



PEA – PEDAGOGY, ECOLOGY
AND THE ARTS CONFERENCE

POWER

EDITED BY
SABINA LANGER
NAZARIO ZAMBALDI

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ECOLOGIE
DELLA
FORMAZIONE



ECOLOGIE DELLA FORMAZIONE

**Collana diretta da Alessandro Ferrante, Andrea Galimberti,
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AND THE ARTS CONFERENCE

POWER

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SABINA LANGER
NAZARIO ZAMBALDI



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ECOLOGIE
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PEA
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Isbn e-pub Open Access: 9788835198192

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We with Freud. Sex, Power, the Black Hole

Lorenzo Bernini

Abstract. What is the relationship between power and sex? My research has long been obsessively circling around this question, as if caught in an empty orbit around a black hole (Bernini, 2017; 2020; 2023). And this essay will drag its readers into the vortex along with me—until they are sucked into the abyss of the drive. After all, we are talking about power and sex. As in a BDSM session, a touch of sadistic enjoyment on my part is more than justified!

What is Sex?

What is sex? The answer depends on who you are. If among the readers of this essay are right-wing reactionaries, or fundamentalists of some religion, they will probably think sex as reproductive faculty, or alternatively as sin. After all, this is what, on January 25th, 2025, was decreed by executive order by the president of the United States of America Donald Trump (2025): there are only two sexes, male and female, defined by the reproductive cells that a body can produce, eggs or sperm. If among the readers of this essay are left-wing progressives, I imagine they would not agree with Trump: they will instead think that sex is defined not by reproduction, but by passion, desire, ultimately by love (how romantic they are!). And that therefore sex must be allowed to express itself far beyond its hetero-cis-reproductive forms, that it must be free to take many different shapes and directions. That there are many sexes, along with many genders and many sexual orientations, all equally valid... But there may also be individualists among the readers of this essay, materialists, cynics or nihilists, not very romantic, not very interested in politics. For them, this answer will seem rhetorical and naïve. They will probably instead think sex mostly as orgasmic sex, as that sex that has its goal in pleasure—in the pursuit of the selfish well-being of the subject.

Today, then, there are many ways of thinking sex. Those readers who do not adhere to the neo-fascist moment of present global politics, I imagine they will consider themselves liberal, and therefore somewhat relativist: what's the problem—they will then ask—if everyone thinks sex in their own way? Well, there is indeed a problem in the disparate ways of thinking sex that I have proposed, and it consists in the fact that the experiences I have listed so far are called reproduction, passion, desire, love, pleasure, orgasm, or sin. They are not called sex. The problem is that none of the definitions I have given define sex as sex. The problem is that for reactionaries as well as for progressives, for atheist nihilists as well as religious fundamentalists, sex remains today something very difficult to think, to define, to signify. Because the point is that in sex—this, at least, is the hypothesis with which I want to open and with which I will conclude—the subject does not think, does not define and does not signify. Because in sex the subject is not properly present but is lost in an explosion of the self. Because where sex is as sex, we are no longer properly there, there is no longer any I that can think. There is excitement, there is ecstasy, in sex—but there is also the anguish that comes from the lack of control, from the suspension of consciousness, from the eclipse of subjectivity. Precisely to defend ourselves from this uncanny experience, we then think sex together with reproduction, or desire, or orgasm, in recent decades also together with identity (with that concept of gender that Trump's executive order has abolished). But desire, orgasm, gender are not sex. And above all, reproduction is not. Because, except for rare occasions in life, one does not fuck to reproduce, but to enjoy. Excuse my vulgarity. But if you want to understand what I seek when I seek sex as sex, it must be made clear that it might be something rude, and dirty—something that cannot be said with polite words.

Sex–Desire, Power–Repression

At the beginning of the last century, Sigmund Freud (1953; 1961) even argued that sex is constitutively uncivil. That civilization grounds its meaning precisely on the removal of the wild character of sex, and that therefore exists a discontent within civilization caused by this removal: a discontent that for Freud is structural, ineliminable. Other authors after him—the so-called Freud-Marxists who read Freud alongside Marx—thought instead that the discontent of civilization is not structural but contingent, caused by a power that traditional and capitalist societies share. And that a civilization without discontent could be achieved through the sexual revolution, in which the relationship between sex and society would

be resolved. Wilhelm Reich (1945) in the 1930s, Herbert Marcuse (1955) in the 1950s, Mario Mieli (2018) in the 1970s: these authors answered the question *What is sex?* in a clear-cut way. According to Mieli, for example, sex is essentially desire, and desire is an inner force that moves the subject toward what can give them pleasure and happiness: sex is an original truth of the subject upon which their freedom depends. Each of us, Mieli argued, is born with a totipotent desire—pansexual, polymorphous perverse, schizophrenic—potentially directed toward all sexual practices and all sexual subjects, without form, without identity; and it is only a repressive power external to the subject that prevents such desire from expressing itself and forces it into the form of the fertile heterosexual couple that participates in the production and reproduction of capitalist society. To the conception of sex as desire, in Freudo-Marxism, corresponds, therefore, the conception of power as prohibition and repression. And it is precisely this conception that makes it possible to conceive the sexual revolution: the sexual subject is in fact crushed by power, yet beneath this crushing the sexual subject exists, already given, endowed with an inner truth that asks to be liberated. For Mieli, for example, this truth takes the form of polymorphous perverse desire, and the goal of revolutionary political action consists in liberating this desire. Once capitalism is overthrown, the subjects will be reconciled with the full truth of themselves, they will definitively be free, and together with other free subjects they will create a society freed from repression, where desire can flow toward all possible pleasures.

Power–Production, Sex–Dispositive

By the mid-1970s, Michel Foucault (1976/1978) dismissed Freudo-Marxism as simplistic, arguing that the relationship between power and sex is not primarily one of repression, but rather one of production. Power does not simply impose a veto on sex; on the contrary, power produces sexual practices and constructs sexual identities—both those it judges normal and those it judges abnormal, which constitute privileged points of leverage for social control. According to Foucault, sexuality itself is a complex apparatus of power, which he calls *dispositive of sexuality*: a set of norms, rules, conventions, techniques of punishment and correction that give shape to our bodies and our minds, that provide the psychosociocultural signifiers through which we access our identities. And the Freudo-Marxist conception of the subject—endowed with a repressed desire that must be liberated—is itself a product of the dispositive of sexuality, which promises freedom while binding the subject to a presumed truth of their self. In Foucault's view,

psychoanalysis inherited this conception from the practice of Catholic confession, Freudo-Marxism inherited it from psychoanalysis: by sharing it, authors such as Mieli are therefore unwittingly complicit with the power they want to overthrow. In the 1990s, Judith Butler took up these theses to argue that gender identity does not express any psychological truth, but is a performance, a role we play by obeying a script of sociocultural norms. On the stage of the hetero-cis-normative society that is still partly ours, in this play, only hetero-cis-sexual men and women appear as true genders, while LGBTQIA+ people appear as minority genders, as failed genders, whose reality is shaped under the sign of abjection.

For Foucault and Butler, then, power is not repression but production. And the dimension of sex that matters most from the point of view of politics is not desire, but identity, which Butler understands as gender identity. Their deconstructivist conception no longer allows for imagining the sexual revolution envisioned by Freudo-Marxism. If gender consists in doing, it is in fact a particular kind of doing, a doing to which the subject does not preexist, a doing that constitutes the subject who does it: by performing man (or gay, or trans, or nonbinary), I become it, I become the subject I am. To completely undo the norms that produce my performance would be to undo myself. The subject's action on the powers that constitute them can therefore not be a revolution, definitive and singular. If no subject exists prior to their performance, it is impossible to overthrow all at once the norms that script it. Yet by acting together, subjects can collectively give new meaning to their performances, building communities of recognition in which new gender norms become possible. Disidentifying and re-identifying. Realizing, more livable forms of life. In this conception, beneath power there is no subject to be liberated, but within the meshes of power the subject can enact countless practices of freedom.

The Suicide of the Self

So, what is sex? What is power? Having no answer, I have offered two distinct conceptions of how power acts upon sex, which have accompanied the struggles of LGBTQIA+ movements. Which of the two is right? I don't have the answer to this question either. Foucault and Butler help us to understand what has happened in the history of sexual minorities, who—by resisting criminalization and pathologization—from the mid-19th century to today, have managed to obtain social recognition and renegotiate the terms of their own definition, leading to the proliferation of gender identities: no longer only the inverts and hermaphrodites of the 19th century, no longer only

homosexuals and transsexuals of the mid-20th century, but also intersex people, gays and lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, asexuals, transgender, genderqueer, genderquestioning and genderfluid persons, nonbinary and agender persons, and the + that today concludes the acronym. This has not been a process of liberating already-given truths, but of inventing new subjectivities and securing a different social placement for them.

Freudo-Marxism, on the other hand, reminds us that this process has also been accompanied, in much of the world, by a loosening of prohibitions and an expansion of freedoms. Today, we cannot deny that they were right in saying that sexual repression was contingent rather than necessary. The World Health Organization no longer considers either homosexuality or gender incongruence to be pathological. Many countries have laws that guarantee equality between women and men, that allow abortion and gender affirmation, that recognize family rights for same-sex couples. Many countries (not Italy) have specific anti-discrimination laws to protect sexual minorities. Meanwhile, customs have changed. Sex is no longer taboo. On the contrary, it is omnipresent: not forbidden but encouraged. The internet today saturates our lives with pornography. The contraceptive pill, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis and Post-Exposure Prophylaxis for HIV, hormone therapies to delay menopause and those for gender affirmation, puberty blockers for gender-diverse youth, therapies and practices of assisted reproduction, Cialis and Viagra for assisted erection, cocaine, methamphetamines, GHB, MPDV, the whole range of chemsex drugs—this whole chemical arsenal now saturates our sexualized bodies. Many today also claim that prostitution is a job like any other, even in countries (such as Italy) where, legally speaking, it is not. And for large parts of the population, so-called sex-positive thinking is now mainstream: we tell ourselves, essentially, that today sex is no longer a political or personal problem. That it no longer has anything scandalous or negative, that it is all positive, healthy, even therapeutic and empowering.

Is this perhaps the liberation of desire that Mieli aspired to in the 1970s? The anti-capitalist revolution has certainly failed: since the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, neoliberalism has triumphed. But can the sexual revolution now be said to have been achieved—within capitalism, not outside it? In the late 1960s, Jacques Lacan (2007) already argued that in late capitalism the repressive imperative of tradition is replaced by an imperative of enjoyment, by which sexual transgression is not prohibited, but provoked and exploited for profit. The neoliberal regime we live in is a pharmacopornographic regime, Paul B. Preciado (2013) added more recently. But in this regime, we must acknowledge that sometimes the discontent of civilization continues to operate as in the days of Freud. That

despite the achievements of feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements, despite the market having learned to profit from sex, in our hyper-hedonist societies sex is still expelled from the social, through the identification of scapegoats who are made its representatives.

Think again of Trump's executive order. Think also of the ruling of the UK Supreme Court on April 16th, 2025 (United Kingdom Supreme Court, 2025) which established that woman is who is biologically born female: today, in global politics, with the complicity of a certain strand of feminism, trans women are often portrayed as usurpers of cis women's rights, and become the symbols of a sexual perversion which damages cis women, their children and society as a whole. Think also of the racist myths of the overendowed rapist black man, of the promiscuous black woman—that Frantz Fanon (1967) denounced in the 1950s, Angela Davis (1981) in the 1980s, and remain highly relevant in anti-immigration rhetorics today. And of the episodes of homo-lesbo-bi-transphobia that dot the news. Of femicides, which sanction women's sexual autonomy. Of bullying in schools. And of the anti-gender campaign (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2024; Butler, 2024), a fundamental ideological glue of contemporary right-wing populisms, which instead of countering bullying and sexism, seeks to limit anti-discrimination education: as if talking about sex and sexual minorities to children and adolescents were equivalent to transmitting a contagious pathogen. Or, more simply, think about the fact that *faggot* and *whore* remain among the most offensive insults one can throw—projections onto others of the abjection of the sexual that we do not want to recognize in ourselves.

To understand the scandal that sex continues to represent, a striking example is revenge porn, a specific crime in many legal systems, including the Italian one (Italy, 2019), which however can be associated with charges of incitement to suicide. If the distribution of videos showing us having sex is unbearable, isn't it because sex takes us each time into a wild region of ourselves, one we want to remain private in, one we are ashamed of when we are in public? Isn't it because, still today, the emergence of the sexual subject each time leads to the symbolic suicide of the civilized subject? Far from sex positivity, then! Sex still represents a negative experience, even if a certain contemporary discourse, heir to the sexual revolution of the 1970s, makes us deny this negativity, mistaking transgression—turned into a source of profit—for the rule.

The Uncanny Power of Sex–Drive

Freud dedicated his whole life to questioning what sex is, and he never found a solution. But, by resignifying a German word, he designated the uncanny power of sex. In German, until him, *Trieb* was synonymous with *Instinkt*, two words derived respectively from Germanic and Latin, which meant the same phenomenon. With Freud (1953), *Trieb* came instead to signify an impulse different from instinct: both from the reproductive instinct of the species, still cherished by Trumpian reactionaries, and from the self-preserving instinct of the individual—the search for pleasure—to which progressive liberals appeal, and in a different way also nihilist individualists. *Trieb* does not indicate the desire that moves the subject to realize their freedom, nor is it the identity that grants the subject unity of the self. Nor is it the selfish pursuit of the orgasm. In English *Trieb* is translated as *drive*, and it indicates a push not instinctual but perverse, that forces toward an excitation not conservative but dissipative, in an obscure nonsensical dimension: not toward pleasure, but toward an enjoyment that is beyond the pleasure principle (Freud, 1955), where identity explosively dissolves masochistically into alterity. Where the subject of civilization abdicates before the subject of sex, who is no longer properly a subject, because they lose self-consciousness. *Drive* thus indicates the scandal that sex represents for subjectivity. And the thesis which I borrow from the interpretation of Freud by queer antisocial theorists such as Leo Bersani (1986; 2010), Teresa de Lauretis (2008) and Lee Edelman (2004), counter to the sex-positive rhetorics of today, is that what makes sex sex, while making it at the same time impossible to answer the question *what is sex*, is precisely the drive: the black hole of signification, which today as always makes sex unacceptable to the self and to society.

Let's be clear: unless we are completely drunk or overly high, in sexual experience a certain degree of consciousness remains. And yet, the fully conscious *I* disappears, and so does the knowing self. Being aroused to the point of losing oneself in the other, in others, or even in ourselves alone, to the point of carrying out acts that we might be surprised by, we might be ashamed of, in our daytime lives: what ecstasy! And what anguish! Precisely to escape this anguish, all societies have always attempted to contain the trauma of the drive to render it acceptable to the self, to give it a meaning it does not have, to shape it in forms from which sex always escapes. The strictly hetero-cis-normative interpretation of man and woman defined by reproduction, eggs and sperm as Trump says, were the solutions devised by traditional cultures to try, in vain, to fill the void of sex with the sense of pleasure and orgasm, of reproduction, of love, of the projection of family and

species into the future. But also, the substitution of sex with gender, and the social recognition of LGBTQIA+ identities represent attempts to give form to sex. As so does the obtaining of marriage rights for lesbians and gays, which we significantly call *civil* rights. These were enormously important political achievements. And yet, we would be deluding ourselves if we saw in these rights the definitive solution to the scandal of sex.

Where these rights have been won, in fact, reaction has grown. And new political plays have emerged in which the uncanny power of sex is projected onto other subjects, as in the passing of an obscene baton (Duggan, 2004; Puar, 2007). In the present neo-fascist moment of global politics, the most progressive among you, my readers, would be mistaken if they thought the only task left to them is to defend these rights against the return of a repressive power embodied by Trump and Meloni, by Putin and Orbán, by Catholic and Islamic fundamentalisms alike. They should not forget, for example, that in Germany, the leader of the neo-Nazi party *Alternative für Deutschland* is Alice Weidel, an openly lesbian woman. As Foucault (1978) teaches, sexual identity and its political positioning can be renegotiated over time: belonging to a sexual minority has never necessarily meant positioning oneself against power, and it certainly does not necessarily mean so today. Today one can hear socially integrated trans women—successful professionals—calling for the closure of borders against trans prostitutes coming from abroad... Today it is possible to see lesbians and gays aligning with the right for the defense of the nation against migrants considered bearers of backward, sexist, homo-lesbo-bi-transphobic and at the same time sexually disordered cultures—cultures considered, in a paradoxical semantic reversal, as symbols of the disorder of sex, of sex that *is* disorder. The most progressive among you should also be concerned with these new political assemblages.

Something Does not Fit

So, what is sex? What is power? I have no answers. The possibility that LGBTQIA+ rights may be co-opted by the neo-fascist moment of global politics, together with the evident risk of the return of sexual repression that this moment entails, leads me all the more to leave the question open. At the same time, it pushes me to embrace the negativity of sex: its wild, scandalous, and dirty character that a certain sex-positive culture of the present would have us no longer see. To accept that sex is many things, and that none of them exhausts it: neither reproduction nor orgasm; neither desire nor identity. To hypothesize, however, that what makes sex sex is the drive,

and that therefore between sex and power there is always something that does not fit. To instil the doubt that even the most progressive among you, my dear readers who have followed me this far, in believing that a political solution to sex is possible—that it is possible to reconcile sex and civilization—might be as mistaken as the most reactionary and nihilistic among you. This is my unfashionable and sadistic proposal regarding sex and power: like a BDSM session, an empty orbit around a black hole, all together, in the company of old Freud—until the abyss of the drive.

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The idea of choosing POWER as the focus of the third PEA—Pedagogy, Ecology and the Arts *conference* in Merano (Italy) stems from an interest in exploring power as a relational, educational, ecological, and creative force. Rather than understanding power solely as domination, authority, or control, the conference invited contributors to investigate how power can be exercised responsibly, shared collectively, and transformed through pedagogical, ecological, and artistic practices.

Educational processes—both formal and informal—play a fundamental role in cultivating critical awareness and enabling more participatory, ethical, and sustainable ways of exercising power. Across educational, artistic, and community contexts, there is a growing need to rethink power as a shared and transformative practice that supports coexistence among humans and the more-than-human world.

At PEA 2025, we explored the many dimensions of power through the lenses of pedagogy, ecology, and the arts. The chapter authors are researchers and practitioners from across Europe and beyond, each engaging with two or all three PEA pillars. The book is structured around these themes, highlighting the focus of each chapter. The conference contributions—keynotes, oral presentations, and workshops—have been reworked for this volume and enriched through the dialogue and exchange that took place during the conference. We hope readers will sense the convivial and interactive spirit that continues to shape the PEA community.

The PEA conference aims to bring together learning and education, ecological thinking, and the visual and performing arts to explore human and more-than-human conditions in innovative ways, from both individual and societal perspectives. The initials of the three core themes—Pedagogy, Ecology, and the Arts—form the acronym **PEA**: a small, round, green legume. The curators appreciate this play on words for its irony and humility—a reminder of the power of being small yet united. Like a single pea, an individual can do little alone; it is through connection with the others, with community and with the world, that meaningful change becomes possible.