by being incorporated into a political discourse feeding a patriotic narrative. Though written in 1976, Adrienne Rich's landmark study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, remains as vital today as it did in the 1970s. According to Rich, our societies have been widely structured upon an institutionalized motherhood, aiming to ensure that “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” remains under male control. A “keystone of the most diverse social and political systems”, institutionalized motherhood has withheld women from the decisions affecting their lives; moreover, it has exempted men from fatherhood, calcified “human choices and potentialities”, and alienated women from themselves by incarcerating them in their bodies (Rich, 1976: 13). Coercive sterilization (practiced in the USA till the 1980s), the lack of reproductive rights such as abortion, and an ideology seeking to control motherhood by putting it at the service of the nation, are all symptoms of an institutionalized motherhood.¹² In face of the traditional values advocated by contemporary conservative discourses, Rich's words become more relevant than ever.

Towards the end of her speech, Palin clarifies the real aim of her conservative feminism and its constitutive culture of life: “America is going to be an even more exceptional place as that culture of life is embraced [...] in this most exceptional country, we're gonna be even more exceptional with that culture of life being ushered in” (Palin, 2010). Derived from Alexis de Tocqueville's remarks in 1838 on the exceptionality of the organizing principles and political institutions in the United States (Tocqueville, 2003: 40, 94), American exceptionalism fosters the belief that the USA is an exemplary, distinctive, and unique country, extraordinarily exempt from history, and an exception to the laws and rules governing other countries.¹³ Drawing on the Puritan concepts of mission and election, American exceptionalism makes use of a secular and theological discourse constituting the United States as “the fulfillment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire”, as put by Donald Pease (Pease, 2009: 7).¹⁴ Nevertheless, and as Lipset points out, American exceptionalism is essentially a double-edged sword, since it entails a dynamics of exclusion and inclusion welcoming those who are truly American for perpetuating the American Creed, but shunning those who threaten the exceptionality of the United States, the dispossessed whose disempowerment proves the limits of democracy, liberty, egalitarianism, and individualism (Lipset, 1996: 17-28). If, according to Sarah Palin, fostering a culture of life will reinforce American exceptionalism, then failing

¹² On forced sterilization, see Baxandall and Gordon (2002: 420).

¹³ My remarks on American exceptionalism are drawn from Lipset (1996: 13); Pease (2009: 7-9); and Santos (1994: 4).

¹⁴ For the influence of Puritan rhetoric on American ideology, see Bercovitch (1975).

to nourish that culture by endorsing reproductive rights will represent an abominating disloyalty towards America. What conservative feminism and its culture of life implicitly say is that abortion is not exceptional; therefore, it is utterly un-American.

According to Estelle B. Freedman, “feminism is neither static nor monolithic”, and much of its historical resilience comes from its adaptability, since it is “a politics in process, ever-changing and ever-adapting to new ideas and local circumstances” (Freedman, 2006: 100). Furthermore, “differences” are at the core of feminism(s), indelibly marked by nation, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality; as Butler points out, “feminism presupposes that ‘women’ designates an undesignatable field of differences”, standing as “a site of permanent openness and resignifiability” (Butler, 1992: 16).¹⁵ Still, despite its openness and malleability, I believe that feminism cannot accommodate a positioning that denies and negates itself; once feminism is reduced in order to serve the purposes of a political agenda, it stops being feminism. As demonstrated by its history, feminism does change (and will continue changing), according to the ongoing debates stemming from specific contexts and women’s needs; its transformation is nonetheless motivated by real deprivation and persistent inequalities, not by scheming politics. In the end, one is not born, but rather becomes, a feminist; as remarked by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow, “the understanding of oppression is not an essential inheritance: it is a creation of ongoing political analysis” (DuPlessis and Snitow, 2007: 8). The charm of Palin’s conservative feminism, as noted by Traister, comes from her form of female power, “utterly digestible” to those who have “no intellectual or political use for actual women: feminism without the feminists” (Traister, 2010: 236). Whatever “brand new style of muscular American feminism” Palin may bring (Paglia, 2008a), it will always be conservative and regressive, and never beneficially progressive.

CONCLUSION

In spite of a public ideology venerating family and motherhood, parenting support in the USA is meager and below standards: paternity leaves, flex time, and job sharing are available to only a few, and day care programs, both public and private, are scarce and insufficient. The political and financial crisis we are currently undergoing, besides threatening to deprive us of our basic human rights by pulling the rug from under welfare states, is also a catalyst for a conservative nostalgia promising to restore security by retrieving traditional values. As this essay demonstrates, feminism remains mandatory today, not only for the persistence of many familiar concerns, such as work equity,

¹⁵ On feminism and “differences”, see Crosby (1992: 130-143).

violence against women, and reproductive rights, but also because of the risk of feminism being seized and corroded by conservative discourses.

Conservative feminism and its steadfast endeavor to hinder reproductive rights should be perceived as an opportunity to rethink our discussions on motherhood and abortion, especially as concerns the rhetoric of choice. As pointed out by Ladd-Taylor, abortion should be addressed as a right rather than a choice, since the fact that women alone have to choose isolates and overloads them: “[i]f the decision to have (or not have) a baby is seen as a choice, not a right, women who are young, poor, disabled, or on welfare but still ‘choose’ motherhood can be criticized for making a bad choice” (Ladd-Taylor, 2004: 12). Actually, and according to Mary Poovey, both motherhood and abortion should be seen as rights, thus warranting the same level of health care in order to “combat the moralization and individualization of women’s sexual activity that holds only the woman responsible for sexual self-control” (Poovey, 1992: 253-254). A keystone of U.S. feminist discourse, the rhetoric of choice should nevertheless be replaced with a vocabulary of rights; besides overburdening women, a pro-choice stance wrongfully dismisses the State from ensuring its citizens’ wellbeing.

The impulse to declare feminism dead is almost as old as feminism itself; curiously enough, the word “postfeminist” was used for the first time in 1919 (Traister, 2010: 5). Though younger generations are predominantly reluctant to call themselves feminists, the momentum of feminism remains powerful; in addition to the numerous activist groups collaborating on a global scale while striving for women’s rights, aspirations for sexual and reproductive rights, equal pay, and political representation for women, are stronger than ever (Freedman, 2006: 87). Sarah Palin, in spite of her conservative agenda, represents a breakthrough for the Republican Party, not only as the first female candidate for vice president, but also as a hypothetical presidential candidate for the 2012 elections. Rather than disregarding Palin’s attempt to redefine feminism, her stances should be perceived as an opportunity to discuss the implications of her language. Dissent, debate and conflict have always moved feminism forward; constantly in formation, feminism will (and must) continue, whether as post-feminism, third-wave feminism, or simply feminisms.

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