



FRACTURING THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC DIVIDE THROUGH ACTION: READING *LES CAHIERS DU GRIF*

A AÇÃO COMO FRATURA DA DISTINÇÃO ENTRE O PRIVADO E O PÚBLICO: UMA LEITURA DE *LES CAHIERS DU GRIF*

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Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s was innovative and productive, despite its tendency—similar to that of previous emancipatory movements—to forget its past. This paper proposes Françoise Collin’s notion of transmission as a fruitful relationship with which to palliate this tendency and to propel women as innovative participants in the symbolic. In order to do this, I analyze *Les Cahiers du Grif*, the first francophone magazine of “second-wave” feminism, as an example of how women’s actions in their plurality fractured the division between private and public as presented by Arendt and thus produced a fertile corpus for disciplines in the humanities. To close, I argue that the difficulties presented by this corpus are a positive consequence of the magazine’s plurality, as well as a worthy legacy that transmission challenges us to focus on.

Keywords: Transmission; Private-Public; Plurality; Françoise Collin; Hannah Arendt; *Les Cahiers du Grif*.

O feminismo dos anos 60 e 70 caracterizou-se pela sua inovação e criatividade, apesar de uma tendência – semelhante à de movimentos emancipatórios precedentes – para esquecer o seu passado. Este artigo propõe a noção de transmissão de Françoise Collin como uma forma de relação frutífera que permite atenuar esta tendência e impulsionar as mulheres como participantes inovadoras do simbólico. A análise de *Les Cahiers du Grif*, a primeira revista francófona da “segunda vaga” do feminismo, permite mostrar um exemplo de como as ações das mulheres na sua pluralidade fraturaram a divisão entre privado e público tal como é apresentada por Arendt, produzindo assim um corpus fecundo para disciplinas de humanidades. Para finalizar, defendo que as dificuldades apresentadas por este corpus são uma consequência positiva da pluralidade da revista, assim como um legado digno que a transmissão nos desafia a aceitar.

Palavras-chave: Transmissão; Privado-Público; Pluralidade; Françoise Collin; Hannah Arendt; *Les Cahiers du Grif*.

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Introduction

Françoise Collin, born in 1928 in Braine-le-Comte (Belgium) and passed in 2012 in Saint-Sauveur (Belgium) after having lived in Paris for over thirty years, considered the two capital problems of the 20th and 21st centuries to be (1) the transformation of the relations between the sexes, and (2) the transformation of “generation and filiation regimes” (Rochefort & Haase-Dubosc, 2001, p. 2). An analysis of the lack of women philosophers in the history of philosophy immediately shows how intimately these two issues are connected: Collin argued early on that this absence was not because no woman impacted intellectual history, but because those who did, which were many more than anyone expected, were systematically excluded from transmission.² From this perspective, the question is no longer whether women have contributed to our common world and history, but why they have been excluded from historiography. In Collin’s words, “the absence of women in history is more a matter of their eviction from power than their lack of activity” (1993, p. 14).

As feminists in the 1960s and 1970s showed, this eviction has often been sustained through the distinction between private and public, for “it is the public sphere that decides what is private and what is public, as well as the rules of access into the public” (Lamoureux, 2010, pp. 151–152). The issue is that women’s position in the symbolic sphere has excluded them from the public space, relegating them to the private. Collin’s emphasis on intergenerational relations and relations between the sexes showed an acute awareness of both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of the political as well as the complexities in human relationships that each of these entails. Women’s inclusion in the public sphere, as well as their establishing relationships in which they have something worth transmitting, are deeply related to the need for a symbolic sphere in which women are participants, both in their relationship to men and women (synchronic) and its relationship to coming generations (diachronic).

This paper’s aim is to present a specific corpus that enriches and clarifies these two problems by resisting traditional categorization systems in academic disciplines and by being a worthy contribution to fields such as philosophy, feminist political theory, history and literary theory. In order to do this, I will first introduce Françoise Collin and her concept of transmission in contradistinction to historiography. Then I will present Collin’s emphasis on Arendt’s notion

² Collin was well aware of the virtues and difficulties in these women philosophers’ recovery in history, as well as of the methodological issues that surround it. A renowned example is *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, directed by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, to which Collin contributed *Différence et différend. La question des femmes*. See (Collin, 1992b, pp. 243-273). For a closer look at Collin’s reflections on methodology and contributions to a historiography of women, see (Collin, 1993, pp. 13-24) and (Collin, 1986, pp. 81-92), as well as the issues published in *Les Cahiers du Griff* dedicated to Gertrude Stein (n. 22), Hannah Arendt (n. 33) and Ingeborg Bachmann (n. 35), among others.

of natality and focus on how it allows the Belgian philosopher to problematize the divide between nature and culture and conceptualize action as linked to the capacity of beginning something new and setting off trains of events into an already given world. Then, I will argue that the difficult position between private and public of *Les Cahiers du Griffon*, the first “second wave” feminist magazine in French, seems to indicate that it is one of these new events. Finally, the aim is to demonstrate that, despite the difficulties in placing the magazine within current academic discipline divisions, it is a corpus that still today contributes to our present and to current thinking in multiple disciplines, both in the field of theory and of practice.

1. Expecting the Unexpected: Transmission and Filiation

A look at feminist movements and their relationship with the times that preceded them shows that presenting a feminist corpus as worthy of transmission is a difficult task even within feminist disciplines. As Fina Birulés explains,

[Past] emancipation movements, including feminine emancipation –of a marked modern, illustrated and progressive disposition–, set their eyes on that which is radically new, on the future, in such a way that they drew a lot more strength from forgetting their history and the conviction that there was no past worthy of being remembered, than from remembering it. (2014, p. 89)

However, there is a price to pay when one chooses to forfeit the past and deny that which is given. In the case of women, this is that each one, insofar as she thinks and writes as a woman, must begin her language anew:

Thus, until few decades ago, almost no one argued against those statements according to which all that could be found in women’s historical past were shreds of events and of fortuitous actions. These statements appeared to coincide with the impression that, in the field of culture, each new [woman] author was an exception, needing to start discourse anew, as if there wasn’t (...) a tradition in which she could insert herself, as if she were in an acosmic space, inserted in a present with no thickness, without past or future. (Birulés, 2014, p. 88)

Collin referred to this feeling of acosmism when she expressed women’s general desire that “something of their work—what? —of transformation be passed on, not just as an achievement, but as a dynamic to be prolonged” (1986, p. 82).³ In line with emancipation

³ Elles voudraient que quelque chose – quoi? – de leur travail de transformation passe non pas seulement comme un acquis mais comme une dynamique à prolonger. (All translations are mine, except those that have official translations in English as specified in the Bibliography section).

movements, 1960's women's liberation movement had also expressed a general desire to forget the past and start anew from an equalized standpoint:

All the women who participated in the beginning of feminism during the 60s and 70s, were taken back, whatever their age, to the same generation. It was even one of the proudly claimed virtues of the movement. Feminism year zero. All of them were born together, at the same time. The choice of the notion of sorority which prevailed at the time clearly indicates the nature of this equalizing phenomenon that denied women's real age in order to give them all one same age: that of feminism's. (Collin, 1986, p. 85)⁴

Collin talked about the problem of equating equality to collective identity in several texts,⁵ but what is relevant here is what the concept of "feminism year zero" seems to imply: a lack of recognition of previous feminist movements. Whatever feminism preceded them, "it doesn't seem to have manifested except by sporadic flashes" (Collin, 1986, p. 81). As Karen Offen points out in *European Feminisms: 1700-1950*,

most [1960s feminists] knew very little or nothing of the historical struggles of their feminist predecessors, with the singular exception of Beauvoir's rather unflattering account (...). They began from "Year Zero" to reinvent feminism. (2000, p. 393)

Beginning from where one stand—and one is always already standing *somewhere*—means knowing what it means to innovate and preserve. This makes revisiting previous feminist movements only insufficient: speaking from what has been given includes revisiting women thinkers who are heterogeneous to us, who do not conform to contemporary feminist ideals. Collin's concept of transmission is especially valuable precisely because it is capable of answering to that which is given as well as to the appearance of something new, it offers a framework from which to think about *what* is to be preserved and *how* to innovate.

As pointed out above, the issue is not that women have done nothing throughout history, but rather that women's actions enter the symbolic as subject to a cycle of repetition that reproduces what has been given but doesn't generate anything new.⁶ In consequence, transmission is especially problematic when it is practiced between women (or from women to men). In Arendt's terminology—but not in her words, for she does not speak of this—, this difficulty can be expressed as follows: women would be transmitters of the activity of labor,

⁴ Toutes les femmes qui ont participé à l'émergence du féminisme des années 60, 70, ont été ramenées, quel que fût leur âge, à la même génération. C'était même là une des vertus, fièrement revendiquée, du mouvement. Féminisme année zéro. Toutes naissaient ensemble, dans le même moment. Le choix de la notion de sororité qui a prévalu alors indique bien la nature de ce phénomène d'égalisation qui niait l'âge réel des femmes pour leur donner à toutes l'âge du féminisme.

⁵ For more on the tendency to eliminate differences between women, or, in other words, to confuse equality with homogeneity or sameness, see (Collin & de Villaine, 1983, pp. 7-16).

⁶ There is a second option: as exceptions that ratify the rule.

which does not produce any objects, whether material or symbolic.⁷ In the case of women, then, transmission is inexistent because there is supposedly no legacy to be transmitted, nothing to leave as inheritance.

Aware of the necessity for a legacy and for a way to transmit it, Collin advocated for a form of filiation that cannot be reduced to reproduction, one that pays attention to women's position in the symbolic order as innovators. What Collin was pointing at goes beyond access to language and thought: she aimed at women being *creators* of language and thought. As she would later further expand on,

few women are beginners of a movement or even authors of a work that is a landmark in the history of art, not because they are affected by a congenital weakness in the matter, but because if they are able to gradually take their place in the art scene and its history (...), still today they struggle to play the role of *initium* or to be recognized as such. (Collin, 2009, p. 104)⁸

Collin's primary concern here was women's symbolic role as innovators. This role and its necessary connection to transmission clarifies her distinction between transmission and historiography. To her, historiography (*histoire*) is linked to knowledge, "its nature is scientific" (Collin, 1986, p. 84), which does not mean that it isn't also political, but it is not necessarily its main aim. In Collin's own words, historiography "is a retrospective job, of excavation and resurrection of that which existed and was unduly buried" (1986, p. 84).⁹

Transmission, on the other hand, is a bidirectional ethical and political relationship, a praxis that establishes symbolic filiation. For a legacy's transmission to be possible, then, the older generation must consider what the newer generation's context is and modulate its language to that context. Correlatively, a willingness to listen by the new generation is necessary to decide if and how they want the legacy. This means that the old generation must accept its own disappearance, accept that the new generations' appropriation of whichever inheritance cannot be determined, and will most probably be unexpected, surprising, maybe even undesirable; a legacy, after all, is "a given to be interpreted" (Collin, 1986, p. 90). Collin summarized this relationship many years later with the following words: "there is a legacy, but

⁷ Collin criticizes Arendt's traditional view of labor in her article "Agir et donné": "Arendt has a tendency to ignore and relegate in the inhuman or prehuman the symbolic part that governs the gestural, which informs the order of necessities itself and which is why eating is never a matter of simple hunger satisfaction." (Collin, 1992a, p. 29).

⁸ Peu de femmes sont les initiatrices d'un courant ou même les auteures d'une oeuvre qui fait date dans l'histoire de l'art, non pas parce qu'elles seraient affectées d'une faiblesse congénitale en la matière mais parce que si elles peuvent peu à peu prendre place sur la scène de l'art et dans son histoire, (...), elles peinent aujourd'hui encore à y jouer le rôle d'*initium* ou à y être reconnues comme telles.

⁹ As she points out in "Histoire et mémoire ou la marque et la trace", a history of women requires both the recuperation of forgotten women in our past and the elaboration of the layers and events in history which were specific to women. It's crucial to keep in mind that one of the main issues is that current historical periodic division doesn't necessarily coincide with events as they actually affected women's lives (Collin, 1993, p. 15)

it is up to both the old and the ‘newcomers’ to assume it and to redefine it in the new context: memory summons imagination and imagination is nourished by memory” (2006a, p. 9).¹⁰

In short, transmission is key to thickening the past—and, more urgently, a past that includes women—without forcing an old world onto a new generation. Establishing filiation relationships that ensure transmission without forcing a specific predetermined legacy on those who receive it opens the symbolic to women being innovators and not only mimics. Through transmission, expectation of the unexpected becomes reciprocal.

2. Natality: a Subversive Ontological Category

Collin’s reading of Arendt began in 1983 and continued until her death in 2012. She was one of the first to introduce Arendt’s thought into feminism, and she did so not by claiming Arendt as a feminist, but by seeing in her an original thinker whose writings, when confronted, became a fruitful source for reflection in political philosophy (Collin, 1983/2006b, p. 209), including her analysis of the private-public pairing.¹¹ Even if problematic and controversial, Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, published in 1958, has by now become a classic in political philosophy. In it, she outlined a conceptual distinction between public and private that is based on a separation of spaces. This in turn led to specific effects on what the political is and, as Collin insisted on pointing out, on who is a *who*, a political actor and as such human in its proper sense.¹² Arendt’s private-public distinction was largely criticized by feminists,¹³ but Collin found in the notion of natality the cornerstone on which to subvert the limits set by Arendt herself.

As early as 1985, the Belgian philosopher published an article in *Les Cahiers du Griff* titled “Le temps natal” where she reviewed the feminist movement using Arendt’s division of the *vita activa* into labor, work and action. Arendt’s definition of the political—clearly outlined by its publicness and the creation of a common world, an *inter-esse*, where one appears through word and deed—became Collin’s groundwork: she pinpointed that feminism’s specificity lay on its attention to this common world. According to her, one of feminism’s struggles was the

¹⁰ Il y a un héritage, mais il appartient à la fois aux anciennes et aux ‘nouvelles venues’ de l’assumer et de le redéfinir dans le contexte nouveau: la mémoire appelle l’imagination et l’imagination se nourrit de mémoire.

¹¹ For an account on Arendt and her insufficient take on women’s oppression and the women’s movement, see (Collin, 1999, pp. 175-185).

¹² I refer to Arendt’s own words: “A life without speech and without action, on the other hand (...) is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.” (Arendt, 1958/1959, p. 157). One is left to wonder, then, what happens to those who are denied speech and action, both of which, by definition, occur in public.

¹³ The best-known critiques can be found in (Rich, 1981, p. 240-254; O’Brien, 1981, p. 93-115).

realization that to appear in the common world – and thus be seen, heard and judged—one had to be present in the symbolic.¹⁴ She argued that

(...) women, recognized as *animal laborans*, slowly admitted into the stage of *homo faber*, are still excluded from the *activity* that is constitutive of the *polis*. (...) They haven't been able to access this type of existence except by constituting their own *polis*, their own political life, among them. This is an important position that remains, in my opinion, insufficient, except to establish a definitive separatism, and for that matter illusory, or to wait for [*escompter*] a miraculous effect of spontaneous contamination. (Collin, 1985, p. 82)¹⁵

The separatism Collin referred to was the one practiced by many feminist groups throughout the 60s and 70s, one which she herself participated in during her involvement in the GRIF (*Groupe de recherche et d'information féministes*), as I will further explain later. But the implicit question still stands: if women have been relegated to labor—which to Arendt remains rooted in the natural world—, how to fracture this position and break into the symbolic order?

2.1. Natality as the Fracture Within the Nature-Culture Divide

The fact is that Arendt's distinctions in *The Human Condition* are helpful to analyze precisely one of the aspects that the famous “the personal is political” condemned. As is well known, this slogan denounced the general conviction that relationships in the private sphere are natural—a word often used interchangeably with necessary—, and thus cannot be analyzed from a political perspective. Through it, feminists contended that the private is not immune to politics and that the reason why domination relationships within the private are considered natural is because they are established as prepolitical by the political sphere. But did Arendt not reproduce this assumption?

In her analysis, Collin showed that the political theorist valued each of the three activities—labor, work and action—differently, together with the private and public spheres. Since for Arendt the political realm is the most valuable, all those aspects that are usually linked to the private sphere seemed to be dismissed or scorned. The Belgian philosopher thus highlighted that in *The Human Condition* a division separates all that is connected to action—

¹⁴ Collin's emphasis on the symbolic sphere is especially relevant when she talks about the political subjectivation of women, a problem she argues by separating the political and the ontological subject. For more on this, see (Lamoureux, 2010, pp. 155-166).

¹⁵ (...) les femmes, reconnues comme *animal laborans*, admises peu à peu au stade de l'*homo faber*, restent encore exclues de l'*activité* constitutive de la *polis* (...). Elles n'ont pu accéder à ce type d'existence qu'en constituant leur propre *polis*, leur vie politique, entre elles: position qui reste, me semble-t-il, insuffisante, sauf à s'installer dans un séparatisme définitif, et d'ailleurs illusoire, ou à escompter un miraculeux effet de contamination spontanée.

the public, the common world, dialogue, appearance, plurality, etc. —from all that is linked to naturalness—the private, labor, work, love, and family—, even if it is, at times, porous. Collin saw in Arendt the remains of the metaphysical duality between nature and culture that characterizes the philosophical tradition that the political theorist herself rejected and criticized, leading her to value culture –and all other aspects related to it– above nature.

However, the Belgian philosopher also detected natality as the key concept within Arendt’s thought that eroded the same duality she ratified. In the arendtian conceptual network, natality is the condition of being born that invests human beings with the capacity to begin, to introduce the unexpected into a world that is given. It is fundamental to understand that Arendt did not advocate for a voluntarist subject: natality, and through natality action, answers both to a given world and to the ability to introduce something new with unforeseeable consequences. Natality includes a passive, natural aspect—being born a woman or a man, in one country or another, in this or that community, an aspect Arendt didn’t forget and a necessary condition for action—, and an active, cultural aspect, which is that each human being, through the act of being born, introduces something new into the world. This is why, according to Collin, the notion of birth blurs the separation between nature and culture, between *zoe* and *bios*.

The argument breaks down in the following way: birth is both a biological category—as Ricoeur criticized Arendt for—and the ontological basis for our capacity to begin, the event that interrupts time as a series of causal events.¹⁶ Through birth each human being in its singularity is introduced into the world—interrupting the flow of natural time—, and through action each human being introduces the unexpected into the world again. In birth, however, not all is new: newness is introduced into a world that is as it is, that has been handed to us and into which each human being is inserted. In a nutshell:

By asserting that the very fact of birth is beginning, Hannah Arendt unwittingly formulates an eminently subversive statement that breaks the secularly scaffolded wall (and which, in a way, she ratified) between nature and culture, between body and spirit, between women and men, between private and public, between non-world and world, between *infans* and adults. (Collin, 1992a, p. 45)¹⁷

¹⁶ Ricoeur argues that rooting action in natality is highly problematic because birth is a biological category while action is a political category, making them fundamentally irreconcilable (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 215). He doesn’t expand his argument any further except to say that “it is necessary to define natality in relation to action, and not vice versa” (ibidem). Collin uses Ricoeur’s quick dismissal as an example of philosophy’s refusal to consider natality as a valid ontological category. She points out that this issue does not arise with mortality despite it also being a fundamentally biological category. She further questions this by asking whether this refusal is rooted in the fact that natality is intrinsically linked to the body of a woman – the mother (Collin, 1992a, pp. 42–43).

¹⁷ Sans en être conscient, Hannah Arendt, en affirmant que le fait même de la naissance est commencement produit un énoncé éminemment subversif, qui brise le mur séculairement échafaudé (et entériné d’une certaine manière par elle-même) entre nature et culture, entre corps et esprit, entre femmes et hommes, entre privé et public, entre non monde et monde, entre *infans* et adulte.

So it is that the line between private and public, between what is given and the start of something new, is fractured by the human condition of natality. Birth, traditionally considered to be part of the private, is itself part of the public, the *inter-esse* that arises from the coming together of singular beings into the plurality that is constitutive of politics (Collin, 1999, p. 201).¹⁸ Newness thus appears in a contingent given world, fracturing Arendt’s attempt at a clearly outlined distinction between private and public. It is also in this sense that natality allows for unexpected political subjects that have traditionally been denied access to the public to suddenly emerge in the political sphere, expanding the range of plurality within it.

Collin thus achieves two objectives. First, she explains how newness appears into an already given world through action’s unpredictability. Given that action is the constitutive activity of plurality, this also explains how that which has hitherto been excluded from the public sphere appears and proceeds to fight for its demand to be present in the symbolic. Second, by restoring natality’s ontological claim as the principle of action, she shows the fracture in the nature-culture divide despite its direct connection to a woman’s body; or, perhaps, even because of it. The analysis that follows, focused on *Les Cahiers du Grif*, is an example of action that becomes part of the symbolic sphere through transmission.

3. *Les Cahiers du Grif*: Chronology, Practices and Format

Les Cahiers du Grif was a magazine published by the GRIF, a group of feminist women in Belgium. This group was born on 11 November 1972 in Brussels during the first *Journée des femmes*, with a stunning number of 8,000 women participating despite the organizers expecting, at most, 1,000. With the intent to propel the day’s enthusiasm forward, “a big open register on a table [allowed each woman] to join, according to [each woman’s] tastes and aspirations, one of the many workshop groups which would consolidate the impact of the day” (Denis & Van Rokeghem, 1992/2019, p. 41). These groups concentrated on all kinds of topics and practices, such as consciousness-raising groups, analysis of sexual discrimination in

¹⁸ For a different and critical take on the role natality plays in Arendt’s thought, see (Cavarero, 2016, pp. 107–120). Like Ricoeur, Cavarero inverts the ontological relationship between birth and action by arguing that when “the unbalanced relationship between the newborn and the mother” (Cavarero, 2016, p. 120) is introduced into the equation, Arendt’s natality can no longer be substantially significant for a horizontal, reciprocal political space. According to Cavarero, this notion of natality only holds if one relies on Arendt’s analogies “which are more suggestive than probable” (ibidem). While Cavarero effectively analyzes one of Arendt’s blind spots, that of the mother and the relationship of dependency between mother and child, here she also seems to understand Arendt’s notion of the political as a space that is purely horizontal and reciprocal and emerges from autonomous agents, thus simplifying what is a complex field of often conflicting relationships between different actors who cannot be without one another.

different fields, and urban and media analysis. Some of these would, as of 1973 and until 1978, “be embodied in *Les Cahiers du Griff*” (Denis & Van Rokeghem, 1992/2019, p. 41).

Les Cahiers du Griff was the result of Collin’s enthusiasm. The summer before the first *Journée “F”* in 1972, the Belgian philosopher returned from the United States with a fresh perspective and full of excitement: “whatever its weaknesses and its gaps”, she would write in 1978,

[American feminism] has a lot to teach us, we Europeans above all concerned with coherence and rationality. First, priority of practice over ideological subtleties (...). Finally, coincidence of personal and collective pleasure with militant work so that it doesn’t block but rather unleashes desire. (Collin, 1978, p. 332)¹⁹

Having witnessed feminism in the United States, where practice wasn’t second to theory and women began consciousness-raising groups, magazines, bookstores and cafés, as well as concerted actions of protest, before having reached a clear theoretical consensus, Collin desired to start a publication in Belgium. Her intention was for it to go beyond theoretical reflection and become a space in which women authorized each other to write without waiting on men’s approval (Denis & Van Rokeghem, 1992/2019, p. 55). A first, clear step was for it to become an available platform for the groups that had been born during that first *Journée “F”* to present their research and work. In an interview thirty years later, Collin would describe the basis for the project as follows:

For me, feminism and *Les Cahiers du Griff* weren’t so much an intellectual operation, but rather the foundation of a common space of meetings, confrontation, thinking, and action, a space that brought women together; not only intellectuals, but also women from all backgrounds, from all ages (...). (Rocheffort & Haase-Dubosc, 2001, p. 2)²⁰

The first issue, entitled *Le féminisme, pour quoi faire? (Feminism, to do what?)*, appeared on 11th November 1972, and was sold simultaneously at the second *Journée “F”* in Brussels and at the Maspero bookstore in Paris. Much to their surprise and excitement, all 1,500 copies were sold by the end of the day: they had created a magazine at “a moment when the francophone textual landscape was almost empty” (Collin, Denis, Desmedt & Van Rokeghem, 1978, p. 6), and it sparked interest. By the time the group dissolved in 1978, 7,000 copies were

¹⁹ Quelles que soient ses faiblesses et ses lacunes, il peut nous apprendre beaucoup, à nous Européennes avant tout soucieuses de cohérence et de rationalité. Priorité de la pratique sur les subtilités idéologiques tout d’abord (...) Coïncidence du plaisir personnel et collectif avec le travail militant enfin, de telle sorte que celui-ci ne barre pas mais libère au contraire le désir.

²⁰ Le féminisme et la fondation des Cahiers n’ont pas tant été pour moi une opération intellectuelle que la fondation d’un espace commun de rencontres, de confrontation, de pensée et d’action, un espace qui rassemblerait les femmes, non pas les seules intellectuelles mais des femmes de tous les milieux, de tous les âges (...).

being printed per issue (Collin et al., 1978, p. 6), with readers in France, Quebec, the French-speaking part of Switzerland and northern Africa (Braidotti, 2014, p. 599).

Two traits show *Les Cahiers du Grif*'s worth and originality: (1) a serious commitment to plurality, which led to (2) the translation of those women's actions into a magazine which itself became part of the symbolic sphere. In order to prove the first point, I will concentrate specifically on those aspects that make up and maintain the magazine's dialogic²¹ structure which, in turn, promotes the appearance of a plurality of voices. After a general introduction to present how each Cahier was made, the text's formal configuration through an article's commenting by different members will be analyzed. This will show how this format allowed for the publishing of different and sometimes opposing opinions on core feminist topics in one same issue. I will then move on to the difficulty of placing the magazine within current disciplinary divisions and advocate for its relevance in several current fields of knowledge.

3.1. *Les Cahiers du Grif*'s Founding Aspirations

The group's intentions were clear as of its first editorial: "The team responsible for the GRIF is politically and ideologically pluralistic: it is united by a specific investigation and by common objectives" (GRIF, 1973, p. 4). As explained above, this was already part of Collin's initial enthusiasm: a magazine that included all women and all their interests. The "hard" nucleus of the Cahiers was composed of women who expressed their interest in participating from the beginning and came from different backgrounds and belief systems, such as laywomen, Christians and free thinkers; some were mothers, others weren't; most had strong links to intellectual careers such as journalism, but women who worked in factories and were involved in union movements were also a part of it.²²

To ensure plural participation beyond this small group, they organized thematic meetings which, in the beginning, were held after the publication of a Cahier. However, a special box underneath the editorial for the fourth *Les Cahiers du Grif*, published in October 1974, announced that the fourth Thursday of each month in the Maison des Femmes at Rue du

²¹ When I speak of dialogism, I refer to Mikhail M. Bakhtin's notion in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Even if Bakhtin uses the concept to describe a new and original structure in Dostoevsky's novel, his definition of dialogism as opposed to monologism is applicable here, for it is also fundamentally answering to "the task of constructing a polyphonic world and destroying the established forms of the fundamentally monologic (homophonic) European novel" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 8), except that in this case the monologism being destroyed is that of a public space occupied specifically, and often exclusively, by men.

²² For more information on the background of the women who made up the "hard" nucleus of the group, see (Brau, 2007, pp. 227–252; D'Hooghe, 2011, pp. 23–34).

Méridien in Brussels would be dedicated to a “meeting of the committee and the board of *Les Cahiers du Grif* open to anyone who wishes to actively participate in the elaboration of the magazine” (Les Cahiers du Grif, 1974, p. 18). As of autumn, 1974, then, meetings preceded each Cahier and the topic and the people responsible for making it were decided through these debates and dialogues. This last point is important: while there was a series of women—among them Collin, Marie Denis and Hedwige Peemans-Poullet—whose presence was constant throughout those five years, each Cahier came into being thanks to a specific interest shown by a specific person or group who then became responsible for obtaining contributions and producing the number.²³

Therefore, the sequence for each issue’s composition as of the fifth Cahier was the following: a meeting would be called in which all women could participate; during the meeting, a certain topic was proposed and the women who participated could, on their own terms and according to their concerns and experiences, express themselves; these meetings were then recorded and later deciphered (Brau, 2007, p. 232). The main article of the issue was usually based on this discussion, and the topic was the basis for the rest of the issue, which was completed with articles from the writing committee and from the discussion group, as well as invited writers, activists and intellectuals. Some of these would later become renowned authorities in their respective fields, among them Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, H elene Cixous, Nancy Huston, Louise Vandelac, Agn es Varda, Fran oise H eritier and Maria Antonietta Macciocchi. It wasn’t mandatory for women who participated in the discussion groups to contribute, although it was encouraged since the Cahiers’ inception: “may all those interested [in certain topics] contact us: we will not progress unless it is by growing collaboration” (GRIF, 1973, p. 4).

In line with the founders’ refusal to publish an academic journal, the magazine consisted of an editorial, reports on different actions and protests, and announcements on events such as film festivals, art exhibitions and magazines. The last two parts of the magazine generally consisted of book reviews and a recommended bibliography on feminist approaches to the main topic or literature books written by women. In addition, some of the numbers also contained letters sent by readers.

As the editorial group itself pointed out in the third Cahier, the magazine’s different sections were meant to enable all types of interests and different complexities of theoretical and

²³ For a chart listing the topics and the people responsible for each number see (Brau, 2007, p. 235).

practical discourse. In their reply to reproaches expressed by readers who considered some of the articles in the magazine to be too difficult, or the tone too intellectual, the GRIF defended themselves by advocating for the importance of publishing all kinds of essays, directed at all kinds of women (and men), all the while admitting “that some texts will appeal to some, and other texts will appeal to others” (Grif, 1974, p. 4), and expressing their intent that “all women find inside our Cahiers at least some pages that appeal to them personally” (Grif, 1974, p. 4).

3.2. *Les Cahiers du Grif's* Dialogic Formal Distribution

One of the magazine's most unique traits, and certainly one for which it is remembered, is the GRIF's originality in how an issue's main article was presented on paper: the main text occupied two thirds of a side of a page, while other third was reserved for comments written by the rest of the editorial group, which, as has been said, varied from issue to issue.²⁴ This distribution allowed the GRIF to show the dialogic structure of the magazine not only in its inception and elaboration, but also in its visible spatiality, in its printed, material appearance. Figure 1 is from the first article, “Féminité et féminisme”, in the first number, *Le féminisme, pour quoi faire?*

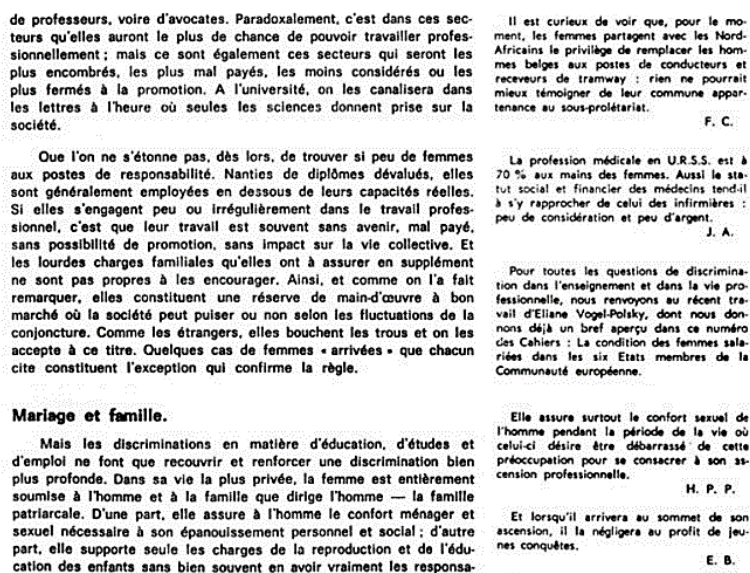


Figure 1. A sample of a page's format. (Collin et al., 1973, p. 7)

The peculiar format is explained to the readership in the following way:

²⁴ Not every issue had a main article in this format, and those that did generally only contained one. *Les Cahiers du Grif* number three, titled *Ceci (n') est (pas) mon corps* is an exception: it contains two commented articles.

This article is the product of numerous exchanges and contacts. Its sole ambition is to present some dominant topics in feminism in order to offer them to everybody's [*de toutes*] reflection and discussion. It was annotated by some of us, and we felt it necessary to leave these notes all their spontaneity. They vouch for the complexity of the problem and the plurality of perspectives. (Collin et al., 1973, p. 5)²⁵

These early lines are proof of the founders' aspirations²⁶ and introduced the readers into a very specific practice: that of making visible, also in its written form, different women's views. The format's merit lies in how it shows the many layers in a discussion: not only was the text commented, but these comments could be commented on by the author. In the case showed above, the writer, Collin, replied to some of the comments made by her colleagues, sometimes agreeing with their statements, other times disagreeing with them, and still others expanding on what she had previously written. Her answers were often a matter of detail or clarity in her own explanations; just as often, she focused on pointing out what hadn't been understood or needed to be more carefully analyzed.

One of the most interesting and clear examples of how this format provided a platform for different opinions on common issues to be presented is *Les femmes et la politique*, the sixth Cahier, published in 1975 and coordinated by Jacqueline Aubenas.²⁷ The main article, written by Aubenas herself, consisted of an analysis on women's supposed disinterest in politics and the reasons behind it. In the first section, she stated that politics could have two meanings: (1) in the narrow sense, that is, participation in state administration through elections in parties, parliament and government; (2) a wider sense: "management of the common good or well-being, or its transformation" (Aubenas, Bouquey, Dury, Lacroix, & Peemans-Poullet, 1975, p. 5). Peemans-Poullet—whose concern for socio-economic analysis and action is patent throughout the magazine—contended that "common good" was something that could not exist within a society where each group held opposing interests, and that for this reason it was a "dangerous word" (Aubenas et al., 1975, p.5). Aubenas's article was from then on meticulously analyzed and discussed by her colleagues. Peemans-Poullet intervened once again to point out that Aubenas's unequivocal use of "non-participation" as a sign of disinterest excluded the possibility of it being proof of a conscious refusal of society. Raymonde Dury followed: in response to Aubenas's emphasis on the division between the public as the space of those who

²⁵ Cet article est le fruit de nombreux échanges et contacts. Il a pour seule ambition d'articuler quelques thèmes dominants du féminisme pour les proposer à la réflexion et à la discussion de toutes. Il a été annoté par certaines d'entre nous et nous avons cru devoir laisser à ces notes toute leur spontanéité. Elles attestent de la complexité du problème et de la pluralité des perspectives.

²⁶ This first number was produced by the six women who since the first *Journée "F"* had considered it a project worth pursuing: Collin, Peemans-Poullet, Denis, Jacqueline Aubenas, Éliane Boucquey, and Marie-Thérèse Boucquey.

²⁷ The choice for the issue's title, *la politique*, and not *le politique*, is not naïve. The distinction was "debated at length by the organizers of the Cahier du GRIF" (Lewin, 1976, p. 48). I will concentrate only on the main article; the whole Cahiers, however, is a skillful display of different views on the relationship between politics and women. It's worth pointing out that the editorial promised a future Cahier titled *La politique des femmes* that was finally never published.

dominate—assigned to men—and the private as the space of those who are dominated—assigned to women—, she argued that the biggest divide was not the one between men and women, but rather between those “who dominate (men and women) and those who are dominated (men and women)” (Aubenas et al, 1975, p. 6). This dynamic continued throughout the text. Some pages later, when Aubenas stated that women’s disinterest was one facet of a general detachment, Éliane Boucquey added: “I don’t like it when we accuse women of being disinterested in politics. As I see it, their indifference is a response to a politics that marginalizes their lives” (Aubenas et al., 1975, p. 9).

Throughout these pages, concrete positions as to what “politics” means, or whether the meanings are important, and how to approach women’s participation or non-participation, were exposed. They were clearly distinct on their emphasis, as is illustrated by Dury’s claim that it is not a matter of men over women, but of those who dominate over those who are dominated, a common argument at the time. The last comment, by Peemans-Poullet, was the final critique: “I think that your analysis lacks a reflection on political power’s function with regard to social relations and our exact place in these social relations” (Aubenas et al., 1975, p. 22). This exchange is only one of the many examples of how the format achieved what Diane Lamoureux describes as “round tables and testimonies which respond to each other in some way” (Lamoureux, 2016, p. 58); that is, the dialogic structure pointed at above.

Furthermore, the themes, arguments and perspectives addressed throughout these twenty-four issues may at first sight appear outdated in their excessively Marxist vocabulary and approach. However, they are very much alive and contemporary: they analyze, discuss and condemn housework distribution between men and women, lower payrolls for women compared to men, domestic violence, the objectification of women’s bodies in media, women’s relationships with their own bodies and with maternity, and the impact of urban policies on women’s lives, among many other topics. They also address the very problematic relationship between women and knowledge when they reflect on a language of women or on psychoanalysis. It is the conjunction of these topics with the way they were presented, an intentional and direct commitment with a plurality of voices, that constitutes *Les Cahiers du Grif*’s strongest and most attractive trait.

4. Conclusion: Breaking into the Symbolic through Action

As M. Xosé Agra points out, the separation of private and public is not undesirable in itself: it is the organization of sexual difference in these two realms and its political uses that feminists argue against (Agra, 1992, p. 164). As mentioned above, the famous feminist slogan “the personal is political”—often also expressed in the formula “the private is political”—was meant to reveal the presupposition according to which “the public sphere is determined by common laws, while the private is left to each one’s freedom” (Collin & Kaufer, 2005, p. 27) and condemn the extension into the private of the sexed domination relationships which reigned over the public sphere. After all, while it is true that all relations—including, of course, those of love and friendship—can have political effects, it is also true that they cannot be equated to the relationship between individuals—citizens—who share a public space (Agra, 1992, p. 164). Or, in Collin’s words:

one could nonetheless add that if the private is political, the private and the political do not fully overlap and cannot be fully identified: a certain opening separates them in which the old tragic theme is insinuated: to sometimes even love someone who is politically or militarily adverse (the enemy). (Collin & de Villaine, 1983, p. 12)²⁸

The blurring between private and public began with the magazine’s elaboration: while it is true that the women-only discussions organized before each issue were led in a private space, the aim was effectively to bring them into the public sphere through the magazine’s publication. This led to one of the many discoveries made by women through these discussion groups: that their concerns and experiences were also part of the political state of affairs, even if invisible.

Les Cahiers du Grif was the platform from which women’s experiences, some of them linked to labor and others linked to work, could jump into the public sphere. The whole magazine was designed so that all women could access it, and it was also made available in such a way so that all women who so desired could *participate* in it. The peculiarities of the magazine allowed for the dynamics of the group, even if confined to the private, to be reproduced—within the material limits of the medium itself—in its public appearance: the dialogical structure of the magazine materialized a practice which was in itself political, for it consisted of women speaking and listening, committing and acting, thus introducing a plurality of new voices and practices into the common world. By practicing separatism, or what Collin called women’s own *polis*, they went from the *animal laborans*, to the *homo faber* (the creation of *Les Cahiers du Grif*, an object which would from then on be part of our common world) to

²⁸ « On peut cependant ajouter que si le privé est politique, le privé et le politique ne se recouvrent cependant pas absolument et ne peuvent être identifiés : une certaine ouverture les sépare, dans laquelle s’insinue le vieux thème tragique : il arrive d’aimer même ce qui est politiquement ou militairement adverse (l’ennemi). »

action and, thus, the political. In this sense, the magazine is an example of what the whole movement did during those decades: by creating a space where women's deeds and speech was made public, they introduced new concerns, interests and ideas into a world that had persistently excluded them, thus shaking relationships between women and men as they had been established for centuries. Action, founded on natality, sprang from the given and modified it.

One of the fundamental—and most tragic—traits of action is precisely that its effects cannot be previously measured or guaranteed: access to the political through action entails unforeseeable consequences despite our intentions. Collin's transmission answers to the unexpected by acknowledging that it is a form of filiation that requires an ethical commitment from all those involved: it acknowledges that it cannot assure a specific type of legacy. It *can*, however, give future generations of women, and men, a cosmos—a contingent given—from which to act, so long as they choose to stand on it and accept the risks entailed in acting.

I have argued that the magazine's openness to plurality is one of its strongest suits. This includes the women who participated—and, later, men as well—the topics covered, the viewpoints and the format. As Caroline Glorie explains in her article “*Le GRIF, la forme revue au féminin?*”, this plurality is one of the main traits that complicates its legacy (2017, p. 6). The first series—the one I have focused on here and which ran from 1973 to 1978—might be suitable for a feminist studies field, but it certainly wouldn't do the second series any justice, given that it included non-feminist texts by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. Should political theory truly remain nonplussed to the many articles analyzing the dynamics in domination relationships both in the private and the public sphere? Would philosophy be skilled enough to approach those Cahiers dedicated to literature and language? This rich, lively and pluri-faceted trait of the magazine is still now a profoundly fertile ground for thought. It is also what hinders it being introduced into current syllabuses; the fact that it was produced and openly signed by women adds yet another layer of difficulty to the matter.

The issue, however, must not be avoided: its complexity is precisely what makes it a fruitful corpus to establish a past that authorizes our present discourse, while also deepening it, both in clarity and richness. In this sense, the Cahiers was the first step towards what Collin called a heritage to be transmitted: women of the same generation found a way to create their own symbolic space and propel it to the public sphere. They worked and fought to earn that space, but the question remained whether they would be left to oblivion or transmitted to later generations. Collin argued that if women are to appear in the public space, this public space

must itself be populated by past women who endure in time, and that whether we agree with them or not is another matter. The fact is that the voices found in *Les Cahiers du Grif* still inhabit our time, both because of what concerns them and because of how they made it public. Following transmission's logic as Collin conceptualized it, the question of whether we accept the challenge or evade it depends on our disposition to answer to their call.

Collin's concern for transmission probably explains why the second series of *Les Cahiers du Grif*, which began in 1982 in Paris, took on a more theoretical shape and dedicated some of its issues to discussing the works and creations of women such as Jutta Brückner, Hannah Arendt and Ingeborg Bachmann, and still included studies on men such as Georg Simmel. These publications showed these creators' singularity and were, I am beginning to think, Collin's own way of transmitting a new symbolic order to whoever would listen, thus ensuring its perdurability in time.

It will not come as a surprise to say that the work presented here is an attempt at answering Collin's call, at listening to what a certain generation has to teach us, precisely because, in Derrida's words, "inheritance is never a *given*, it is always a task" (Derrida, 1994/2006, p. 67). In it, I hope to have demonstrated that the practices the GRIF set in motion may yet have a lot to teach us on how to subvert and modify symbolic spaces, how to listen to our past and think about our present. For, in Rosi Braidotti's words:

What makes *Les Cahiers du Grif* significant is the extraordinary pioneering role it played in the French-speaking world. The journal set a creative, original, and visionary political and intellectual agenda. (...) Its achievement is unique: *Les Cahiers du Grif* is a monument to European feminism, and Françoise Collin was the force behind it. (Braidotti, 2014, p. 600)

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