

Affidamento

Or: Why (and when) relationships between women are the basis of female freedom

(From a lecture by Antje Schrupp: <http://www.antjeschrupp.de/affidamento>)

Translated from German by Shoho Kuebast)

Affidamento is an Italian word that is difficult to translate into German [or English - the translator]. The verb "affidarsi" means "to entrust oneself/to".

Affidamento describes in the thinking of Italian feminists a relationship between two women that becomes the basis for female freedom.

Why - and when - are relationships between women the foundation of female freedom? Because, of course, not all relationships between women are expressions of feminine freedom. There are also unfree relationships between women; there is also power and competition, oppression and domination among women. So, it is by no means just a matter of simply saying: "We have to strengthen relationships among women". It is about understanding what constitutes the free potential of women's relationships and women's groups. So why, and when, are relationships between women the foundation of female freedom?

The thesis behind the word "affidamento", to entrust oneself, is: Whenever a woman confides her *Begehren* (German for desire, aspiration, request or in "Zen Jargon" one could see it as *ultimate concern* - left untranslated throughout this essay) to the authority of another woman. So, when a woman's *Begehren* finds a way into the world with the help of someone else who has "more" and who therefore speaks with authority. Because then a woman is free and supported to act in the world.

That relationships between women are the basis for female freedom was already a basic idea of the women's movement in the 1970s. [...]Using the keyword "consciousness raising", they found out that comparing their ideas with those of men or working through male images is not beneficial. [...]For this idea of relationships among women, numerous images and terms were created that are still around today. "Women are strong together," for example. Or talk of women's solidarity. Or the idea of women's networks and women's alliances.

This view soon turned out to be untenable. There was a feeling of unease about this "we" of women, because women soon discovered that there really is no such thing as a "we". That relationships among women are shaped more by inequality than by equality.

Not just that there are women with different opinions. There are women who talk more than others. Women who say more interesting things than others. There are very different wishes and intentions. There are different social origins and different skin colors. Today there are also different religions, cultures and ethnic groups, all of which cannot be reduced to a single denominator: "We women".

For a long time, this difference was seen as a problem among women. Women who refused to subordinate their personal wishes and intentions to the "movement" were quickly seen as traitors or egoists. You may know the picture of the crab basket: as soon as one climbs up, the others pull it back down again. Women who did not have the "right" feminist opinion were suspected of

lacking solidarity or lack of awareness. Very often, then, relationships among women did not mean freedom, but bondage. It has been a difficult road to understanding the way relationships among women enable feminine freedom.

Many women therefore preferred - and if we are honest, we still prefer - society and relationships with men. Perhaps that is why the struggle for equal rights with men or the recognition of women by the male-dominated institutions came to the foreground.

So, it is the question: How can we think about women and freedom together? So that we can show solidarity with feminism, but are not tied to certain topics and pulled down from the crab basket again and again?

The Italian women philosophers were the first to clearly distance themselves from the ideal of equality - both between women and men and between women. Since the 1980s, they initially rejected emancipation feminism, which had set itself the goal of equality between women and men, i.e., understood female freedom in analogy to male freedom and tried to enforce it with political programs such as quota regulations and plans to promote women. "Don't believe you have rights" is the actual title of a book, which in the German translation means "How female freedom comes about". (Book by Antje Schupp with Italian feminist group - the translator)

Rights cannot guarantee female freedom, because they are not granted to women because they are women, but on the contrary precisely independent of them - namely because they are equal to men. If women are not the same as men, then they have no rights either - for example Muslim women who wear a headscarf.

The love of women for freedom, their *Begehren* to be free, which is expressed in the women's movement, but includes the idea that being a woman and being free are not mutually exclusive. So it's about understanding what freedom is that doesn't deny being a woman. In the past, before the women's movement, it was often said that when a woman freed herself from female role models, when she became a pilot or researcher, that she would do it even though she was a woman. As if being a woman was a handicap.

Today, after the women's movement, this is no longer the case. Today we know that a woman is free to do whatever she wants, that being a wife does not limit her to anything. And that she doesn't have to give up being a woman in order to be free. In other words, a woman who plays soccer today is not doing a male job, but a female one. And a woman who wears pants doesn't take on men's clothes, she wears women's clothes.

That's a woman's freedom. When you lose neither freedom nor womanhood. But that brings us to the meaning of difference: female freedom also means the freedom to actively differentiate yourself from other women. To do something other than what the majority of women think is right. When women are free, they have no common interests and opinions simply because they are women. And yet they do not mutate into neutrals, into sexless beings. They are women and that means something. Only that this meaning is now free - it does not depend on its nature, its genes, its supposedly feminine nature, which is somehow defined, but what it means is being negotiated and can therefore also change.

I recently heard a lecture by a teacher who said that education always has something to do with a difference: the difference between what I already am, can and may do, and what I am not, can and may do. And I think he's right about that. The only question is: How do I find out about this difference? And what difference has something to do with (one's personal) *Begehren* and not just with the higher - better - faster - further (desire) of our performance society? Because not everything I want to be or wish for has something to do with the aspiration that grows out of the love for freedom. Sometimes I just want to function. Or compete with others.

The answer is: freedom is in relationship. Women are not automatically linked and related to one another by gender; they must actively enter into these relationships with one another. And not relationships in general, but specific, the respective woman who has a relationship with another specific woman.

That freedom is something that arises in a certain way from a relationship, from a dependency, is initially an unusual thought. Because usually Western philosophy did not make relationships the basis of freedom, but autonomy, that is, "self-legislation", the detachment of the subject from the restrictions through relationships. The others and one's own relatedness were not seen as the basis of freedom, but rather as their limit: My freedom ends where it restricts the freedom of others.

In this respect, the female discovery of freedom in relation to one another is a discovery that is turning the western worldview inside out; it is not only limited to women, but is also an offer for men. "To put yourself in relation" is also the title of a book, edited by Ina Prätorius, in which authors from various fields, from political science to economics, from theology to biology, show how such a "world view of freedom in relatedness" the thought patterns of these subjects changed.

The other / the difference is not the limit of my freedom, but its basis. Only because there are others, can I change. I don't have to stay what and how I am, can overcome this difference between what I am and what I want to be.

If you look from this perspective, the differences between women are no longer a problem, but the basis of female politics. Women's politics then no longer means demanding rights and better living conditions for women, addressed to men, institutions, politics, for example, but attention to what women do, what they say, how they behave. "Women's politics" becomes a "politic of women".

A woman's freedom is not based on men, but on the inequality of other women, on the difference between my *Begehren*, the otherness, the other woman with whom I have a personal relationship.

Begehren and authority describe not only a relationship of difference, but also of inequality. One more and one less.

To put it differently, *Begehren* is not the same as subjective will, i.e., what I want with my intellect and my reason and what goals this reason sets me. Because of course my mind and reason are by no means free. They are shaped by a patriarchal culture that is thousands of years old. My reason is vain, selfish. Behind it stands my self, the subject of western philosophy. It is entirely shaped by the "this-world" order and therefore not free.

Begehren is something else. It is, so to speak, open to the beyond, to transcendence, to what is really other. My self/my reason, is simply looking for self-confirmation in the greater number of others: encouragement, help, advice, training. *Begehren*, on the other hand, does not strive for self-affirmation, but for new beginnings. Luisa Muraro once said that it leans out of the window of reality. Precisely for this reason it takes the mediation of female authority in order not to fall out.

Begehren cannot be created and made. It is awakened. It recognizes moments of quality and is drawn to them. For example, from a good book, an intensive conversation, a new idea. But these “sparks of light of quality in the world”, as Chiara Zamboni once put it, or this experience that something “fits 100 percent”, as Dorothee Markert put it - that cannot be repeated or brought about according to plan.

You've all probably experienced this before: a perfect vacation, but if you go back to the same place a year later, it's not so good anymore. *Begehren* must therefore be willing to experiment; it always tries something new.

My *Begehren* is therefore not available to me either; I need the authority of others to even recognize it. Envy, for example, can be an indication that a desire lies dormant in me that I didn't even know about before. What if we no longer interpret our being different from a woman we are jealous of, as competition or envious, but as an incentive to investigate where we are actually going? Envy and how to deal with it is a good example of how a difference, a conflict, can be the starting point for a new beginning.

Back to the question: How do I experience the difference - for example between what I already am and what I am not yet? I do not experience it abstractly by sitting at the desk and writing down a list of my goals, but I experience it in the encounter with a woman who is different from me, and whose otherness arouses a *Begehren* in me, myself - and with it the world - to change.

But I need the other woman not only to discover my own *Begehren*, but also to follow it. To act and be active in the world according to that *Begehren*. Because the world has not waited for the *Begehren* of women, for a long time it has even denied that it even exists.

In order to be able to act in the world, female requests needs a mediation, a mediation with reality as it is. A woman who brings her *Begehren* into the world without the instigation of female authority runs the risk of being mistaken for insane (which is why so many women used to be put in asylums). Or fail.

In his film »Against the Wall«, the director Fatih Akin describes very impressively the problem that a woman with her *Begehren* cannot find a place in the world. She only has two alternatives: Either adapt to traditional roles or literally run "against the wall" and die. Fatih Akin has not found a solution to the problem. There is no female authority in his film, only female *Begehren*. But that alone is not enough. A *Begehren* that suddenly faces the world will not move anything, it is exuberant, wild, but it literally runs against the wall. *Begehren* cannot be addressed directly to the world; it needs the mediation of an authority.

An example that clearly illustrates this is the *Begehren* of a child who is hungry and wants milk. The child screams, it presents its *Begehren* to the world, so to speak, but it does not address the world directly, but rather the mother. In other words, someone who has more in terms of what s/he wants, who knows where the refrigerator is and how to get the milk out. There would be no point in having the baby yelling at the refrigerator.

Female authority is there when there is an answer to a woman's *Begehren*, when a mediation succeeds between this *Begehren* and the world as it is found. It can be advice, an example, concrete help. It cannot be generalized.

Authority cannot be established, sued or demanded either. It is there or it is not there. For example, whether what I am saying here today has authority for you or not, whether it addresses a *Begehren* in one or the other, offers an answer to something, that is not in my hand.

Authority can also exist in groups, "circulate". Words of authority can be used in conversations, but they are only ever perceived as such by those who have a corresponding *Begehren*. Authority is always dependent on the situation, on the context, it has to be justified again and again in a relationship, it cannot be codified in badges of rank or titles.

That is also the big difference between authority and power. Power depends on the majority. It congeals into positions and status; it does not have to be constantly renegotiated. One can sue for power, invoke it.

Authority, on the other hand, does not need majorities. All she needs is the relationship between two women. That is why authority also makes people independent of power - I can, for example, assign authority to a woman who is not at all recognized by the majority, but who has answers to my *Begehren* that help me to act in the world with my wishes and intentions. And so, authority can undermine power - because it enables new standards and judgments.

If there is female authority, then I do not have to deny reality, I no longer have to run my head against the wall, I am able to act, even in difficult circumstances.

My freedom does not depend on rights or opportunities given to me, but on whether I can find a way to follow my *Begehren*. Freedom is staying on the trail of your own *Begehren*.

And that is also the reason why *affidamento* relationships, i.e. authority relationships among women, are the basis of female freedom: Because they make the individual woman free from the majority opinions of the world, the main extreme, the usual things that are taken for granted, without making her disoriented and lost. By recognizing authority, by finding authorities to mediate between my *Begehren* and reality, I become capable of acting. I am no longer dependent on the recognition of those in power or the majority opinion, because I have found a different standard.

But I can still act. And by acting, I create new differences again. Action means that I actively differentiate myself from other women. That I do or say something that is new and that will

probably meet with opposition. That will lead to conflicts, but at the same time to new differences and new possibilities for female freedom.

After the ideas of Italian women were initially strongly rejected in Germany (because they were accused a return to the supposedly »naturally feminine«) the ideal of equality is no longer mentioned anywhere. Instead, people speak of »diversity« today. The differences between women (or cultures and religions) are not only accepted, it is generally said that this diversity is fertile and beautiful.

Does that mean that Italian women's appreciation of difference has become a social reality?

I do not think so. Because diversity is not just difference. Diversity is diversity - the colorful variety from Merci (chocolate brand), for example: some taste like marzipan, others like hazelnut, but ultimately everything is chocolate. Some are Christians, some are Muslims, some are women, some are men, but ultimately we are all human. Behind the ideal of diversity there is still the norm, the one, the essential, the common point of reference.

They are symmetrical differences - based on a common axis. But it is about asymmetrical differences. So about two things that cannot be compared or deduced from one another. It's not about apples and pears - which can be compared with each other, because it's always fruit that tastes one way or another. It's about the difference without symmetry, about the difference, let's say, between apples and stirring wheels. It makes no sense here to ask which is better or worse.

If the difference is asymmetrical, there is no common frame of reference. But what if that also applies to people, to men and women? What if there is no such supreme judge when it comes to the difference between people? What if neither human rights, nor God, nor a common "human being" decides what is right and what is wrong, but what if we have nothing but our difference? And with it our differences - because the difference is not just a special taste, but the other, that which is not like me. Difference always means conflict.

For example, Lynndie England, the soldier who tortures prisoners in Iraq - she does not simply adopt male behavior from the war, but invents a new way of being woman. This affects all women and challenges us to judge, also to dispute. Her actions are not just a colorful facet of female diversity, but here we are dealing with a real difference between her and me.

Emancipation has made it possible for women to participate in all areas. But at the same time, it also promotes the lack of freedom of women, as the example of Lynndie England shows, but also, for example, the many women who rush back and forth between kindergarten, office, gym and going to the disco. Hannah Arendt, for example, once said that it doesn't suit a woman when she gives orders. Many feminists found that very unemancipated from her. But from the perspective of female freedom, from the perspective of the affidamento, this is not a pushing back of women to traditional femininity. Hannah Arendt herself did not lead a typical female life. Rather, it is a judgment of female authority, for example for me, who feels a great discomfort in the face of all the commanding and functioning career women that we now have. No, it doesn't suit a woman when she gives orders, nor does it suit her when she tortures prisoners. Not because it goes against feminine nature. Obviously, it doesn't. It's because I don't agree with the behavior of these women.

So, it is not so easy to deal with relationships that are - or at least can be - the basis for female freedom. It's not about just learning something nice from another woman, that women support each other, that they form networks and combine their different resources.

It's about the very revolutionary thought that freedom is only possible if I have a relationship with someone who is really different from me. One with whom I have differences. Another who can not only do something better, but who does something that is new to me, that I may have even thought was wrong up to now. Because only this really differentness of the others, this real difference, which is not diversity, but conflict, enables me to discover something really new, to change my entrenched opinion, to break out of given thought patterns and paths - in other words, freedom. Freedom from your own limitations.

It is obvious that this idea is very radical. It is well known that relationships of difference are traditionally carried out differently - in court, for example. An external judge decides who wins or loses. And if there is no such judge, then there is war.

Diversity can be accepted if it provides a little variety and folklore under a common top denominator. The really other, the difference and all its differences, are still seen as a problem and a threat.

So, we are still breaking new ground when we try to understand "*affidamento*" as a relationship of difference.

Lecture on August 27, 2005 at the Begegnentreffen in Bielefeld and on June 4, 2007 in the creative workshop in Frankfurt am Main.