

“IL SESSUALE POLITICO” OR A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR COMPASSION AND TOLERANCE

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An awareness of the importance of gender issues has spread among a new generation of researchers in Italian Studies. Currently, the intersectional approach prevails, which investigates gender, race, and class with a progressive and emancipatory intention. This approach is often militant and assertive, at times angry, at times euphoric. Psychoanalysis has largely been superseded by this approach. Against this trend, my latest book, *Il sessuale politico: Freud con Marx, Fanon, Foucault* argues for the value of psychoanalysis as a tool to understand political phenomena as they relate to gender issues and confronts what I call the negativity of sex, i.e. what Freud called ‘sexual drive’, the abject aspect of sex that challenges the present celebration of sex as essentially good and healthy. In this paper, I will present this idea in the context of my thirty years in the Italian university and my personal experience as a middle-aged gay academic.

In 1990 the World Health Organisation removed homosexuality from its classification of diseases. In 2018 gender incongruence was also de-listed. In Italy, since 2015 it has been possible to change gender without genital surgery; and since 2016, civil unions of lesbian and gay couples have been legally recognised. When I was studying philosophy at the State University of Milan in the 1990s, I could not have foreseen these changes. At that time, homosexuality bore the stigma of illness and death as it was associated with AIDS. Gay nightlife in Milan was desperate and wild: drugs were widely used, people hooked up recklessly. It was quite rare to come out in one’s own family, or in the workplace, and an academic study of sex was inconceivable in the Department of Philosophy. *Il sessuale politico* originates in part from the memory of my frustration and double life at that time: that of a

student interested in studying sex in a sexophobic and heteronormative university by day and a nerdish clubber in a hypersexualised gay entertainment industry at night.

Today at the University of Verona I teach a course in political philosophy and sexuality. Does the fact I teach this course mean that the sexual repression and homophobia that I experienced in the 1990s have disappeared from Italian universities and from Italian society in general? The answer is complex. On one hand, we can rightly feel encouraged by the idea of an Italy where gender equality is legally recognised, where lesbians and gays are more integrated, and where the younger generation can be sexually uninhibited and gender fluid. There is evidence even in mainstream media that 'sex positive' thinking is now widely spread, namely, that sexual activity of all kinds is not shameful or taboo anymore, but is considered 'normal' human activity. On the other hand, we cannot fail to see that non-heteronormative sex is still condemned and so-called sexual minorities are still discriminated against. Tragically, homophobia continues to exist, and statistics tell us that suicides of bullied LGBTQIA+ young people in Italy have not decreased.

Personally, I have had to navigate the difficulty of talking about my research regarding sex in an academic environment. When I was hired in Verona almost fifteen years ago, the neo-fascist party Forza Nuova violently protested against my appointment at the university. This was the first in a series of attacks from the far-right, from which my university has not always defended me. Recently, an important cultural institution in Milan asked me to change the title of a talk I was invited to give. One of its sponsors, a financial company, did not like to be associated with the term 'sexual' that appeared in the title.

Despite the progress in Italian society toward greater sexual awareness and acceptance, discrimination persists. Even sex-positive rhetoric risks projecting an aberrant sexuality on new scapegoats who are seen as not 'sex-positive enough', for example, non-Westerners, Islamic or migrant people, who are accused of being sexually repressed and homophobic. Moreover, this sex-positive rhetoric denies that in Italy and in the West generally, sex remains an uncanny force that often conflicts with civilization, that drives the subject into an uncivilized wilderness, that disturbs the subject's inscription in society. To understand the psychological negativity that sex continues

to represent, consider the example of revenge porn. The Italian legal system rightly recognises that revenge porn can incite suicide. If the publication of footage in which we are filmed having sex is unbearable to us, isn't it because the act of sex leads to the symbolic suicide of the civilized self?

My book therefore interrogates this rhetoric of positivity and its connection to the denial of the abject in sex. It is an invitation to momentarily renounce this rhetoric of positivity in order to consider the negativity of sex, which we do so much to avoid, as a theme that needs to be addressed in academia and beyond. Psychoanalysis would say that sex is an abject part of the self, something that the Ego partially refuses and expels from conscience, something that society needs to repress and sublimate to build civilization. Sex is exciting, but it is also shameful and 'filthy'. It can make all of us 'filthy', and affects all of our lives. And this repression and sublimation may cause a distorted perception of the self and the Other. Recognising this simple fact can be the catalyst for a political ethic of compassion and tolerance. This might seem a very modest proposal, I know. Young researchers on gender issues in Italian Studies might be outraged by my asking for so little. But we live in dark times – times of crisis and wars. And in these tragic times, it is easy to find enemies on whom to project our own negativity. So, my invitation to compassion and tolerance, by the end of the day, is not so modest at all.

Reference

- Bernini, L. 2019 *Il sessuale politico: Freud con Marx, Fanon, Foucault*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.