

"Resistance as the liberation from a system"

Emilia Roig in conversation with Lena Fritsch and Mathilde ter Heijne

The Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies is a nonprofit organization founded in Berlin in 2017 by Emilia Roig. It was established to examine how social structures and identity categories, such as gender, race, and class, intersect to produce social inequalities. Described as the first center of its kind, it brings together scholars and practitioners from law, sociology, feminist and gender studies, human rights, social justice, and other fields. Through its research projects and initiatives, the center aims to explore how intersectionality relates to these fields, develop more effective approaches to addressing inequality, and foster collaboration across social movements.

This conversation between Emilia Roig, Lena Fritsch, and Mathilde ter Heijne was recorded in Berlin on April 26, 2019, as part of the artistic project *Assembling Past and Present* for Mathilde ter Heijne's exhibition *Women to Go: Das Persönliche und Unpersönliche in Präsentation und Repräsentation* at the Grassi Museum in Leipzig.

In order to fight injustice, it's important to understand the systems that keep it in place

Mathilde ter Heijne: Emilia, what were the initial moments in your life where you realized that you wanted to change your life, or where you realized that you wanted to change the society you live in?

Emilia Roig: The family structure I grew up in influenced my later life and is related to the issues I deal with today. I'm personally a product of French colonialism. My mother comes from Martinique. My father is Jewish Algerian and was born in Algeria. In the colonial system, my father had a position as a 'colonizer', a white man. In the 'divide and conquer' system Jews were given more rights than Muslim men. There were many patterns of dominance. Within the family, too, there were also patterns of superiority and social hierarchies that had to do with gender - the man-woman relationship - or with skin color - my mother was black, my father white. Added to this was the social position. My father was a doctor, my mother is a nurse. As a result, there were many patterns of dominance in our home. As a child, I observed this and it was clear that this was not fair. It hurt me to see it. I was in solidarity with my mother because there was also abuse at home and the realization that there are inequalities and injustice. This was important for me in my development.

Emilia: Since my family was privileged in that system - we had our own house, I played an instrument, I had a pony - that was the position I grew up in as a child. At the same time, I noticed that many people in the city where I lived did not have these things. I was a bit ashamed of this. After my mother divorced my father, my middle-class life was over. My father didn't give us money and my mother had to work. But I didn't suffer from this. I actually felt more comfortable, even if early on I had to work for my own money. I'm grateful that I could experience it like that. It showed me what money means in the system and how we get power from it, and what access it

gives us. It made it clear to me that the structural conditions that we encounter on the path of life give us a social position that it's hard for us to leave behind. And we can't help that. No matter how much work we do, people will not be in the same position. The idea that the people who have fewer opportunities in life are themselves to blame is wrong.

Because of this, I understood early on how a social system works. People live their lives in this system, and are like pieces of a puzzle, but are not able to see or change the system as a whole. Many people even accept the system as objective truth, but it is not. The question is, once you understand this complex system in all its injustice, how can you show it to others?

Mathilde: In which way did you become active in the fight against injustice?

Emilia: In order to fight this injustice, it's important to understand the systems that keep it in place, in order to break them down. I see three major systems.

First, there is patriarchy, which determines people's values based on their gender. This system is the reason why women are kept in inferior roles, and it makes sure that their voices are not heard.

Then there is capitalism. The accumulation of capital is a construct because it determines the value of work and people. For example, white men on the board of directors of powerful companies receive a lot of money for their work and have a lot of power. Much more than the women (and it is usually women) who take care of elderly people or children, and thus make an enormous contribution to society, without this being adequately appreciated.

If you type the word 'professionalism' into google, you will get automatic pictures of 35-year-old white men, slim, looking like 'Ken' (Barbie's boyfriend). These are the images that we have. There are so many people who benefit from these images in their professional careers without having to do much. Who get jobs because of their appearance and status as middle-aged white men. They can be mediocre and still achieve a lot just because they fit in very well or they are privileged by the system, they can get the job more easily.

The third system is racism, and also colonialism, which defines the value of human beings on the basis of supposed races that are constructed. These systems also produce very concrete results and consequences. The superiority of the white race is a starting point for how resources are distributed: for example, how work is distributed (who does the dirty work?). Care-work is undervalued, for example. Care-work is, of course, more than the care that is done at home. Care-work, in the workplace or on the street, is actually a matter of giving love, emotional work is also part of care work. This is what we do all the time, but it's invisible. Patriarchy is centuries old, we can't change it so quickly. What we can do is to face it with love and compassion. It's also important to understand that men can also suffer from patriarchal structures, even if they also benefit from them. Some men miss a lot and are not even aware of it.

Mathilde: What role does the Center for Intersectional Justice play?

Emilia: First of all it is about bringing people into contact with the concept of intersectionality [see footnote 1]. People who work in the institutional or political sphere. Most of the time the word is misunderstood or is not known at all. The first work to be done is to build understanding and knowledge within the administrative bodies, within the parties. I believe that intersectionality is transformative. It means and involves questioning systems. If we only focus on laws and decision-making processes, we run the risk of missing other possibilities.

It is important to see the changes that are taking place in society. The old patterns are being broken. This change is not coming from politics, or from the law. It is a much greater force, but we don't know yet what the new system will look like. But it will come! We can't contribute to it by fighting against the system: then we would only get burned. Therefore, we should present something positive instead. We want to bring about processes that change consciousness, change narratives, tell new stories. The impact of such things should not be underestimated.

Mathilde: I read a quote by Anne Braden [see footnote 2] in *Feminist Freedom Warriors* [see footnote 3]: "In every age, no matter how cruel the oppression by those in power was, there were those who fought for another world. I believe that is the genius of humanity, the thing that makes us semi-divine: the fact that some people can imagine a world that never existed." How can positive resistance open up new spaces?

Emilia: Confronting the norm is exhausting. You need to be able to mobilize the mind and to speak from the perspective of the imagination. There are many words with very negative connotations. In German, in French. These are words like "radical", "resistance", "activism" - and why? Because the people who subscribe to them question something. They question the social status quo. It's threatening. It seems aggressive from the outside. But let me describe it differently. I see resistance as liberation from a system and liberation of the soul. I got this way of thinking from members of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA or anywhere in the world where there is a real resistance. It is very positive because everything is connected because everything plays a part in it. What I experience in my private life also plays into society. Freedom is often presented to us like something beautiful, light, like flying. But to get freedom is hard. It was the hardest thing I have ever gone through. Liberation costs strength, that is painful. There are constant doubts, doubts about yourself and the process. But liberation is positive because once it is there it means life and love.

Love is also a word that is misunderstood, understood too narrowly. Many think of romantic love, of butterflies in the stomach. But love is an attitude, it is a decision. Love can express itself in all areas of life, at work, in relationships with all people, on the street. That's what liberation brings. If we are not free, we cannot feel, experience, or receive love.

1. "Intersectionality theory provides a dynamic research paradigm—a prism from which to analyze more fully a range of social problems in order to ensure inclusive remedies and greater collaboration across social movements. Intersectionality moves beyond traditional frameworks that separate social problems into discrete challenges facing specific groups. It starts from the premise that people have multiple identities, and being members of more than one "group," they can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege. Intersectionality sheds light on the unique experiences that are produced when various forms of discrimination intersect with these converging identities. It is a dynamic strategy for linking the grounds of discrimination (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual identity, etc.) to historical, social, economic, political, and legal contexts and norms that intertwine to create structures of oppression and privilege."

2. Anne McCarty Braden was an American civil rights activist, journalist, and educator dedicated to the cause of racial equality.

3. Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a digital video archive documenting cross-generational conversations about justice, politics, and hope with feminist scholar-activists. This collaborative effort features Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Linda Carty in conversation with comrades and sisters in struggle, with a team of graduate and undergraduate students providing creative, research, and technical assistance.