the body, sexuality and precarity

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abstract

The focus group held in Bologna on 2 October 2005 revolved around the relationships between 'body', 'sexuality' and 'precarity', which are concepts at the heart of the reflections and political agenda of the feminist and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (GLBTQ) movements in Italy.

keywords

body; sexuality; precarity; identity; desire
introduction

The discussion between the participants began with a debate on a topical issue—the search for a common element able to act as an interpretative tool to explain reality and to regroup different personal opinions into a shared struggle. In light of the difficulty of finding such a connecting element in the post-modern era, what emerged was the controversial issue of precarity. This precarity—understood as the precarious nature of affections and life—which is experienced today by women, men, lesbians, gays and transgender persons, was presented in different ways by the participants of the focus group. It was presented sometimes as a new element and an unavoidable characteristic of contemporary public and private space, and sometimes as a constant in the lives of specific individuals, such as gays and transgender people. Body and sexuality—at the root of the feminist and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (GLBTQ) movements of the 1970s—assume new meanings in this context of precarity, while remaining central elements of forms of subjectivity. The idea of precarious (or queer) identity (regarding gender, sexual orientation) has come such a long way that its versatility, extreme marketability and (supposed) political inconsistency generate enthusiasm and perplexity at the same time.

The concept of precarious identity has been directly linked to the debate on the institutionalization of 'different orientations', giving rise to new procreation technologies and the transformation of the family as an institution, with all the doubts and opportunities this can generate. The internal discussion in the focus group bore witness to the liveliness of the Italian debate on these topics and highlighted some of the most significant positions within the feminist movement and the GLBTQ movement.

what does 'common' mean?

The reflection on the word common, as was emphasized by Monica Baroni, is a reflection on 'what language we speak amongst ourselves, what we say to each other, what we can transmit, what we can reject and extract from the language instead of continuing to produce abstract ideas and theories which alienate us from the experience'. If the common experience of these last few years denotes a general tendency to work 'in the specific', with each person placed in a group or institution that governs their own identity (in terms of sexual orientation or gender), it is now necessary to look for what can materially be the base for renewed sharing.

In the 1970s, the body in the material sense was a concept around which common analyses and practices were built. If, for the preceding generation, the place of reflection and feminist practice was the body, today the fragmentation and consequent 'need for security' that precarity brings with it leads to a
're-significance of that same body'. 'Today, it seems obvious to me', maintained Cristian Lo Iacono, that there has been 'a linguistic and political shift from one type of discussion centred on expropriation-re-appropriation – which is why our liberation movements aimed to re-appropriate something which was presumed to have been violated, expropriated, oppressed – to another type of discussion. Today [...] we no longer speak of re-appropriation [and] the body seems to have vanished: we now speak of it as if it were some sort of neutral piece of external skin. An important fact, however, is the size of the body in terms of its security and meaning: we are at a stage where, unlike the 1970s, the body has become a place of real meaning, subject to a series of interventions [from piercing to tattooing] which serve to give it meaning which is not collective but self-made, singular and individual. The need for security and the response to the precarity of existence itself go through these processes of bodily modification which totally invade the minds of individuals living in the world's rich nations.'

Today, according to Porpora Marcasciano, there is a new type 'of centrality of the body: I have the feeling that the body continues to be a producer of needs (desires, diseases), or rather that it is still the starting point but no longer the destination. Let me clarify that: from the 1970s onwards, the body has become a place for personal and social experimentation, but whereas at the beginning it was above all personal – it was re-appropriated as people began to become acquainted with it – now it is more a place of social, objective and not subjective experimentation. The place in which to try out businesses, speculations and markets'.

If the body is no longer (only) the subject of re-appropriation or the place on which to lay the foundations for the certainty of one's own self-determination, one's own material and symbolic (re-)production and has been reduced to being the 'starting point', what then is common to our lives, in the objective and not yet sufficiently 'subjective' sense?

'What we still have in common is precarity', Laura Fantone maintained, 'except that it can no longer easily be translated into a political language. If, in the 1970s, the body was translated into a long-term project, precarity with its brief and fragmented time factors makes it difficult for the collective to develop any project at all'.

Precarity becomes a synonym for a common condition, the horizon in which people's lives are continually defined and redrawn: a horizon, however, very rarely becomes 'an enlightening experience' and 'project' because it is, in the words of Porpora Marcasciano: 'like the eyelashes which are so close to the eyes that we can't see them. They've been with us forever, which is why we don't experience them as an objective condition'.

Precarity is, indeed, a condition that, as it is essentially a concept linked with modernity, entered our political language only a few decades ago. In specific
terms of contemporariness, as it is an essential characteristic of post-modernity, it does not limit itself just to shaping the lives of the so-called south of the world or of the more marginal groups in the West – such as, for example, women, GLBTQs or prostitutes, which used to be the case – but as the group Sconvegno reminded us, ‘it managed to involve the mainstream worker accustomed to Fordist production and the whole surrounding social set-up’. In that sense, this is the aspect that ‘draws people together’. Looking at contemporary western societies from the point of view of precarity, according to Eleonora Cirant, possible analogies emerge between various forms of precarious existence, including that of immigrants that are inscribed ‘in the experiences of going elsewhere, breaking family ties, trying out new identities and new consumer models’. Then there are elements of this same condition, added Sexyschock, which, if referenced subjectively, transform precarity from a simple *conditio communis* into a possible area for creating new experiences and languages.

**identity sui generis**

But what does ‘precarious identity’ mean specifically? In what sense can we today define gender identity as a precarious identity? If the sense of precarity that covers the concept of the body (in terms of gender) seems mirrored in the concept of sexual identity and the definition of sexual orientation, we should not properly speak of an ‘explosion’ of the preceding categories but rather of an incessant shifting between crises and temporary consolidation, more or less substantial or instrumental, within those same categories. According to Daniela Danna, in ‘suggesting a discussion about the mobility of identity, not falling back into categories can be important but cannot refute a preceding categorisation. Let me explain: for me, sexual identification, the definition of the sexual orientation of the person opposite and my own has become less important only after a moment of strong identification. You can't achieve greater flexibility if the problem of harmonization between heterosexuality and homosexuality is not resolved’.

Just look, for example, at what happens in the change from Female-to-Male (FTM), a passage in which, as Eleonora Cirant stressed, ‘a new M is not being invented, but a macho model of masculinity is being recreated [...] paradoxically the model being recreated is still the old one’. Porpora Marcasciano is opposed to this interpretation, stating that in the change from F to M, ‘there is a basic need here, [...] a need to be “men” in the specific sense. This has created a great deal of argument, including and especially by feminists, such as in the case of the reconstruction of the phallus. Looking for the “penis” (which is not looking for the phallus), is the landing point, a recovered destination and a hybrid. [...] I don’t think that the journey to or arrival at a change from F to M, if there is an arrival, has restored the structure to the state in which it was
handed to us'. On the other hand, Eleonora Cirant stresses that what remains is that in the change 'the political crux should not be so much in the F or the M, but in the "to", in the political awareness of the transformation in itself. And today this awareness doesn't exist in the changeover just as it doesn't exist in the use of biotechnologies'.

On this aspect, Porpora Marcasciano concurs: 'the people who turned to the Movimento Identità Transgender (MIT) and completed the changeover do not return because they consider the experience to have been completed. [...] Scientifically, the process is concluded but often the awareness of it is absent. This absence does not involve only transsexuals but concerns everyone: the general perception is that we live and then leave no trace of ourselves. Returning to the discussion on the body [...] it seems that the body no longer has any weight, that life is a life which has been emptied out and that the body has been made lighter because it has been emptied out'.

This discussion was taken up by Sexyshock: 'The body is weightless – unaware – even when it is passing from one precarious identity to another. The perception which unites us concerns what is asked of the body by bio-politics or by the State and the market and that is that it has, first and foremost, a performing role to play. The body has to be in several places and several situations, and know how to perform exactly the identity requested'.

And yet even as it lives its precarious identity, the body remains strongly 'situated'. As Eleonora Cirant showed, 'Physicality and sexuality are one of the privileged areas where an attempt can be made to give form to identity. [...] Bodies, whether light or heavy, are always situated. Contexts and subjects always exist, [even if] there is a range of extreme variations in the way bodies are perceived, lived and represented. That's why we move from invisibility to hyper visibility, from negation to instrumentation and exaltation'.

In the case of sexual practices, contact with precarious identities (particularly for transgender persons of both sexes), such as prostitution, demonstrates what Porpora Marcasciano defined as the tendency of individuals to be polysexual or polysexed ("polisessuat"). On the other hand, such forms of 'precarious' sexuality generally remain non-disclosed by the individuals practicing them, because they are considered 'abnormal' and therefore unacceptable to common sense. For those, however, who make their homosexuality clear for all to see, precarity has become an inevitable condition: for them, as has been stressed by Cristian Lo Iacono, precarity is an element that has become a natural part of each individual life story, marked in modern times by cultural stigma and the material exclusion from the mechanics of social reproduction. In this sense, 'the homosexual condition' represents a sort of 'precedent' for the contemporary and more generalized precarious condition. Today, however, as Sexyshock notes, such a condition is accompanied 'on the one hand by a sort of expansion in freedom of
expression of queer identity which leads to greater social acceptability [...] and on the other, by the emergence of new forms of marginalisation which link old forms of discrimination against GLBTQs and new forms linked to the drawing up of schematic diagrams of identities for which continual changeover and indetermination is not accepted'.

**precarious families**

The discussion on sexual precarity, experimentation and the multiplicity of emotional experiences has taken the whole issue back to the Italian debate on the PACS¹ and the analysis of the concept of the family.

Cristian Lo Iacono maintained that 'our current challenge is to support maximum diversification in the forms in which life is created, emotions and the area of growth. The struggle over TRA² should have made clear just how crucial the problem is that has to be solved – family, the emotions and biological ties. One of the things we have to focus on is that love, care and protection are independent of the biological and genetic investment each one makes in others'. The family was not created as a place of emotional sentiment, but as an economic nucleus. And today, now that 'industrial or post-industrial capitalism [...] no longer needs the traditional nuclear family, [...] the backward-looking defence of this model is related to the current circumstances of the dismantling and the reorganization of the social state. Today's capitalism would not only enthusiastically accept a flexible family model, it fosters and begs for it. And we are obliged to work with categories and regulatory structures which are already dominated by the spectre of power – which does not mean abolishing them tout court'.

Sexyshock agreed with Cristian Lo Iacono: 'Sexual precarity is positive if it is not regulated, or rather if it is that segment of mobility that allows the passage from the world of established norms and normalisation to the world of the surprise. In a precarious and mobile environment like this, you can meet and relate to people with different desires from yours'.

What is in debate is not so much the realization that there are so many forms of conjugal living, emotional ties and parenthood, but the regulatory aspect that these new forms require. While sharing the idea that each process of regularizing forms of co-habitation imparts a model, during the discussion positions swung between those who support moving from the fixed patriarchal heterosexual model to a largely plural model and those who speak of the abandonment *tout court* of the concept of family. The association between family and affection is not discounted. Liliana Ellena is inclined to abandon the term 'family', as is Laura Fantone: 'It is a common heritage based on the first feminist analyses that the nuclear family is not what might be called the "normal family", but rather that

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¹ Recently in Italy, a huge number of bills have been presented to Parliament by members of the Democratic Left party and the Communist Refoundation party for the recognition of *de facto* couples, both heterosexual and homosexual. The public debate on this issue is commonly known in Italy as the 'debate on PACS' (Patti civili di solidarieta/Civil Partnership Agreements), echoing the legal formula adopted in France.  
² TRA (or PMA) is an acronym for the Italian 'Tecniche di Riproduzione Assistita'(Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART)). In March 2002, a draft law was presented to the Camera (lower house). The draft was written by a small Committee of the Commission for Social Affairs and aimed to regulate ART. In April 2002, the Movement of Women organized many events (meetings, petitions, open letters, etc.) to express their collective
which developed with urbanisation, in which the patriarchal model combines with women's total responsibility for reproductive care. In that sense this term is, in itself, terrifying'. Daniela Danna continued on the same theme: 'In the public debate, claiming these new emotions to be family is misleading [...]. It is a concept to be used only if there are children'.

If, says Monica Baroni, the same family is 'the cause of the process of social precarity', how can claiming recognition of the various emotional ties as 'new families' be a revolutionary process? It is rather the opposite: it 'ties people down to the traditional models of the practising of emotion'.

And yet there are those like Daniela Danna who see in the legal recognition of the various forms of emotion an important opportunity to reassess rights as an 'individual', and therefore a 'general and universal' prerogative, against those who perceive rights as 'differentiated': a right that disregards 'the orientation and gender identity (whether male, female or intermediate) of citizens'.

The fact remains, as is underlined by Eleonora Cirant, that social transformations must be accompanied by legal transformations and vice versa, and the fact that this is not the case in Italy today not only in the area of new emotional ties but also regarding non-traditional forms of procreation is probably the reason for the state in which the contemporary debate on the family and on various forms of relationships finds itself.

For Monica Baroni what Eleonora Cirant described cannot be the basis for rebuilding the 'common' as the discussion on forms of 'emotions' or procreation is only 'the symptom and cause of individuals turning towards the private space and the abandonment of the public space'. In line with Eleonora Cirant, Sexyshock expressed herself thus: 'if the fact of having taken both the battle against Law n. 40 and the PACS into the public arena has horrified those people who still saw them as private matters [...] to the point of pushing public opinion towards the backward ideology of security decreed by the state, like the traditional family, [...] perhaps, then, the challenge which draws us together is indeed the search for modalities which allow each of us to live out our own plan, whatever that might be'.

desires

That the response to the (positive) depreciation of traditional norms tied to the received idea of the family is the legitimization of one's own desires, of the way people map out their own lives, cannot at all be taken for granted.

For Monica Baroni 'the slogan used by Sexyshock 'The only law is one of desire'’, represents the synthesis of the path followed by feminism in recent decades. I've come to the conclusion that that slogan [...] exemplifies the full convergence
between the idea of desire and that of the offer of consumption in such a way that all movements become productive. This does not mean that we have to return to a position of essentiality, which I personally abhor, but it ratifies the need to reflect on the complicity with that market and with everything we will criticise'.

And yet for Sexyshock the idea of 'desire as a political factor' 'is not the same as some spurious attestation of individual desire. For this to stick, it must be the result of interpersonal awareness and collective mediation. [...] And it cannot be regulated if not as a strategy: it should, rather, remain a sort of constituent and always active process which never manages to be an untouchable “constituent right”.

On the other hand, desire is not equal to itself: it is a political factor that has radically changed its own meaning in these last 30 years or so. 'In the temporal conception of desire', Liliana Ellena stressed, 'a substantial transformation has been noted: in the '70s, the question was the discovery of desire, desire was the name of the game and we all had to speak about it. Today, the horizon is completely different: desire is the battlefield and this has become a field which is inhabited by potentially transgressive subjects but also by the market and consumption'.

Eleonora Cirant agrees. For her 'It is taken too much for granted that (desire) is in itself subversive; it could just as easily be the norm and conservative; which is why then if desire is a battlefield, it is necessary to understand how individual and collective desires displace and remove the connection between private and public'.

On the other hand, the concept of desire, counters Sexyshock, can in no way be superimposed on the possession of something: it is rather more in the line of an experience, that of desiring, which is liberating in itself. '[Therefore] it is necessary to work on the meanings of desire and on their limits, shifting them continuously'.

Participants: Sconvegno (Italian FR Committee), Sexyshock (Gender Communication Laboratory), Laura Fantone (Italian FR Committee), Gaia Giuliani (Italian FR Committee), Liliana Ellena (scholar in Gender Studies), Porpora Marcasciano (Transgender Identity Movement), Monica Baroni (scholar in Cultural Studies), Cristian Lo Iacono (gay activist and Ph.D. at the University of Turin), Daniela Danna (scholar in the Department of Social and Political Studies of the State University of Milan) and Eleonora Cirant (feminist activist, Centre of Documentation of the National Female Union).
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