

Introduction: the politics of sexuality in contemporary Italy

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Sex is always political. But there are historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated. (Rubin 1999, 143)

This special issue responds to a critical time in the politics of sexuality in contemporary Italy which has seen, particularly during the 2000s, the unfolding of passionate public and politicised debates, struggles and contested renegotiations over normative and minoritised sexual identities and practices. The complexity of events and shifting conjunctures that unravelled during this period can be grouped into three broad categories. The first includes the attempts made to change policies and laws addressing and regulating sexual and intimate life and practices. Heated disputes over the recognition of same-sex partnerships and a new prostitution law, for example, revealed the influence exerted by powerful political and religious actors in maintaining and reinforcing policies and laws which construct the ‘traditional Italian family’ as the fundamental nucleus of society, and other forms of intimacy and non-familial sex as problematic. The polarisations over these issues and their politicisation have often contributed to over-simplifying what are complex matters of intimacy and sexuality, thus limiting the opportunity to address them with transformative and inclusive policies. A second series of events concerns the enhanced visibility of repeated episodes of extreme violence against racialised and gendered sexually minoritised groups, specifically gay men, transsexuals, and migrant prostitutes. In addition, the normalised daily display of women’s sexualised bodies on mainstream media has increasingly been experienced and problematised as a form of visual violence. The viral success in 2009 of Lorella Zanardo’s controversial documentary *Il corpo delle donne* contributed to emphasising the extent of this normalisation, and the need for spectators to confront and challenge it by taking a more active and critical role (Zanardo 2010). Third, the end of the 2000s was marked by the sexual scandals involving Berlusconi and his entourage, and the public debates which ensued. Despite attempts to reduce the so-called Berlusconi-gate to an issue of a private matter, and its frequent characterisation by the international media as a laughable Italian idiosyncrasy, it represented a key moment in the re-evaluation of the meaning and importance of sexuality in shaping the dynamics between politics and power in the country.

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Importantly, the practices of resistance enacted at different civil and political levels in response to these recent developments have also shown the existence in Italy of a vital counter-hegemonic movement, whose collective knowledge production is crucial for the development of critical thinking on normative sexualities. Examples of these include: Italian feminist networks, which have shown their mobilising potential for collective action¹ (see Galetto et al. 2009); networks and groups of men, such as *Maschile Plurale* (<http://maschileplurale.it/cms/>), engaged in the redefinition of masculinity and whose analyses have been achieving greater visibility and credibility; and the contestations and struggles of queer activism (see Ross 2008, 2009).

As mentioned at the outset, the unfolding of these events became the starting point and then the context in which this project was conceived and elaborated. Our aim as editors of this special issue was to engage in a rigorous debate and analysis of the contested and shifting politics of sexuality in contemporary Italian political, cultural and social life. By choosing to focus specifically on the politics of sexuality, we wanted to emphasise the importance of recognising sex and sexuality as always political, i.e. with the potential to either generate opportunities for political recognition, inclusion and belonging, or indeed to restrict or curtail these very opportunities – different outcomes and possibilities that depend on whether and how a political (re)negotiation of sexual politics is made possible in the context of changing social, cultural and economic forces. This collection engages in the investigation of these issues and possibilities by looking at normative and minoritised sexualities, how they are thus constructed, and the extent to which they are – and have been – regulated, produced, reproduced or challenged in public and political debates, policies, social and everyday practices. Crucial for our analysis are both the specificity of the socio-political and cultural context of Italy, and the global and transnational forces and rapid transformations that contribute to shaping the politics of sexuality in the country.

Also important for the development of the discussion presented in this issue are the insights and perspectives that emerge from the scholarship that has engaged with the study of sexuality in the Italian context. In this respect, it should be noted that sexuality has been a peripheral area of investigation in Italian academic research – both in terms of its institutional recognition and epistemological status and in relation to the positioning of those who have been identified as the target population of these very studies. Indeed, it was only in 2006 that a survey on the sexual behaviour of the Italian population was carried out (Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna, and Garelli 2010), almost 30 years after the first one (Fabris and Davis 1978). Overall, the study of sexuality and sexual practices has been largely ignored by mainstream research on heterosexual families and intimate relations, with just a few exceptions (Piccone Stella 1979; Siebert 1991). More recently, sexuality has been further investigated as an issue pertaining specifically to ‘sexual others’. The latter are thus identified due to: their non-normative sexual orientation, for example as gay and lesbians (Saraceno 2003; Colombo and Barbagli 2007), their belonging to groups ‘at risk’, for example as young people (Buzzi 1998; Garelli 2000; Dalla Zuanna and Crisafulli, 2004), their socially ‘problematic’ reproductive behaviour and condition, for example as Italian women with low fertility levels (Livi-Bacci 2001), and their sexual transgression and/or victimisation, for example as prostitutes (Monzini 2002; Sapio 2007). These perceived ‘others’ have also been the focus of a growing body of critical perspectives which have explored intersections between gender and sexuality, moving across disciplinary boundaries, and stemming in particular from feminist and, more recently, from queer

studies (Rizzo 2006; Trappolin 2008; Pustianaz 2011). Also relevant to note are contributions which would not necessarily be identified as pertaining to Italian studies *per se*, but which have looked at the Italian context in relation to issues of sexuality as a case study or as an illustration of more generalisable European dynamics; for example on reproductive laws and policies (Hanafin 2007, 2009), on migration, identity and sexuality (Angel-Ajani 2003; Duncan 2009; Mai 2009; Andrijasevic 2010; Bonfiglioli 2010), and on gay and lesbian politics (Holzacker 2012; Santos forthcoming).

The encounter and exchange between the perspectives on Italian sexuality developed from within Italy and those coming from Anglophone Italian studies, to which this special issue intends to be a contribution, have already mutually enriched epistemological frameworks and empirical knowledge (see for example Ross and Scarparo 2010). We also believe that this evolution is bound to develop further with new generations of researchers working on issues related to gender and sexuality in Italy increasingly moving and operating across different national contexts. Nevertheless, what still needs to be addressed, as Ross (2010, 165) has argued, is 'a deconstructing gaze on normative gendered and sexual identities (hegemonic masculinity, heterosexual sex)'. If research on masculinity is finally finding visibility and legitimisation (Ruspini 2009; Bellassai 2011), the processes of construction of models of normal, natural sexuality, and the ways people experience them in their everyday life, have been for a long time, and still are to a certain extent, marginal questions in studies on Italian sexuality (Bertone and Ferrero Camoletto 2009; Inghilleri and Ruspini 2011). This special issue contributes to developing a more critical perspective on these matters, by looking at the dynamics of power and resistance in the construction and policing of the boundaries of *both* minoritised *and* normative sexuality, and by taking into account not only the contemporary specificities of the Italian context but also the complex historical processes that have shaped current dynamics and understandings. In this respect, it is our hope that this collection will represent a step forward in the development of a comprehensive and critical study of the politics of sexuality in Italy, whilst also making a contribution to international scholarship in this field.

Opening the issue is the article by Irene Peano which shows how processes of 'othering' are related to the workings of sovereignty. Here the power of the sovereign to suspend the law is explored by looking at how transactional sexual exchanges have been simultaneously practised and criminalised by Italian politicians. Peano reveals the violence inscribed in these processes, and how they are performed, for example, upon undocumented migrant sex workers in detention centres, who are reduced to 'bare life'. Here, however, the author also recognises the possibility of practices of resistance, even under extreme and brutal conditions. In the closing article of this issue, Isabel Crowhurst also looks at the violence involved in the othering of migrant prostitute women in Italy. In particular, she explores their reduction to the constraining victim/criminal paradigm, which denies the recognition of their subjectivity. Focusing on the media display of a degrading picture of a black migrant prostitute in a police cell after an anti-street prostitution raid, the author shows the historical and colonial roots of current Italian state policies of control over migrant women, which builds upon a racialised construction of black women's threatening sexuality.

The medicalisation of gendered bodies and their sexual functionality, regulated and supported by the state, is another powerful process of construction of normative sexualities, and is addressed with two contributions. By analysing recent social campaigns

on male sexual health, Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto and Chiara Bertone discuss how powerful actors and economic interests, supported and legitimised by public bodies, are involved in the construction of a new medicalised masculinity, defined by a naturalised heteronormative hyper-functional sexuality, which feeds upon the historical roots of Italian virilist ideology, and the persistence of highly gendered sexual scripts. In the second contribution on these aspects, Eleonora Garosi shows how the historical and contemporary complexity of the living conditions of trans people in Italy has been constrained to varying degrees by the medicalised gender binary definition sanctioned by law. The author also explores how such normative prescriptions are negotiated and challenged in subjective experiences of gender transitioning.

The peculiar Italian denial of recognition of minoritised sexualities in legislation and policies, in the context of a welfare system that strongly builds upon assumptions of (heteronormative) family stability and solidarity, is addressed by the two articles which discuss the experiences and representations of gay and lesbian lives. Martin Dines and Sergio Rigoletto show how Spain, perceived for a long time as Italy's backward cultural cousin, with its recent changes, in particular the introduction of same-sex marriage, has now become the symbolic mirror of Italy's backwardness and marginalisation, or, in a conservative perspective, of its possible threatening future. Through their analysis of the film *Il padre delle spose*, they call upon the importance of locality, under the form of local governments and of local communities, to providing opportunities for recognition. The invisibility of LGBTQ ageing people discussed by Charlotte Ross shows the implications of the familistic assumptions of a welfare system delegating care for the elderly to their informal, kinship network of support. Attempts to imagine, and practise, non-heteronormative possibilities of solidarity within the LGBTQ community, such as the project of a residential community for older lesbians discussed in the article, are bound to clash with these structural limits of Italian social policies.

Finally, having emphasised the importance of the context in which this special issue was developed, we wish to acknowledge and briefly reflect upon the recent transformations that have taken place since Berlusconi's resignation and replacement with a technocratic government. With this recent change, sexuality issues have been marginalised from the political agenda, written out from the competences of the technocratic government and from its economic crisis-driven priorities. The processes addressed by this issue, however, are still in place and inform the ways in which these very priorities are defined and continue to intersect with the production and reproduction of gendered, classed and racialised models of normative and minoritised sexualities. It is only by acknowledging these processes that we can recognise the spaces that are available for a renegotiation of 'the domain of erotic life' (Rubin 1999, 143) under the present conditions of economic austerity, increasing social inequalities and cultural diversity.

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Note

1. The demonstrations promoted by the *Se non ora quando* network (<http://www.senonoraquando.eu/>), which took place in February 2011 across the country, are a prominent

example of the success of feminist activism in involving large and diverse swathes of the population in protesting against the government and its sexual politics.

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