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Gay orgies under the big top

Re-sexualising the queer debate

LORENZO BERNINI

ABSTRACT: In *Freud's Drive* (2008), Teresa de Lauretis tries to keep the Freudian concept of the drive together with the Foucauldian category of biopolitics, through the mediation of Fanon's understanding of race. Indeed, according to Jean Laplanche, the drive does not coincide with the instinct, but it leans on the instinct and sticks onto the bodily surface. By doing so, it individuates an intermediate region between the physical and the psychic, like the one where race spreads out and biopolitics acts upon. From this region, the drive troubles the inscription of the subject into the social order, pushing them towards its dissolution. We should start from there if we wish not only to overcome vain dichotomies in queer theory between essentialism and constructivism, or between political and apolitical thinking, but also 'to do justice' to Freud and Foucault. And if we wish to stay queer while doing queer theory.

KEYWORDS: antisocial theory; sexual drive; biopolitics; race; intersectionality.

1. BOWLS OF CONTENTION

Through these pages,¹ I would like to continue on from a discussion which started in Pisa on April 6, 2016, when I held my first seminar for the CIRQUE – the Italian Interuniversity research centre devoted to queer studies whose name sounds as the French word for “circus” but in Italian is the acronym for “Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca Queer”. I introduced on that occasion so-called antisocial theories, which my book *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory* (BERNINI 2014; Eng. tr. 2017) is devoted to. In particular, I presented antisocial theories as a critique of the radical constructivist methodology that Butler (1990; 1993; 1997; 2004) inherited from Foucault (1976), and that many other scholars inherited from Butler later on.² And I praised

¹ This text was firstly presented as a talk during the conference *What's New in Queer Studies?* organized in L'Aquila by the CIRQUE from the 31st of March to the 2nd of April 2017.

² By “radical constructivism” I mean the thesis according to which subjects are shaped by power, and in particular: 1) sexuality can be understood as a power device that produces sexual subjects, 2) gender can be understood as a set of biopolitical norms that regulates sexuality, and 3) sex is not considered the natural foundation of sexuality, but a social construction which is always read through gender norms. See note 14 and BERNINI 2017.

such critique for two reasons. The first is that, in this trend of queer thought, the category of *sex*, understood as Freud's sexual *drive*, is brought back to the core of queer research: a field dominated since the 1990s onwards by the category of *gender*, understood in Butler's terms as identity construction. The second reason is that, by insisting on the sexual drive, antisocial theories reinstate the subject of queer research as a perverted subject who belongs to a minority, with no ambition to become universal – while a certain current easy combination of the methodologies of constructivism and intersectionality runs the risk to reintroduce universality by calling for an alliance among all the oppressed, and turning queer from a floating signifier to a universal signifier that represents this alliance. Clearly, mine was a provocation. The CIRQUE's statement of intent does not just promote an intersectional approach, but goes as far as to state that “queer's relationship with LGBT studies [...] is neither necessary nor a key defining factor”, and that one of “the objects of queer enquiries” is the “deconstruction of identities”, which extends beyond sexual minorities to encompass “categories like ‘migrant’, ‘precarious worker’, ‘disabled person’”, “marginal individuals, losers, misfits”, “our colleague with Asperger's” and “the cat lady with her bowls”.³ In Pisa I made a plea for an understanding of queer theories as political ones, aimed at investigating the relationship between sex and power from the point of view of sexual minorities – something I am still eager to argue for. As a matter of clarity, I have got nothing against theories that help investigate the identity and subject construction of migrants, of people diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, of animal rights activists in general and of cat ladies in particular. What I contend is that such topics become queer only when they thematize sexuality, as for instance the so called antisocial stream of queer theories does through the Freudian concept of the drive. In Pisa my provocation succeeded: a lively discussion followed, in which Carmen Dell'Aversano, director of the CIRQUE, at the end of her intervention addressed an essential and radical question to me: “what does queer research *gain* from focusing on sexual drive?”. Here, I would like to continue answering this question, not so much to put an end to it as to keep it open. In so doing, I will not bring anything “new” to queer studies,⁴ but I will rather invite to look at the present and the past of gay men's sexual

³ The CIRQUE's statement of intent can be found here: <http://cirque.unipi.it/en/unidea-del-queer/>

⁴ Go back to note number 1.

experience, and remain in those interstitial sexual spaces where queer people have always been.

One of the possible starting points for a queer reflection on the antisociality of the drive is Leo Bersani's famous essay *Is the Rectum a Grave?* (2010; 1st ed. 1987). However, the book that relaunched the debate in the last fifteen years is Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). In 1987, during the AIDS crisis, Bersani proposed gay men to suspend their desire for inclusion in liberal societies and welcome, though temporarily, a politically incorrect understanding of homosexuality, which would take the disgust raised by anal intercourse seriously. In 2004 instead, in the midst of the political struggle for lesbian and gay marriage, Edelman invited queer subjects to welcome – not just temporarily, but permanently – the sexual negativity they are associated with in heterosexist (hence all) societies, and turn it into their political positioning. A similar yet different proposal is to be found in the avant-la-lettre queer manifesto *Le Désir homosexuel* (1972), where Guy Hocquenghem argued against both liberal and Marxist thought, and in favour of a “homosexual struggle”, aimed at the sexualization of society and at no sublimation. But one could also look at Mario Mieli's pervert version of the Freudo-Marxist theory of sexual revolution as it is elaborated in his *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (1977). What is it, then, that queer theories, movements and subjects *gain* from this? I am not able to provide one single reply to this question; therefore, I will sketch two possible answers. In the last section of this text, I will tackle the issue from a theoretical perspective. But as a starting point, I will leave theory aside and contend that, from a political and existential point of view, we are not talking so much about gain, as we are about loss. A focus on sexual drive implies that one takes up the burden of their own abjection and negativity, gets rid of phantasies of universal inclusion, and abandons all dreams of absolute peacefulness. In fact, we are talking about a big loss, one that may lead to losing politics itself by depriving the sexual subject of intelligibility in the public sphere (BERNINI 2014). But, in my opinion, on our ability to get enjoyment from this risk depends the very fact of being queer: weirdo, twisted and perverted.

2. CONFORMIST HYENAS AND GAY ORGIES

In June 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States legalized same-sex marriage. In May 2016, instead, the Italian Parliament ruled in favour of a

poor and ultimately discriminatory law on civil partnerships, which does not recognize to lesbian and gay couples a family status, but nevertheless constitutes an important step towards full citizenship for sexual minorities. Yet, what does it mean for LGBT people to fully become citizens? Does the recognition of them as good husbands and wives, or fathers and mothers, equal the recognition as LGBT or queer subjects? Do the rights connected to family life, or all rights in general, suffice to free queer people from the negativity they are associated with in heterosexist societies, and bestow full citizenship on them?

What followed the approval of civil partnerships in Italian mediascape helps reply to such questions. Initially, Italian public opinion reacted quite well. Few political groups countered the discriminatory version of the law that got approved, and articles, TV programmes and reports abounded, celebrating this new legal tool and recounting romantic narratives about gay and lesbian couples. In the TV show “Uomini e donne” (“Men and Women”), presenter Maria De Filippi even hosted the first gay “tronista” (the main contender of the show, who seats on a throne). But soon, horniness began to spoil the honeymoon of equality. On February 19, 2017, a TV report of “Le Iene” show (“The Hyenas” show) was broadcasted, which accused the National Secretariat against Racial Discrimination (UNAR) of funding an association that groups together gay sex clubs. Most likely, the organization under attack is anddos, the National Association against Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation. This is not the first time “Le Iene” show spreads an outcry against sexual habits of gay men. On November 26, 2014, they broadcasted a report on the bareback and bug-chasing practices in Italy. This time, however, they added footages secretly shot inside gay saunas and cruising bars in Rome. There, male bodies can be seen (not faces, which are covered) performing fellatio, anal sex and fist fucking. Because of the show, UNAR’s president Francesco Spano resigned, and junior minister Maria Elena Boschi promised to put a stop to public funds to anddos. Several political figures took advantage of the outcry, and a huge homophobic campaign started on social media. After one week, a new waive of disgust and indignation was raised by the national daily *Corriere della sera*, which published a report on gay debauchery in Milan, featuring gay bars, dark-rooms and private parties with chems and unprotected sex (BERBERI 2017). Few people, even from the LGBT scene, have openly reacted and stood up

in defence of sexual freedom.⁵ Vis-à-vis these events, it is fair to wonder why no one in Italy has ever complained when an organization such as the ARCI (Italian Cultural and Leisure Time Association) gets public money for social and cultural purposes, whereas the participation of anddos in projects against violence has provoked such an outcry. The answer is quite easy: because affiliates to ARCI include bars, restaurants and dance halls, not clubs with darkrooms, cruising bars and gay saunas. To get indignant for everyone's indignation and to cry out because of everyone's outcry are no solutions. We may dream of a world where to play blackjack in an ARCI bar equals a group jack off in an anddos club, but it may be more effective to be aware that such equivalence, in this world, is not given. Today, we are living in neoliberal and hyper-hedonistic societies that are able to capitalize even on sexual enjoyment, and yet the sexual drive – that is, sex as such, free from affectivity, wedding vows and reproductive phantasies – is still understood as a toxic force disturbing consciousness and spoiling social relations, hence by no means to be funded or sponsored by state bodies. For this reason, I believe, sexual promiscuity in gay venues keeps troubling the same public opinion that is touched by televised gay couples and their love dream turned into second class marriage.⁶

Bersani paved the way to raise this awareness in queer subjects. Edelman, for his part, goes further and opens the door for queers to become active representatives of sexual drive, thereby assuming an untenable, unreasonable and ultimately defeatable political stance. Embracing such stance in today's Italy would not mean to follow the reality principle and reassert the right for anddos to receive public funding *in spite of* their promotion of sexual intercourse among men. Instead, it would mean to follow a principle of *jouissance* that is much beyond the pleasure principle, and assert that UNAR shall finance anddos precisely *because* it promotes sexual intercourse among men. Or better, that the anddos affiliates should close down and men having sex with men should obtain a “queer basic income”,

⁵ Among the few, it is worth mentioning Franco Grillini and Porpora Marcasciano (ORRÙ 2017; MARCASCIANO 2017).

⁶ “Le Iene” show itself, on December 6, 2016, televised an interview with *Simone e Ivan: I più giovani sposi gay d'Italia* (Simone and Ivan, the youngest gay married couple of Italy). The two 23-years old partners who met in high school conveyed a positive picture of homosexuality, condemned homophobic bullying, stated they never cheated on one another and claimed to be sexually versatile, thereby neutralizing the troubling edge of sex among men through romantic ideals of reciprocity and faithfulness.

or a “sexuality wage”, to be free to have sex in public, wherever and whenever they like. This, obviously, is an untenable (and bound to be defeated) political stance, which I would not recommend for the gay movements’ agenda. In my *Queer Apocalypses* I even criticize Edelman for seemingly drawing norms from Lacan’s ontology of *jouissance*, moving without mediations from the descriptive to the normative level – as if politics can do without contingencies, circumstances and possible alliances.⁷ The situation changes, though, if we move from the activist to the philosophical field. While, in the former, the reclaiming of negativity runs the risk to lose sight of politics,⁸ in the latter the refusal to reflect on such negativity runs the risk to lose queerness itself.

3. QUEERS UNDER THE BIG TOP

To be more exact, I would like to make the following point, in partial disagreement with both Bersani and Edelman: that it is possible to preserve the queer edge of queer theories without necessarily dismissing the radical constructivist paradigm initiated by Foucault’s research on sexuality. As is known, the latter constitutes the background, not only of Butler’s theory of performativity, but also of Puar’s concept of homonationalism, Massad’s gay imperialism, Preciado’s farmacopornographic regime (PUAR 2007; MASSAD 2007; PRECIADO 2008; 2010), and it can be found in the CIRQUE’s statement too, when we read that one of the “defining objects of queer enquiries” is the “deconstruction of identities”. It is therefore not my task to partake in the struggle of antisocial theories against constructivism, of antisociality against relationality, of the apolitical *jouissance* of the drive against the political subversion of gender roles. In my opinion, it is much more interesting to detect the points these different politico-philosophical stances have in common than to focus on their frictions, which make the contrast too simplistic. My latest investigation is moving precisely in this direction, opened up by Teresa de Lauretis in her *Freud’s Drive* (2008).

⁷ In my book *Le teorie queer: Un’introduzione* (2017), I trace the genealogy of queer theories within critical philosophy as opposed to normative thought.

⁸ For the same reason, I also disagree with those who – vis-à-vis the all-pervading war waged by radical Catholics against an alleged “gender ideology” that would pervert society – reclaim “gender ideology” as the creed of transfeminist and queer movements. I find it an act of political responsibility to hold a counter-information campaign and explain teachers, parents, students and citizens in general what queer and feminist theories are, beyond any caricatural picture that the Vatican and “anti-gender” movements can provide (BERNINI 2016).

Following Laplanche (1970; 1992), de Lauretis insists that, in Freud, sexual drive is not sexual instinct, but the perversion of it. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud contends that such perversion emerges not so much from the infant's needs, despite surfacing at an early stage, as from the arousal that the infant's body experiences while being fed, washed and touched by other caring bodies.⁹ The drive, then, does not originate from the body, Laplanche and de Lauretis argue, but "sticks onto" the bodily surface, thereby configuring a middle region between the inside and the outside, the somatic and the psychic. This region is transindividual,¹⁰ in the sense that it does not belong to the subject, for the subject loses themselves through it into the other and the world.¹¹ Whereas Bersani and Edelman confront psychoanalysis with Foucault's constructivism, de Lauretis argues that precisely in this middle region do psychoanalysis and constructivism meet. The subject's exposure to the manipulation of the other makes not only the installation of the drive possible, but also the production of biopolitical identities. This is what, according to de Lauretis, Frantz Fanon well understood. In his pivotal *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), Fanon explains how colonial domination works onto the black male body through a process of racialization that is both denigrating and hypersexualizing. The outcome is known among non-specialists of Fanon as well: sticking and coagulating onto his body, race comes to identify the black man as an exaggerated phallus craving to possess and rape white women. In this sense, Fanon provides an example of intersectional analysis thirty-seven years before Kimberlé

⁹ To provide an example: according to Freud, "sucking with delight", is a masturbatory activity of the infant, which reactivates the arousal of the oral area initially stimulated by the mother's breast and/or bottle. The oral drive, therefore, leans onto the feeding instinct, not on that sexual instinct which Freud deems "natural". To him, the latter aims at the heterosexual coitus for procreative purposes, and surfaces only in puberty, without ever erasing once and for all other perverse (hence non-reproductive) drives. The Freudian theory can shed light on the glory holes that shocked journalist Filippo Roma from "Le Iene", author of the above-mentioned TV report among anddos gay clubs.

¹⁰ Neither Laplanche nor de Lauretis make use of the term "transindividual", which I borrow from Simondon (1958; 1989).

¹¹ This topological reading of the drive is confirmed by Bersani (1996: 100) himself: "Overwhelmed by stimuli in excess of the ego structures capable of resisting or binding them, the infant may survive that imbalance only by finding it exciting. So the masochistic thrill of being invaded by a world we have not yet learned to master might be an inherited disposition, the result of an evolutionary conquest. This, in any case, is what Freud appears to be moving toward as a definition of the *sexual*: an aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure, the human subject's potential for *jouissance* in which the subject is momentarily undone".

Crenshaw coined the very term “intersectionality”.¹² Yet, compared to many contemporary intersectional analyses and intersectional political practices resulting in the mere juxtaposition of different axes of discrimination, Fanon’s antiracist and decolonial critique puts sexuality at the core, and the author of such critique (i.e., Fanon), does not position himself as a universal subject, detached from the objects under scrutiny, but thematizes what it means to be a hypersexualized black man within a world dominated by white people who read him as a possible assaulter. Because of this, and despite its rampant sexism and homophobia,¹³ *Black Skin, White Masks* is still of the utmost importance for researchers who do not want to give up queerness in order to apply constructivism and intersectionality.

Hereby, I am not proposing an alternative genealogy of queer theories where Fanon replaces Foucault as their putative founder. Indeed, we can easily do without founders, or decide to multiply them if we like to (Mieli, in Italy, could be one of them). It is my conviction, instead, that Bersani has pointed too hastily to Foucault, in his *Homos* (1996), as the one responsible to desexualize the political theory inherited by constructivist queer theorists later on. For Bersani, Foucault was unable to conceptualize the disturbing obscenity of the drive when he came to reject the use of psychoanalysis in political theory. But actually, in *The Will to Knowledge* (1976) Foucault did not criticize Reich and Marcuse’s Freudomarxism and Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalysis for their disturbing obscenity (REICH 1936; MARCUSE 1955; 1964; DELEUZE *et al.* 1972); on the contrary, he held these theories responsible for using psychoanalysis in order to provide over-reassuring understandings of power and desire and in order to promise a final liberation of the human from negativity.¹⁴ Elsewhere, Foucault himself shows that psychoanalysis can be used differently. In *The History of Madness*, he invites the reader to “do justice to Freud” (FOUCAULT 1972: 360;

¹² Within the field of critical legal studies, Crenshaw (1989) deployed the concept of “intersectionality” to refer to the need to cross raced and gendered lines to formulate well-balanced judgments in discrimination trials.

¹³ According to Fanon, black Antilleans, whose psychology is deeply marked by colonial subjugation, do not undergo the Oedipus complex, hence cannot be homosexual. Moreover, to him racist xenophobia is the expression of white women’s and men’s desire to get raped by black men.

¹⁴ Foucault contrasts a repressive conception of power that he explicitly attributes to Reich and Marcuse, and implicitly to Deleuze and Guattari, with a productive conception of power. According to the latter, biopowers constitute the subject as well as their own sexual identity – therefore, the subject cannot get rid of this powers once and for all. This is the radical constructivist hypothesis that Butler herself borrowed, and has inspired many subsequent queer reflections.

Eng. tr. 2006: 339), and to recognize his fundamental contribution to the dialogue over the obscure and apocalyptic “unreasoning” that positivist psychology has been trying to silence. Additionally, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault considers psychoanalysis an ally when he carries out an archaeological critique of the modern dream to turn “man” into an object for science. Psychoanalysis, he holds, is not a general theory about the human, but an investigation of its external boundaries. It is not a human science, therefore, but a counter-science that dissolves the human into “that region where death prowls, where thought is extinguished, where the promise of the origin interminably recedes” (FOUCAULT 1966: 395; Eng. tr. 1970: 418).

In contrast with Bersani, my claim is that these passages from Foucault are telling that, similarly to Fanon, Foucault did explore the liminal region theorized by de Lauretis as the region of the drive. In this region, subjects are done and undone, and they are exposed to the intervention, not only of the powers that construct their identities, but also of the drives that make their identities explode with excitement. This region is certainly not “new” at all – if we wish to find “what’s new in queer studies”,¹⁵ we should go somewhere else. This is rather the region where sexual minorities have been relegated to for a long time, and from which they have never been ultimately rescued, either by equal marriage or by neoliberal hyper-hedonism. In Italy, “Le Iene” show and the *Corriere della sera* daily have reminded gay men that they belong there, as if to punish them for their increased legal inclusion. Going back to the declaration of intent of the CIRQUE – or the circus –, my proposal is to invite all marginal individuals, losers, misfits, colleagues with Asperger’s and cat ladies with their bowls to inhabit that region, convinced as I am that occupying such unliveable space does imply an existential and political loss, but also an existential and theoretical gain. That is, the gain to stay, or better become, queer.

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¹⁵ Go back, once again, to note number 1.

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