

## TAKING DISABILITY SERIOUSLY ON THE FEMINIST DISABILITY STUDIES CRITIC TO THE MAINSTREAM FEMINISM

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**Abstract:** The discipline of Feminist Disability Studies (FDS) emerges in the mid-Eighties as a critique of both Feminist and Disability Studies, considered “guilty” of excluding women with disabilities from their theorization and, therefore, incapable to represent them as subjects. After a brief analysis of the similarities and the differences between the conditions of oppression experienced by people with disabilities and women, in this paper I first analyse some of the reasons that may be present behind the silence of Feminism on disability, then I show the importance of FDS for the feminist inquiry. Finally, I conclude by focusing on a recent and interesting point of convergence between Feminism and FDS, namely, the theme of vulnerability and dependency.

**Keywords:** Feminist Disability Studies; care; disability; vulnerability; dependency

### 1. Against “neutral universality”

Critical theories have been focusing for a long time on the normalising power of what appear to be neutral norms and practices, on the performative power of language and on mechanisms of exclusion that allow to draw reassuring lines between

included subjects and the not too generic *others*. The existing different perspectives on this issue share a common trait: the opposition to the falsely abstract liberal universalism, which relies on formal equality to resolve all those differences that must *not matter*.

Feminist theory,<sup>2</sup> in particular, has historically stood out for its theoretical and political identification, demystification of and opposition to established sexist ideologies that, while emerging in a range of different contexts, have chosen as their only subject (whether a political, legal or institutional) the “neutral universality” actually based on Man’s anthropological characteristics.

Over time, the notion of “neutral universality” has been criticised by the feminist thought for its logic of exclusion and segregation not only with regards to women, but also to members of other, non-socially

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<sup>2</sup> There are many forms of feminism: the use of the singular (feminist theory) here is justified by the fact that they all criticise the concept of “neutral universality”.

dominant, groups. However, individuals with disabilities have rarely been included among them, even though at an international level these – let us say – “new” subjects have been gaining greater and greater visibility, at first from a political and then from a theoretical point of view.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, and oddly enough, while the theory of intersectionality enjoys a large following within feminist movements, until quite recently this critique has not taken disability into consideration. As a result, the condition of women with disabilities has rarely been object of a critical analysis.

After a brief analysis of the similarities and the differences between the conditions of oppression experienced by people with disabilities and women (section two), in this paper I present some of the reasons behind the silence of Feminism on disability. For this purpose, in section three I will examine the contribution of Feminist Disability Studies (FDS), a school of thought that criticises mainstream Feminism for failing to take into account disability and disabled women in particular. I will then discuss some of the most relevant issues regarding justice and women with disabilities

(section four) and I will conclude by briefly illustrating the importance of FDS in the feminist debates on vulnerability and dependency.

## **2. Abstract convergences**

Women and disabled individuals have historically shared a common destiny: the dominant rhetoric has shaped them as “bodies” rather than as thinking subjects, thus stating their social, legal and political inferiority, by relying on the assumed objectivity of a “nature” which seems to be inevitably linked to corporeality and biology. Medical knowledge and power have played a far from marginal role in this, by relying on pseudo-scientific data to demonstrate the difference between these individuals and what is statistically and normatively considered as “normality”. Indeed, the divergence from normality has historically been construed as moral inferiority, a radical otherness that justified, both for women and for disabled people, exclusion, discrimination and deprivation of rights.

First, this exclusion was the result of techniques that, by focusing specifically on

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<sup>3</sup> The birth of the disability rights movement, which eventually led to the affirmation of disability studies as a specific theoretical field, took place in the

Sixties, at the same time as that of the anti-psychiatry, feminist and black movements.

non-paradigmatic bodies, were aimed at marking a boundary between the included and the excluded. On the one hand, in fact, these bodies were and still are exhibited in the public space, either to showcase the oddness of a disability or to emphasise feminine beauty in a way that turns women into objects, primarily, of desire (cfr. Garland Thomson 2002).

On the other hand, these bodies have become invisible to society's normalising outlook and have been restricted to the private sphere, because this is "the realm" where they are seen to belong, "by nature": disabled subject – much like children – are seen as the quintessential care-recipients and, as such, they are destined to spend their life exclusively at home or in institutions. In this perspective, the care-giver is always a woman. This role, in fact, is a mere addition to women's traditional roles of wife or servant (not forgetting that of prostitute, of course).<sup>4</sup>

Both techniques, however, reinforce the position of ableist and male paradigms, safeguarding them from any critique. In the former case, this happens because disabled

and female bodies are spectacularised in a way that blatantly emphasises their otherness and "domesticates" it.<sup>5</sup> In the latter case, the technique is successful as once again the private sphere hides those bodies that could potentially expose the incoherence of the liberal narrative with regards to their own role within the social order.

In this framework, disability has historically occupied a peculiar position and has had a *transversal* relevance with regards to the different forms of exclusion of women and persons with disabilities. From a legal point of view, for instance, it has been associated to an idea of incompetence that still translates into the failure to grant disabled subjects the enjoyment (and, in some cases, the ownership) of their fundamental rights, including the right to vote or that to bodily integrity.

Similarly, as it is known, being a woman has been compared to a form of disability until very recently: the idea that *by nature* women are weak, irrational, physically and morally fragile (in a word: disabled) has justified for a long time their inability to obtain custody of their children,

<sup>4</sup> On the three women's roles, see for instance Giolo (2012). On care and migration, see Casalini (2010), Kittay (2009), Scieurba (2015).

<sup>5</sup> On "staring" and individuals with disabilities, cfr. Garland Thomson (2006).

to occupy prestigious (and well-paid) professional roles, or to enjoy fundamental rights such as property rights or the right to vote. This is the reason why some feminists still believe that women are essentially *disabled* by a patriarchal structure that has created a world based on the needs of men, where women are seen as either in need of protection, or inconsiderate and ultimately dangerous for the society, when they try to gain independence at all costs (cfr. Young 1980, Silvers 1998).

Therefore, in the feminist thought disability has been used primarily as a powerful metaphor aimed at exposing women's oppression, thus overshadowing the experience of people with disabilities and, in particular, the one of women with disabilities.

Fortunately, however, there have been exceptions to the rule: a number of scholars have acknowledged disability perspectives, focusing specifically on disability in the context of ethics and justice theories and in the metaphysics of embodiment.<sup>6</sup> But how much has Feminist

theory been focused on women with disabilities?

### **3. The long and ambiguous silence of Feminism**

The discipline of Feminist Disability Studies (FDS) emerges in the mid-Eighties<sup>7</sup> as a critique of both Feminist and Disability Studies (DS). The former are accused of having fought only ordinary sexism, failing to criticise the dominant able-bodied paradigm and implicitly assuming then able-bodied women as their subjects. Disability Studies, on the other hand, are criticised for having focused for too long on a "social model" of disability based on a rigid constructivism, from which the (disabled) body is programmatically excluded.<sup>8</sup>

FDS condemn this exclusion, which is seen as one of the causes that led to a lack of public representation of the specific experience of women with disabilities and to the failure to recognise disabled women as subjects. Therefore, FDS aim to expose the specific form of oppression against disabled

<sup>6</sup> Amongst others, see Kittay (1998, 2011), Carlson, Kittay (2010), Nussbaum (2006), Silvers (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Hillyer Davis (1984), Wendell (1989), Fine, Asch (1988), Morris (1991).

<sup>8</sup> On the "social model", see Oliver (1990). Amongst the FDS critics, see Crow (1996), Morris (1996), Thomas (2002, 2004), French (1993).

women, which should not be considered merely as a sum of the discriminations suffered by them because of their disability and of gender discriminations, but as the result of the *simultaneous* presence of the two factors (Thomas 1999).

As readers will have noticed, Feminist Disability Studies' dissatisfaction with the theoretical apparatus of existing critical perspectives is shared by black feminist theory, whose notion of "intersectionality" is particularly relevant also in relation to disability. Moreover, FDS also agree with Spelman, who criticises mainstream feminism for its false universality, interpreting the scholar's thought from the point of view of disability.

Indeed, in her essay Spelman exposes the bias of a (feminist) reflection that focuses only on middle-class white women and considers the non-paradigmatic ones as an exception to the rule (Spelman 1990). Similarly, FDS criticise the unjustified exclusion of disabled and elderly women (who often can be distinguished from each other only from an analytical point of view):

in fact, the belief that "the personal is political" (which, we should note, is shared by FDS) has historically been one of the causes of the exclusion by Feminism of non-paradigmatic groups, including the one composed by women with disabilities.

After all, as the slogan leads to overlooking the essential cultural aspects of existence, it also fails to acknowledge that women with disabilities have no voice, and therefore prevents them from being recognised. Disabled women are then essentially silenced and denied their right to have their subjectivity (and their being "women") publicly affirmed. As a consequence, they are not even experiencing the impossibility to emancipate themselves from the roles that have been traditionally and universally ascribed to women, being rather completely excluded from such roles.

I will return to this in more detail below. Before that, however, I wish to focus on a crucial aspect: can the silence on disability that, for a long time, has characterised Feminism, be considered merely an oversight?<sup>9</sup> Could it be rather

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<sup>9</sup> For a long time, in spite of repeated requests, even prestigious journals like *Hypatia* have ignored the issue, basically acknowledging the mainstream notion that the disabled subject and body, when theorised, are considered as "others". In 1991 the monographic issue *Feminism and the Body*

completely ignored the issue, in spite of Susan Wendell's call – just two years before – to move "Toward a feminist theory of disability". In 2001 the journal opened up to disability with the monographic issue on *Feminism and Disability*, but it is only with volume no. 30 of 2014 that *Feminist Disability Studies*

intentional?<sup>10</sup> And if the latter is the case, what could be the reasons behind it?

Within FDS, opinions on this matter range from lenient justification to unforgiving exposure of a deliberate exclusion. A number of authors belonging to FDS (such as, among others, Jane Morris) have linked Feminism's silence on disability to a fear of human fragility, acknowledging how the encounter with disabled individuals forces a difficult acceptance of the deep similarities between oneself and individuals that are not as radically different as they are normally seen to be.<sup>11</sup>

As this act of exclusion of disability originates from a primordial and in some ways unconscious fear, it should not be condemned, but understood, as it is the expression of a culture based on values like strength, autonomy and rationality, which permeates everyone's reality. These scholars, therefore, maintain that a number of mainstream feminist theorists have fallen victim to the cultural setting they live in.

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take centre-stage. These data support the hypothesis that the silence on disability is not the result of an oversight, but rather of an intentional exclusion. Cfr. Wendell (1989), Dale Stone (1995).

<sup>10</sup> Garland Thomson (2002: 2) states that: «I want to give the omissions I am describing here the most generous interpretation I can. The archive, Foucault has shown us, determines what we can know. There has been no archive, no template for

In the mainstream thought indeed, disabled women are associated with the private sphere and with a notion of dependency interpreted as passiveness and need. As such, they come to represent a concrete threat for Feminism, as one of its main aims is freeing women (as subjects) from their domestic slavery, emancipating them from their role as care-givers and, ultimately, achieving female empowerment. These goals, indeed, appear to be attainable only by affirming women's independence and autonomy, while the inclusion of disabled women, at least at first, seems to jeopardise the achievements of Feminism's theoretical and political action. Then, in this perspective, disabled women's exclusion can be explained by the fact that mainstream Feminism has accepted unconsciously the patriarchal stereotypes, therefore associating moral value and social prestige with rationality and autonomy (Asch, Fine 1988).

However, other FDS scholars tend to question similar arguments: if one of the

understanding disability as a category of analysis and knowledge, as a cultural trope, and an historical community. [...] I think, however, that feminist theory's omission of disability differs from disability studies' ignorance of feminist theory. [...] Disability studies is new, but feminist theory is not».

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Morris (1991); Asch, Fine (1988); Young (1990).

reasons that may lead to support Feminist theory is its emancipatory power (i.e., its ability to free women from patriarchal oppression), it seems rather odd that women can be liberated from sexism but not from the set of oppressive practices that fall under the notion of “ableism”.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, these scholars believe that Feminism has failed to take disabled women into account because of its complete lack of interest in disability (Morris, 1991). Hence, the attempt of Feminist Disability Studies to reaffirm the point of view of the disabled persons (Garland Thomson 2002), in order to create a space for subjects that until very recently have been excluded even from the group of the *inessentials*.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. The voice of (still) inessential subjects**

Since, historically, able-bodied persons have held the power of

representation, the presence of an impairment has been linked with the impossibility of leading a worthy life and has simultaneously justified even the most invasive medical and rehabilitative interventions. Both ideologies still affect women with disabilities, who are excluded on several, intersecting, levels: as disabled persons, and as women. Furthermore, as we see above, by focusing specifically on disability and on disabled women, curiously FDS scholars find themselves fighting against mainstream Feminism, which, in spite of promoting universal liberation theoretically, can end up supporting quite the opposite.

In this perspective, FDS play a crucial role in widening the Feminist philosophical inquiry (and, more in general, the philosophical inquiry *tout court*), promoting its inclusiveness exactly by offering to the various debates women with disabilities’ voices.

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<sup>12</sup> I am referring to “ableism” as a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical, and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is then cast as a diminished state of being human.

<sup>13</sup> Elderly and disabled women do not appear among the groups considered by Spelman as inessential within feminist theory. Attempts to justify this omission stated that, although age and disability are crucial factors leading to oppression for many

women, they vary so widely across different cultures that it is hard to make any useful generalisations. These arguments, however, do not seem very convincing: other forms of oppression, such as racism, for instance, also vary widely across different cultures, but this did not stop feminism from acknowledging them. Moreover, some feminist scholars have reaffirmed the public/private dichotomy with particular reference to disabled and/or elderly women, stating that, as they are unable to be care-givers, they must live in residential homes. Cfr. Dalley (1988).

As I already sketched, the assumptions of an implicitly able-bodied Feminism are particularly problematic for FDS: it is not by chance that they emphasise how disability, in spite of acquiring greater visibility than before, still plays «an unacknowledged and untheorized role in contemporary [...] feminist analyses» (Hall, 2013: 1, see also 2011).

In this respect, the roles of women in a patriarchal society are among the most problematic issues: as it is known, the feminist struggle for emancipation from traditionally imposed roles led, most importantly, to the recognition of women's right to self-determination. This right turned into free access to abortion, into the possibility to use contraception as an expression of a woman's choice not to become a mother, and into the affirmation of women as a subjects in full control of their own sexuality rather than the objects of male desire.

These three issues are particularly problematic for FDS, which aim to expose the inessentiality of women with disabilities as subjects in the theoretical feminist debates on these matters.

Indeed, while traditionally “feminine” roles are seen as something that has been forced upon women and from which they should be liberated, disabled women are often denied concrete chances of occupying these roles and of enjoying the important rights.<sup>14</sup>

However, these issues have so far been ignored by able-bodied feminism. With regards to reproductive rights, for instance, disabled women must face both the assumption that they are asexual, and the subsequent lack of reproductive health care, medical competences and adequate information on sexuality (Kallianes, Rubinfeld, 1997; Kuttai, 2010; McKay-Moffat, 2007). Numerous disabled women report the surprise of their gynaecologist when they ask to be prescribed birth-control methods, or the latter's ignorance on the interactions between birth-control prescriptions and other drugs that the patient may have to take in relation to her disability, which could lead to unwanted pregnancies or to avoidable pathologies in the foetus.

From a social point of view, this assumption is also linked to a reluctance to accept that disabled women may have access to the traditional roles of wife and mother,

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<sup>14</sup> *Ex multis*, cfr. Mykitiuk, Chadha (2011).



which is so marked that, in case of a separation, disabled women are very unlikely to obtain custody of their children, based on the assumption that they will not be able to cope with this responsibility.

In the past, mentally disabled women (referred to as “feeble-minded”) were also prevented from having children through forced sterilisation campaigns, which were even supported by reformist Feminism.<sup>15</sup> It has to be noted that, in spite of being explicitly prohibited internationally, this practice is still legitimised today, if not *de jure*, at least *de facto*.<sup>16</sup>

As we can easily see, this is where Feminist studies and FDS are most at odds: the traditional roles that are often seen as oppressive for able-bodied women are seen as sources of emancipation for disabled ones, who consider the access to such roles as a way to reaffirm the subjectivity that was denied to them.

However, although the concerns of disabled feminists may often seem opposite to those of the women's movement's primary agenda, they are based on the same position: women (*also the disabled ones*) have the

right to make decisions about their bodies and their lives.

This right also affects delicate issues such as abortion and reproductive technologies. FDS do not hope for a return to obscurantism, but warn about the concrete risks of an eugenic approach to the above opportunities. For example, the fact that abortion of disabled fetuses is deemed acceptable from a social point of view and often supported by legislation is seen as highly problematic by FDS.

The same criticism is directed towards the existence of social policies based on eugenic principles – for instance, “wrongful life” and “wrongful birth” actions, or the lack of psychological support for disabled individuals (but not for able-bodied ones) requesting to be euthanized – which deeply affect the life of disabled persons and their families and friends (Jones 2011). From the point of view of FDS, these policies are an expression of a number of ideologies that permeate western liberal societies, depriving

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. Carlson (2001), Trent (1994), Braswell (2014), Tilley et al. (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. artt. 16, 17, 23 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). See also Rioux, Patton (2011), Richardson (2011).

disabled persons of their right to «inhabit the world».<sup>17</sup>

Actually, the eradication of disability through the preventive elimination of disabled subjects (mainly through abortion) appears to be legitimised by a number of assumptions: that the life of the disabled person would be painful and incomplete and therefore not worth living; that disability has high social costs; that parents have a moral obligation to give birth to a child with the best chance («procreative beneficence»); that disabled children have a right not to be born (Savulescu 2001).<sup>18</sup>

In this respect, FDS focus mainly on two aspects: on the one hand, they find it hard to accept that, at least from a cultural point of view, the mere diagnosis of a foetal disability can be considered sufficient (if not decisive) to proceed with an abortion. Indeed, the fact that parents may be able to deny their child his or her right to be born due to a disability is in stark contrast with the public recognition, specificity and full dignity of

living with a disability that FDS seek to affirm.

On the other hand, FDS criticise the patriarchal mechanisms and the strong social conditioning (such as those existing in the doctor-patient relationship) that pregnant women are exposed to. As a result of these mechanisms, currently any woman (whether they are disabled or not) wanting to give birth to a disabled child is likely to be accused of being irresponsible, and denied the support and assistance she would need in her day-to-day life with a new-born baby. Therefore, FDS contend that these women are not actually put in a position to make a free choice, as disability is seen as intrinsically negative and a sufficient justification to prevent both a child from being born and a woman from experiencing maternity.<sup>19</sup>

## **5. New alliances: towards a new Feminism**

Curiously enough, the most likely chance to establish a dialogue between FDS and feminist theorists seems to be offered by

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<sup>17</sup> One of the first Authors who used the arendtian expression referring to disability was Jacobus tenBrock (1966). See also Hubbard (2013).

<sup>18</sup> *Contra*, Sandel (2007).

<sup>19</sup> Garland Thomson (2011: 606) writes: «In my view, capability lodges too firmly in bodies and not enough in environments. What makes the capability approach untenable is that judging the worth

of a life through quality-of-life arguments has been used to justify eugenic euthanasia, selective abortion, forced sterilization, institutional warehousing, and a variety of other discriminatory practices based on prejudicial attitudes and lack of imagination on the part of dominant majorities who do not understand disabled lives». On care and dependency, cfr. Thomas (2007).

the *Ethics of care*. The latter, however, is often despised by disability theorists, due to the fact that the concept of “care” may easily turn into different forms of maternalism, preventing individual empowerment and forcing disabled persons to a material and symbolic dependency. For this reason, for a long time FDS have emphasised the need to abandon the «ideology of care» (Morris 1997: 54), which sees the person with disabilities as powerless. FDS have claimed, on the contrary, the right of the disabled individuals to independence, which can be achieved, amongst other things, through independent living and by granting disabled individuals the right to choose among different, acceptable options.<sup>20</sup>

More recently, however, the distance between the two schools of thought has narrowed remarkably, partially thanks to the interest shown by a number of second-generation *Ethics of care* theorists for the issue of disability (Casalini, Cini 2012: 163-193).

In this respect, Kittay and Nussbaum have played a crucial role, criticising, although in different ways, the anthropological assumptions of Rawlsian liberalism (Rawls, 1971, 1993). Kittay, with her *Dependency theory*, criticises the Rawlsian project for programmatically excluding the most vulnerable, non-self sufficient subjects, and therefore all individuals linked in different ways to the notion of “care”, such as children, elderly, sick persons, as well as persons with mental and physical disabilities and their caregivers.

Sharing many theoretical premises and the same critical target as Kittay, Nussbaum extends her notion of “capability” and her “capability list” to include persons with physical and mental disabilities (Nussbaum, 2006, 2010) Unlike Kittay, however, Nussbaum believes that the only way for disabled individuals to achieve a full and equal citizenship is to promote their *independence* (instead of Kittay’s *dependency*).

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<sup>20</sup> The fight for independent living, which started in the Sixties, led to the creation of self-help centres for disabled persons. Unlike institutions, where disabled persons receive medical treatments and therapies in isolation from daily life, Independent Living Centres offer services that enable people with disabilities to control their own lives, within the local community. While there are many different

Independent Living Centres, they are all based on a number of common principles, namely: (1) the equal value of human life, regardless of the nature and seriousness of the disability; (2) the ability of disabled persons to make choices affecting their own lives; (3) the need to recognize their right to do so; (4) the right of disabled persons to fully participate in society from an economical, political and cultural point of view.

Her thought is essentially in line with the “first wave” of DS and FDS, whose theories place a key importance on subverting, from a cultural point of view, the association between disability and dependency, in order to guarantee the emancipation of the disabled individuals and the promotion of their rights ownership.<sup>21</sup>

Recently, however, FDS seem to be more in line with Kittay’s perspective, or to have at least taken a new direction that opens up a dialogue with the scholar’s thought and, more generally, with perspectives focused on the re-evaluation of human vulnerability and dependency.

Over time, in fact, Kittay has consolidated a project aimed at the resemantization of dependency as something that derives from our being “some mother’s child”. This action is the premise for a reinterpretation of the concept of dependency: valuing everyone’s inevitable dependency, Kittay moves towards the universalization of the concept, which is intended to favour the inclusion of the subjects thus far excluded from the political

community, exactly due to their being associated to any form of dependency.<sup>22</sup>

FDS has also been taking part in the debate on the meaning of dependency and vulnerability. Indeed, despite the general undertheorisation of the concepts, both terms have been the focus of recent debates, aimed to analyse their normative significance, their relevance in bioethics and their meaning as ontological conditions of humanity, given our shared physical vulnerability and/or dependency.<sup>23</sup>

The reflection of FDS on shared dependencies and vulnerabilities is of crucial relevance, as it offers new insights for the elaboration of an alternative anthropological model to the hegemonic liberal one, able to include non-paradigmatic subjects into the political discourse. Note, indeed, that for FDS the fact that a person may *potentially* find themselves in a condition of vulnerability or dependency at some point in their life (i.e., short or prolonged periods of disability) is not the relevant factor. Rather, what is relevant is that each individual is characterised by vulnerability and

<sup>21</sup> On the DS “phases”, cfr. Ralston, Ho (2009).

<sup>22</sup> Similarly (but the two perspectives diverge in some relevant aspects), Cavarero (2013).

<sup>23</sup> On the first, see Kittay (1999, 2015), Nussbaum (2006), MacIntyre (1999), Goodin (1985).

On the second, cfr. UNESCO’s *Report of IBC on the Principle of Respect for Human Vulnerability and Personal Integrity* (2011); on the third, Butler (2004, 2998). See also Fineman, Grear eds. (2014) and Mackenzie et al. eds. (2014).

dependency (which disability – perhaps inevitably – seems to be connected to) throughout her life and, therefore, that the liberal anthropological model is inadequate *for everyone*.

Indeed, the disability perspective sees in the existential condition called “disability” the place where the “existential variants” (such as vulnerability, dependency and the interdependency coming from them), manifest themselves at the highest level. These variants, however, are also present in the existential condition considered able-bodied (whatever this term may actually mean).

Therefore, the specificity of the condition does not transform an individual with a disability into an “other”, whose experience cannot be shared. Instead, it makes him or her one of the subjects who can more strongly expose the intrinsic limitations of contemporary theories, including those of the mainstream feminism.

This action is possible exactly because the universal nature of the disabled experience can reveal the interconnection between vulnerability and dependencies

(whether they exist from birth or are induced), which affect everybody’s lives. Therefore, interpreting vulnerability and dependency as universal conditions (as theorised by FDS), will presumably also lead to deeply re-thinking the current social and institutional structure.<sup>24</sup>

Here lies the fundamental importance of critically engaging FDS: this critical approach, in fact, may promote a crucial renewal of theory (including the feminist one) with respect to concepts and practices that will be able to include individuals with disabilities and ultimately, the concrete experience of every human being.

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, institutions are requested to implement policies that, by recognising that vulnerability and dependency are universal human

conditions, support the enjoyment of autonomy rights for the largest possible number of individuals, including disabled ones.

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