

«MI RIVOLTO, DUNQUE SIAMO»
LA LETTERATURA
COME ARMA POLITICA

a cura di

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BLACK WOMEN'S POLITICAL ADVANCEMENT
IN THE US IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY:
SEX, RACE, AND CLASS
IN SHIRLEY CHISHOLM'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. A political choice for black people. – 3. For a joint feminist commitment. – 4. Conclusions: towards humanism

1. *Introduction*

The fame that accompanies the name of Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm is linked to the fact that she was the first black woman to win a seat in the US Congress in 1968 and the first woman and the first black person to run in the presidential primaries for the Democratic Party, in 1972. The reason why, however, her public discourse deserves to be analyzed goes beyond mere membership and must instead be ascribed to the content of her political thought and her vision of American society¹. Indeed, among her most significant reflections that deserve special attention there is the one relating to sex and race², and this will be given centrality here. However, an analysis that takes into account her peculiar political biography is appropriate: that is, to escape the temptation to cast her discourse in an ahistorical ideological framework, which would project onto Chisholm's words and actions

¹ She reports «I was the first American citizen to be elected to Congress in spite of the double drawbacks of being female and having skin darkened by melanin. When you put it that way, it sounds like a foolish reason for fame. In a just and free society it would be foolish» (S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought and Unbossed*, New York 1970, XI).

² However, it is worth mentioning that her public policies are always geared toward the interest of the working class and reinforcing social programs. For an extensive analysis of her bills and parliamentary interventions, see S. BENUSSI, *Black Empowerment nel Congresso degli Stati Uniti: Etnia e genere nella politica americana*, Cagliari 2008.

meanings out of time and context. Given the topicality of the issues intertwined with her path in the institutions and the party, this is a strong temptation. The privileged position for such an observation is the analysis of her two autobiographies. The first was published in 1970 under the title *Unbought and Unbossed* (part of the same slogan used during Chisholm's campaign for Congress). It was a strategic element in her future ambitions, including her candidacy in the '72 primaries. The second, *The Good Fight*³, published in 1973, is an account of her campaign in the presidential primaries: it turned out to be essential in order to offer the public and her electorate a coherent and solid view of her choices, to prevent the defeat from tarnishing her star and compromising her future. The former thus falls more appropriately into the genre of political autobiography, while the latter offers a timely account of a specific choice, what it entailed, and the significance of that particular struggle⁴.

As A. Curwood explains, the congresswoman autobiographies, especially the first one, have long been the primary source on her life and political action: «It seems that, when it comes to Chisholm, historians have abandoned their usual skepticism toward autobiography»⁵. Their usefulness today is mainly that they allow us to analyze the narrative by which Chisholm constructs her character by relating it to the most relevant political issues she addresses. We can thus better understand, by framing her more precisely, the meaning she gives to her identity not only as a black woman but mainly as a feminist and politically engaged black woman. In addition, we can see how she chooses to present herself to the general public and to expose her reflections on the condition of women, the persistent racism in society and institutions, and the economic marginalization of a significant part of American society.

³ Both autobiographies feature a final appendix with essays and speeches.

⁴ Not so much will be taken up here of the various episodes of her life and career, which are beyond the main focus of this paper and for which reference is made to other works. In addition to the already mentioned biography by A. Curwood, it is worth reading the texts by Susan Brownmiller, James Haskins, Nancy Hicks, and Barbara Winslow. See also Shola Lynch's documentary.

⁵ A. CURWOOD, *Shirley Chisholm: Champion of Black Feminist Power Politics*, Chapel Hill, 2023, 174.

How are these fundamental themes addressed in Chisholm's autobiographies? There is a constant motif that runs through her discourse: the contrast between an individual identity and a collective identity. That is, the problematic relationship between the need to valorize her specific political merits in the face of sex- and color-bound identity that risks being too strong, mortgaging and overshadowing her work, and the desire, or rather, the compelling need to give voice to a marginalized and subordinated minority (the black community) and majority (women). Chisholm proudly claims to be a woman and black but simultaneously realizes the need to value what makes her a viable and effective politician in the complicated mechanisms of institutional representation. This is not just to win greater voter support, especially during the primaries⁶: even when appealing to her affiliation plays electorally in her favor⁷, she takes care to highlight a personal political vision. Therefore, we're going to see how she faces this challenge.

Shirley Anita St.Hill was born in 1924 in Brooklyn; she was the daughter of immigrants from Barbados, where her parents sent her and her sisters to attend elementary school, given the difficulty of supporting their daughters in Great Depression New York. First, it is worth noting what personal qualities Chisholm highlights in describing herself. From the earliest pages of her first autobiography, she chooses to convey an image of herself based on the theme of contrast: she highlights her unimposing appearance as a counterbalance to her strong personality and charisma, grounded in total self-confidence. There is a specific emphasis on the magnetic energy conveyed by her words («I was already dominating other children around me — with my mouth. I lectured them and ordered them around. Even Mother was almost afraid of me»⁸), as opposed to her petite body («I have never weighed much more than 100 pounds»⁹); «When I graduated in

⁶ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good Fight*, New York 197, 71.

⁷ Consider the call for women to vote her during the campaign against J. Farmer for the congressional seat (S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 75) and, before that, the laborious efforts to encourage the election of blacks to representative assemblies (S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 39).

⁸ S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 4.

⁹ Ivi, 3.

1946, cum laude, I was nearly twenty-two but I looked sixteen or seventeen; I weighed about ninety pounds. It made job hunting hard»¹⁰. The pattern of juxtaposition is most evident in *Unbought and Unbossed*: Chisholm presents her life and professional affairs as alternating between polarities that attract her, and in the face of which she tries to find a middle ground.

From the outset, she focuses on the theme of education, which will be a major one in her program of action, as well as in her profession during the periods when she will move away from politics¹¹. Chisholm presents herself as proud of her roots and the education she received¹². In describing her childhood and youth, she will dwell heavily on the theme of dedication, discipline, and the absence of distractions. It is conceivable that there is a need to emphasize the sobriety of her youthful life, given the unconventionality of her career path and her engagement in the public sphere. She restores her persona to an asceticism that reassures the reader in a way that ascribes the transgression of sexist norms (work, political career) to a higher motivation, free of any suspicion of frivolity¹³. The description of her journey, first in university associations and then in the Democratic Party's neighborhood club, eventually helping to build an alternative club in the Bedford-Stuyvesant district that would remove the black and Spanish-speaking community from the control of the white political machine, is characterized by the contrast between presenting herself as endowed with independence and, at the same time, highlighting both her contribution to community organization and management and her deep understanding of the workings of politics¹⁴. In this sense, both autobiographies are characterized by reference to a political realism made up of the ability to keep to the point and value principles, not from the perspective of a claim to independence as an end in itself, but with the idea that only if a compromise does not become an unconditional sur-

¹⁰ Ivi, 28.

¹¹ Although she will put more effort into leadership work than teaching.

¹² It should be noted that it offers a hagiographic representation of Barbadian society and the educational system (Ivi, 5-8).

¹³ Ivi, 16-17.

¹⁴ See the entire chapter Starting in Politics (Ivi, 29-40).

render can one confront power and obtain concrete results¹⁵. Thus, Chisholm unravels her testimony by recounting her rise in the party, her election to the State Assembly, and the events surrounding her candidacy in the primaries.

2. *A political choice for black people*

As noted above, the fundamental theme in Chisholm's autobiographical accounts is the tension between her desire to present herself as a political agent endowed with marked individuality and her identity as a black woman. Identity that entails a twofold reflection on the condition of both sexism and the deep-rooted racism of American society. It must be kept in mind that her writings and speeches aim to make her political line known to the general public, but the need to construct a public image palatable to the electorate influences her words. This is primarily true of *Unbought and Unbossed*, considering that *The Good Fight* comes at a time when Chisholm's career appears more established and, above all, has a defensive character of the choices she made during the presidential campaign: in *The Good Fight*, greater freedom is evident in pointing out, for example, the failings of her colleagues.

Chisholm's father was a follower of Marcus Garvey, and this shaped her education and view of the condition of African Americans.

¹⁵ She repeats several times Frederick Douglass's famous assertion in the West Indian emancipation speech, «Power concedes nothing without a demand», adapting it to emphasize the need for both the black community and women for autonomous politics, not subservient to the leadership of white men (Ivi, 59 and 138). See her criticism of actress and feminist activist Shirley MacLaine, who «had deserted her own principles as a member of the women's movement to help the McGovern men maneuver and keep the issue out of the campaign» (Ivi, 130). The feminists achieved little or nothing in the 1972 Miami Convention, in which many abandoned Chisholm to avoid antagonizing McGovern, who would have been the likely winner. They did not even have the strength to exchange their support for McGovern for a concrete commitment: «Women like Shirley MacLaine and blacks like Willie Brown were the targets of accusations that they had sold out to McGovern. It seems to me that "sold out" is the wrong interpretation; they were not bought. They gave themselves away» (S. CHISHOLM, *The Good Fight*, New York 1973, 131).

Indeed, he came into early contact with the valorization of black identity as a specific reality in American society when an idea of integration rather than recognition of diversity still prevailed. The civil rights movement¹⁶ would be characterized by the quest for full equality at a stage when segregation was the first obstacle to be overcome, and it was deemed appropriate to emphasize the need to reach standard citizenship status of blacks. Only once segregation had been overcome could the analysis shift to structural racism and, above all, to the specificity of the black community. Such an idea, however, had been anticipated by currents that presented a different view, such as Garveyism. She elaborates on a different thought from the Garveyite one, although she remembers it benevolently («Papa was a Garveyite, too, a follower of Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican who originated many of the ideas that characterize today's militant black separatists», «Garvey declared in the 1920s that “black is beautiful” and called on blacks to preserve their racial purity by becoming separate», and «I think this appealed to my father because he, too, was a very proud black man. He instilled pride in his children, a pride in ourselves and our race that was not as fashionable at that time as it is today»¹⁷).

Chisholm expresses a clear vision, albeit characterized by a tricky balance, of what the politics of the African American community should be within American society and institutions. Its goal must be to redefine itself, create its values and goals, and then organize to achieve them. The essential problem, according to her, was that the black community lacked its political agenda and the ability to create it. She believed that the black community was in the condition of a colonized

¹⁶ The political action carried out by associations such as the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, and SNCC to end segregation and ensure the effective exercise of voting rights between the second half of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s (for an overview of the role of women in the movement see S. BENUSSI, *Le donne afroamericane negli Stati Uniti. La lunga lotta per i diritti civili*, Milano 2007). At that time, the valorization of the specificity of black identity and separatist policies were mainly carried out by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Later, in the period when Chisholm would become a central figure in American politics, such thinking would become more intense and shared, e.g. with the rising Black Power and the birth of the Black Panther Party.

¹⁷ S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 14.

population; that is, it had to adopt the norms and cultural standards of the colonizer, the white man¹⁸. This is why he refuses to condemn Black Power, whose critique of the idea of the American melting pot she shares. Instead, she believes that the path followed by other communities with a strong ethnic identity is the right direction for the African American community: to integrate its politics but remain an autonomous and leading political subject¹⁹. That is, not to seek an integration that is a dissolution into a melting pot where the perspective of the strongest groups prevails, but instead to assert its identity. The aim should not be a divisive one, but to build a mosaic in which all are protected.

This, however, can happen if progress is made not by individuals but as a collective²⁰. Therefore, the enhancement of black identity is necessary: without a strong sense of community, only the progress of a few individuals co-opted into the white system can be achieved. Therefore, for example, she accepts the support of the Black Panther Party. However, while she understands black youth's rejection of the system, she agrees neither with their antagonistic strategy nor with the postulate of separatism²¹. Given her upbringing, marked by admiration for her Garveyite father, there is no reason to doubt Chisholm's genuine sympathy for the militant youth; on the other hand, given her distinctly institutional political background, it is in her chords to work within the system. Of course, given the purpose of her autobiographies, it was necessary for her to present herself as a solid point of reference, not tempted by excesses and extremism, while at the same time not displeasing those younger, more radical forces that supported her («Today I am a militant. Basically I agree with what many of the extremist groups are saying — except that their tactics are wrong and too often they have no program»²²). Her candidacy in the primaries

¹⁸ Ivi, 141.

¹⁹ Ivi, 143.

²⁰ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 144.

²¹ «The idea of blackness has no place in national politics in the United States, I would say; this cost me support from people who were convinced I was selling out my race ... The criticism came from believers in separatism, and that is not my philosophical or political position» (Ivi, 106-107).

²² S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 145.

had been supported by young people, especially college students, who had found in her an ally against the war in Vietnam, a representative who could bring their voice to Congress. At the same time, she makes it clear that she did not feel she was the candidate of blacks, women, or young people, even if they constituted her base of reference, because she considered herself the candidate of all American citizens²³.

3. *For a joint feminist commitment*

The theme of sex discrimination runs through both of Chisholm's autobiographies. She addresses it from different perspectives: what it meant to her to be a woman about her political biography, i.e., how this affected her in terms of possibilities and opportunities²⁴; her analysis on the status of women and their liberation; and her relationship not only with other feminists within the movement²⁵, but also with the women who generally formed part of her political milieu and electorate. Chisholm emphasizes the impact of women's oppression as early as the introduction of her first autobiography, where she clearly states:

Women are a majority of the population, but they are treated like a minority group. The prejudice against them is so widespread that, paradoxically, most persons do not yet realize it exists. Indeed, most women do not realize it and «Of my two "handicaps", being female put many more obstacles in my path than being black»²⁶. When she decides to run for the State Assembly, she must fight for her name to be considered, even if she had served the party for long years²⁷. The way she chooses to describe the discrimination she encounters because of her sex changes from the first to the second autobiography and de-

²³ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 56. Given the context, it was an almost obligatory statement, but she thoroughly supports the idea (Ivi, 161).

²⁴ S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 26.

²⁵ Chisholm actively participated in the feminist movement in the 1960s (Winslow *Shirley Chisholm: Catalyst for Change*, Boulder, 1.^a ed., Westview Press 2014: 53).

²⁶ S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, XII.

²⁷ Ivi, 51-2.

pending on the subject with whom she relates. First, she manifests sympathy toward the attitude of the constituents with whom she interjects during her campaign for the state assembly seat and who berate her for being out of place. Not only does she declare that a direct counterattack would have been counterproductive, but she is aware that highlighting the chauvinism of ordinary people would be inappropriate, both at the time of the interaction and in the eyes of the reader. Chisholm, therefore, declares that she merely explained her choice to run for office. Thus, she dilutes the tone and avoids controversy. However, in order to do so, she accepts the narrative that black men's machismo is because they have been deprived of their masculinity by white society²⁸ and emphasizes the greater machismo of white men²⁹.

Speaking of the campaign for Congress, where she had had to go up against James Farmer, a significant leader of the civil rights movement and candidate of the Republican Party, she recounts how her rival had tried to describe her as overbearing, with a matriarchal attitude, and declares «I was not running an antimale campaign»³⁰. Although she decided to use Farmer's weapon against him, taking advantage of the fact that the number of women voters in the district was much higher and directly contacting women's organizations for support, she is resolutely committed to offering a conciliatory view «It was not my original strategy to organize woman power to elect me; it was forced on me by the time, place, and circumstances. I never meant and never mean to start a war between women and men»³¹. Different is the position she takes in her second autobiography, where he declares that «if anyone thinks white men are sexists, let them check out black men

²⁸ Ivi, 53.

²⁹ Ivi, 54. But after she quotes Betty Friedan and declare that sexism knows no color line.

³⁰ Ivi, 74-5. Farmer centered his campaign on the need for a male voice in Congress representing the district (B. Winslow, *Shirley cit.*, 67). Moreover, Farmer's campaign was supported by young men who were part of black nationalism and who claimed sexist positions (Ivi, 68).

³¹ S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 75.

sometime»³². Given the lack of support from her CBC colleagues in her presidential run, she had felt betrayed, especially since the reason for their rejection was sexist: she cites numerous incidents in which she had received hostile treatment for being a woman³³. Above all, she denounces the fact that black women were expected to place their interests behind an idea of racial loyalty that was constructed according to a male gaze. Her black colleagues³⁴ believed that «In this first serious efforts of blacks for high political office, it would be better if it were a man» and described her as a little matriarch³⁵.

Her thoughts on the condition of women are consistent between the two autobiographies, but the second one expresses stronger language in pointing out the discrimination to which they are subjected. In *Unbought and Unbossed*, she points out the injustice of discrimination against women³⁶, compares the condition of women to that of the black community, and denounces how not only black women but also white women suffer more significant discrimination than men as a whole, black and white; she cites, for example, the wage gap³⁷. She believes that the greatest obstacle to change is female socialization, the resulting self-inflicted contempt comparable to that associated with racial discrimination, and the habit of self-denial that is inculcated in women from birth³⁸. In *The Good Fight*, where the discourse is less

³² S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 31.

³³ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 32, 34, 37, 50, 56, 77.

³⁴ The only ones to support her were Parren Mitchell, Ron Dellums, John Conyers, and Charles Rangel (A. CURWOOD, *Shirley cit.*, 187, 211). Between March 10 and 12, 1972, at the height of the primary campaign, a National Black Political Convention was held in Gary, Indiana, where thousands of black activists gathered. The assembly decided not to support any candidate, not even Chisholm, who had chosen not to go, probably foreshadowing that she would be delegitimized. Several factors played into the convention's choice, but sexism was undoubtedly one of them (Ivi, 220-221).

³⁵ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 31-32. However, the false myth of black matriarchy was supported even by institutions (B. Winslow, *Shirley cit.*, 67, A. CURWOOD, *Shirley cit.*, 80 and 289). See in this regard P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment*, New York 1991, 73-75.

³⁶ S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 76.

³⁷ Ivi, 165.

³⁸ Ivi, 169.

theoretical and more related to the happenings in the primaries, she takes the events as a starting point for some general reflections. She observes how women retain a political naiveté due to long exclusion and comparable to that of blacks, but more pronounced. She observes the difference between black and white women³⁹ in the greater disenchantment that white women felt with the possibility of change, while black women came from an experience of fighting that had taught them greater confidence⁴⁰. In *The Good Fight*, she speaks of the difference between black and white women in the feminist movement: She acknowledges that «it has been generally true that the women's movement has been a white middle-class phenomenon» because «black women share many of the same concerns as white ones, including the need for a national day care system and a guarantee of equal pay for equal work, but they have different priorities from white women»⁴¹. Thus, it is not a total division but a question of priorities: for example, she points out that while white and middle-class women have made abortion rights their primary battle, black women consider it equally important to guarantee the health and welfare of children (nevertheless, they fight for abortion, too); or, white feminists have a hostile attitude toward religion, which is not shared by the black community, both women and men⁴².

4. *Conclusions: toward humanism*

Can we analyze Shirley Chisholm's thought using the interpretive key of intersectionality? According to A. Curwood, the answer is undoubtedly positive. Several passages in her work explicitly trace Chisholm's political position back to intersectionality⁴³. Curwood herself acknowledges that the theoretical framework for intersectionality

³⁹ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 74-77.

⁴⁰ Ivi, 77. Only at last, in the Miami Convention in July 1972, did she gain the tepid support of the Black Caucus (A. CURWOOD, *Shirley cit.*, 262).

⁴¹ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 108.

⁴² Chisholm would later become part of the black feminist movement, which began forming associations between 1973 and 1974 (B. WINSLOW, *Shirley cit.*, 96).

⁴³ A. CURWOOD, *Shirley cit.*, 149, 152, 202, 217, 218, 288.

had not yet been created, but still wants to interpret Chisholm's position as a precursor to that approach («She was practicing intersectionality before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term and the theoretical framework to identify such work»⁴⁴).

The intersectional approach was introduced through the work of K. Crenshaw⁴⁵, a jurist, in order to dissect «a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis»⁴⁶. Crenshaw's critics the single-axis (sex or race) approach to discrimination. She does so by focusing on three areas: case law related to discrimination, feminist theory and the way feminist activism has put it into practice, and anti-racist policies, broadening her observations to include the condition of women in the black American community. It should be noted that Crenshaw's work is not based on the mere cognizance that black women suffer from both racism and sexism, that is, two single-axis discriminations that both apply to them. Instead, the idea is to abandon the analysis based on the single axis of discrimination as a distortion of the experience of Black women. Crenshaw's critique is not based on the mere recognition that black women are subject to both discriminations since the cognizance of this double discrimination was already present, for example, in the work of F. Beal⁴⁷.

Crenshaw's idea is different: the problem for her is not whether or not to apply both single-axis (sex/race) analyses to the condition of black women but the fact that single-axis analysis is itself distorting. Crenshaw argues that the single-axis observation of discrimination is

⁴⁴ Ivi, 3.

⁴⁵ The approach was further explored by Crenshaw herself about the problem of violence against women (K. CRENSHAW, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, in *Stanford Law Review*, 6/1991 1241-1299).

⁴⁶ Id., *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, in *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1/1989, 139.

⁴⁷ B. GUY-SHEFTALL, *Words of fire: An anthology of African American feminist thought*, New York 1995, 146-53. See in this regard the fictional works of Alice Walker, who was harshly criticized for exposing violence against women within the African American community. Beal's idea of double jeopardy is taken up by Chisholm, who speaks of twin jeopardy (A. CURWOOD, *Shirley cit.*, 289). See in this regard note *supra*.

shaped by the experience of the privileged category within the discriminated group (men in the case of race, white women in the case of sex). Crenshaw reiterates that it is not a matter of including black women in the existing analytical framework but of creating a new theoretical model that allows for the observation of «intersectional experience» as «greater than the sum of racism and sexism»⁴⁸. Consequently, it is not enough for her to recognize that Black women are victims of both racism and sexism; instead, it is necessary to identify how racism and sexism specifically decline themselves in the case of Black women.

Crenshaw's proposal is compelling, especially in the first part of her essay: In analyzing the employment discrimination of black women, she verifies how there is not simply an overlap of sexism and racism but how such discrimination takes a third form in its own right, in which on the one hand black women are denied the possibility of being representative of women as a whole and black people as a whole⁴⁹, on the other hand, they are denied their specific marginalization if they are not traceable to a broader category, this one protected by law, namely women in general and black people in general⁵⁰. Thus, we need a fundamental perspective transformation: «These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated»⁵¹. About feminist theory and the feminist movement, Beal had already found significant differences between how the oppression of Black women in the patriarchal system is declined⁵²; Crenshaw proposes a similar view, deepening it⁵³. Moreover, about anti-racist politics, Cren-

⁴⁸ K. CRENSHAW, *Demarginalizing cit.*, 140.

⁴⁹ Ivi, 143-150.

⁵⁰ Ivi, 141-3.

⁵¹ Ivi, 140.

⁵² B. GUY-SHEFTALL, *Words cit.*, 147 and 150-2.

⁵³ See, for example, the issue of sexual violence, which presents different issues for Black women: «Black women are caught between a Black community that, perhaps understandably, views with suspicion attempts to litigate questions of sexual violence,

shaw notes that the problem goes beyond the discrimination that Black women suffer within the African American community: the fact that «race is still seen by many as the primary oppositional force in Black lives»⁵⁴ makes it difficult both, for Black women, to construct an anti-racist politics that takes into account their specific condition and, for Black men, to accept it.

However, this is not Shirley Chisholm's position, especially in the two autobiographies. Her analysis is predominantly a single-axis one, even in her use of language. Usually, when she talks about sexism, either in general or, specifically, in the political environment, she does not do so by connecting it on her status as a black woman but by making a unified argument for all women.

Moreover, she usually presents the two axes separately. She even compares the status of women and that of black people, an approach that does not fit with intersectionality, in the context of which it makes no sense to propose a parallelism between two discriminations that necessarily intersect. She says, for example, «I repeated what I have said many times, that during twenty years in local ward politics, four as a state legislator and four as a member of Congress, I had met far more discrimination because I am a woman than because I am black»⁵⁵, and «It is true that women are second-class citizens, just as black people are»⁵⁶. But even more, it is her overall treatment of the condition of women that is based a unified discourse⁵⁷: In *Unbought and Unbossed*, Chisholm devotes one of her final speeches to the theme «Women and Their Liberation», where she discusses the condition of women in the United States, only occasionally mentioning the specific condition of black women. In *The Good Fight*, predominantly repeats the separation between the two axes; she refers more frequently to Black women but highlights the fact that they are victims of both racism and sexism

and a feminist community that reinforces those suspicions by focusing on white female sexuality» (Crenshaw 1989: 159).

⁵⁴ K. CRENSHAW, *Demarginalizing cit.*, 161.

⁵⁵ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 32.

⁵⁶ S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 75.

⁵⁷ Also, she mainly analyzes the black community's political situation as a whole, encompassing black women and men (S. CHISHOLM, *Unbought cit.*, 133-151 and S. Chisholm, *The Good cit.*, 140-148).

rather than observing the peculiar way in which they combine («Black women... must have enough self-confidence so they will not be worn down by the sexist attacks that they will encounter on top of racial slurs»⁵⁸). Even when she makes some remarks about the feminist movement that emerged in the 1960s⁵⁹, highlighting how it was predominantly made up of white middle-class women, Chisholm immediately specifies that black and white women share many interests, albeit with different priorities, and that «white and black women could work together on economic issues, like job discrimination, where their needs are the same»⁶⁰. She enhances the common ground rather than solicit reflection on diversity. While being aware, of course, of the dual identity of black women, she urges a joint reflection on the shared experience of oppression.

Therefore, it seems incorrect to attribute an intersectional perspective to Chisholm. Curwood herself justifies her hypothesis by citing speeches or episodes that do not imply an intersectional approach: it is not enough, for example, to cite the fact that Chisholm was aware of the prevalence of black women among single mothers in poverty⁶¹, or, much less, the mere fact that she similarly denounced racism and sexism⁶². We cannot take Chisholm's intention to represent all the American people («I stand before you today as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency of the United States ... I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women's movement of this country, although I am a woman, and I am equally proud of that. I am not the candidate of any political bosses or special interests... I am the candidate of the people»⁶³, and merge it with an intersectional approach («Because of her ideological and personal location at the intersection of race and gender, and her resistance to representing any one group in favor of an

⁵⁸ Ivi, 32.

⁵⁹ The most representative organization was NOW, which Chisholm joined soon after its founding (B. WINSLOW, *Shirley cit.*, 38).

⁶⁰ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 108.

⁶¹ A. CURWOOD, *Shirley cit.*, 151 and 298.

⁶² Ivi, 182.

⁶³ S. CHISHOLM, *The Good cit.*, 71.

intersectional approach, she had multiple sources of power»⁶⁴), which is based on totally different and even opposing assumptions.

Curwood herself acknowledges at the very least that «Chisholm's analysis, especially earlier in her congressional career, vacillated between seeing the Black freedom struggle and feminism as parallel and seeing them as intersecting»⁶⁵; as noted, even when she discusses Black women, the prevalence of single-axis analysis is overwhelming⁶⁶.

Chisholm's vision is humanist, not only because she explicitly declares that «In the end, anti-black, anti-female, and all forms of discrimination are equivalent to the same thing – anti-humanism». It is especially so because it expresses a clear humanist vision: « I want the time to come when we can be as blind to sex as we are to color»⁶⁷: its goal is full and equal citizenship. We cannot forget that Chisholm was coming from an institutional and political background in America, where the principle of equality before the law had yet to be realized⁶⁸.

⁶⁴ A. CURWOOD, *Shirley cit.*, 218.

⁶⁵ Ivi, 150.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., S. CHISHOLM, *Race, Revolution and Women*, in *The Black Scholar*, 4/1971, 17-21, Id., *Unbought cit.*, 40-5, Id., *The Politics of Coalition*, in *The Black Scholar*, 1/1972 30-32. In the speech on the condition of black women given in 1974 at the University of Missouri, she states «The black woman cannot be discussed in the same context as her Caucasian counterpart because of the twin jeopardy of race and sex which operates against her, and the psychological and political consequences which attend them ... To date, neither the black movement nor women's liberation succinctly addresses itself to the dilemma confronting the black who is female». However, even there, she reiterates « An aspect of the women's liberation movement that will and does interest many black women is the potential liberation, is the potential nationalization of daycare centers in this country. Black women can accept and understand this agenda item in the women's movement» (S. CHISHOLM, *The black woman in contemporary America*, University of Missouri, Kansas City, June 17, 1974, <https://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/sayitplain/schisholm.html>). In this regard, see also T.L. BROWN, «A New Era in American Politics»: *Shirley Chisholm and the Discourse of Identity*, in *Callaloo*, 4/2008, 1015.

⁶⁷ S. Chisholm, *Unbought cit.*, 75. To better understand the implications of the concept and to avoid distorting interpretations, see M. F. Berry, Vindicating Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Road to a Color-Blind Society, in *The Journal of Negro History*, 1-4/1996, 137-144.

⁶⁸ Likewise, it seems historically inaccurate to claim that Chisholm was practicing intersectionality because «an imagined coalition of feminist, Black freedom, antiwar,

On the contrary, intersectionality is a theory rooted in critical theories of society⁶⁹, which questions the very possibility of realizing that project, if not even its desirability. In the end, this is the greatest danger posed by an application of intersectionality, insofar as it can depower a common struggle against patriarchy that is more than alive and well: «But Crenshaw is aware of pitfalls. “Some people can use [intersectionality] as a way to deflect a critique of patriarchy – by saying: ‘How can there be any full structural critique when we are so many different things at the same time?’”»⁷⁰.

Native, welfare rights, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) activists was the inspiration for her presidential run» (A. CURWOOD, *Shirley cit.*, 3, 223 and also 225 and 240): first, as we have seen, a summation of political forces is not sufficient to speak of intersectionality, and second, at the time they were discussing equal rights for homosexuals and the withdrawal of punitive laws against homosexuality (as Ivi, 258 herself points out), not queer, transgender, and LGBTQ identities.

⁶⁹ P. HILL COLLINS, *Intersezionalità come teoria critica della società*, Torino 2022. It is appropriate to mention that K. Crenshaw is one of the leading representatives of Critical Race Theory.

⁷⁰ H. Khaleeli, *#SayHerName: why Kimberlé Crenshaw is fighting for forgotten women*, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/may/30/sayhername-why-kimberle-crenshaw-is-fighting-for-forgotten-women>, 2016. Crucial in this regard is the critique by Holly Lawford-Smith and Kate Phelan (H. LAWFORD-SMITH, K. PHELAN, *The Metaphysics of Intersectionality Revisited*, in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2/2022, 166-187).