
**From revolution to liberation.
Feminist consciousness-raising and sexuality in the 1970s**

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L'articolo propone uno sguardo sulla "rivoluzione sessuale" degli anni Sessanta e Settanta in Italia nella cornice interpretativa della storia emozionale, con un ampio ricorso alla metodologia orale. Attraverso l'analisi di inedite fonti orali e il contrappunto della "posta del cuore" dei rotocalchi femminili del periodo, l'Autrice si interroga sull'apporto del metodo femminista dell'autocoscienza nella recezione e nella modifica degli input della cosiddetta rivoluzione sessuale. Prendendo in esame il contesto italiano del "lungo Sessantotto" l'Autrice ha analizzato come i nuovi modelli di una sessualità apparentemente più libera siano stati incorporati e modificati all'interno della controcomunità emozionale creata dal femminismo autocoscienziale, nella direzione di ciò che sarà poi definita "liberazione sessuale", e si è interrogata sulle aperture e sui limiti che questo approccio ha comportato.

Parole chiave: femminismo, autocoscienza, sessualità, liberazione sessuale, storia orale

This article examines the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s in Italy from the perspective of emotional history. Drawing mainly on unpublished oral sources and advice columns in women's magazines, it assesses the contribution of the feminist method of consciousness-raising to the reception of and reaction to the so-called sexual revolution. Focusing on the 'long 1968' as it unfolded in Italy, I analyse how the new models of an apparently freer sexuality were appropriated and adapted to the emotional counter-community created by feminists practising consciousness-raising towards what would later be defined as sexual liberation, and I discuss the openings and limits that this approach has entailed.

Key words: feminism, consciousness-raising, sexuality, sexual liberation, oral history

Introduction

Writing about the protests of the 1960s, Eric Hobsbawm said that 'making love and making revolution could not be neatly separated'.¹ Yet, women — in the

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¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Il secolo breve*, Milan, BUR, 2010, p. 392. All translations of quotations originally published in English are those of the translator.

increasingly ‘eroticising of social life’ — once again discovered that they were the object and not the subject of the revolution.² ‘Girls say yes to boys who say no’: the slogan used to encourage men to refuse conscription in the United States perfectly expresses the new paradigm of a sexuality that was suddenly supposed to be free and emancipated (in opposition to the prevailing myth of virginity), but still at the service of male desire.³

The feminist movement of the 1970s,⁴ which in Italy must be read in the context of the ‘long 68’,⁵ played a decisive role in this dynamic, allowing female pleasure to take centre stage and marking the transition from sexual revolution to sexual “liberation”,⁶ thanks in particular to the political method of consciousness-raising.⁷ It is worth noting that this was not the only polit-

² Jeffrey Weeks, in Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax. A feminist perspective on sexual revolution*, New York, New York University Press, 1990, p. 67.

³ Like 1968, the sexual revolution has multiple, simultaneous centres of expression and its dynamics travel from one country to another, from one continent to another. For a broad overview of this simultaneity, see Gert Hekma, Alain Giami (eds.), *Sexual Revolutions*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe. A Twentieth-Century History*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, chapter IV; David Allyn, *Make Love, not War. The Sexual Revolution, an Unfettered History*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2000.

⁴ Maud A. Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968-1983*, New York, Routledge, 2014; Teresa Bertilotti, Anna Scattigno (eds.), *Il femminismo degli anni Settanta*, Rome, Viella, 2005; *Anni Settanta*, “Genesis. Rivista della Società Italiana delle Storiche”, III/1, 2004; *Il movimento femminista negli anni ’70*, “Memoria. Rivista di storia delle donne”, n. 19-20, Turin, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987.

⁵ On the debate on the concept of the ‘long 68’, see Angelo Ventrone, “Vogliamo tutto”. *Perché due generazioni hanno creduto nella rivoluzione, 1960-1988*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2019; Francesca Socrate, *Sessantotto. Due generazioni*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2018; John Foot, *Looking Back on Italy’s “Long 68”*, in Ingo Cornils, Sarah Waters (eds.), “*Memories of 1968*”, *Cultural History and Literary Imagination*, Vol. 16, Bern, Peter Lang, 2010; Anna Bravo, *A colpi di cuore. Storie del sessantotto*, Bari, Laterza, 2008.

⁶ On the ‘feministisation’ of the sexual revolution, see Joe B. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex. Fashion, Feminism and the Sexual Revolution*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015; Lillian Rubin, *Erotic Wars. What Happened to the Sexual Revolution?*, New York, Harper Perennial, 1991.

⁷ By consciousness-raising, I mean a political method, derived from the United States and adopted in Italy with a highly original theoretical approach and a practical application that was influenced by the peculiarities of the Italian long 68. Theorised first and foremost by Rivolta femminile, especially in Carla Lonzi’s writings, consciousness-raising spread like wildfire across Italy in more or less orthodox ways compared to the initial theory. While most of the consciousness-raising groups were short-lived, lasting from a few months to a few years, some women continued to meet, sometimes for decades, practising a form of consciousness-raising that gradually took on more and more specific features. Talking today about consciousness-raising means analysing a new language, a new way of doing politics, of being together among women. From the outset, the Italian approach was outward-looking, with a few exceptions: “feeling better” was only possible in a different structure from the patriarchal one, and working on oneself was only useful to the extent that it led to increased political awareness, to the possibility of changing reality. Consciousness-raising moved on two tracks: it was both a new political practice within the extra-parliamentary Left and a personal practice of women searching for a new identity in the changing world. These two inputs have not always been balanced out, and

ical instrument adopted in the feminist context as a reflection of the slogan ‘the personal is political’; moreover, the changing nature of consciousness-raising collectives does not allow us to assess the diffusion of this practice. However, it is an approach that deserves attention because of the potential counter-narrative it has offered for the women who practised it. Moreover, it is now proving to be particularly interesting for the study of a subject that often presents problems of communicability, and which the small consciousness-raising groups were concerned with: sexuality.

So how did women manage to break free from the conflicting guidelines on sexuality that came from the family, institutions, media and the youth movements, in which they were immersed? What was the contribution of consciousness-raising in this sense? Which knots were untied, and which remained? And were new ones created? These are some of the questions that the research on which this article is based has sought to answer, focusing on the Italian context and drawing on a collection of unpublished oral sources,⁸ on the one hand, and a selection of letters taken from the advice columns of a number of illustrated magazines, on the other.⁹

consciousness-raising as a daily practice has not always had the impact on politics it was hoped to have; turning points and great personal changes were followed by relational and political disappointments, the difficulty of finding oneself, of patching oneself up, of adapting to the new role so painstakingly constructed. The history of consciousness-raising is a history of attempts, of many and diverse paths leading in the same direction.

⁸ I interviewed 51 women and 3 men, in ten different parts of Italy. For the selection, I used the snowball sampling method, the only criterion being that the participants had had consciousness-raising experiences. The oldest interviewee was born in 1933, the youngest in 1955; the average age difference between me and the participants was 40 years. I conducted the interviews alone, with the help of a video camera (sometimes used only as an audio recorder, at the request of the interviewees); most of the meetings took place in the participants’ homes. Unfortunately, the choice of such a large sample did not allow me to do an in-depth biographical analysis of each participant, especially in the context of collective interviews. This was not the result of superficiality on my part, but my attempts to go in this direction often clashed with the interviewees’ emphasis on the pervasiveness of the consciousness-raising method, so much that it overpowered the specificities of the participants’ individual lives. However, I have tried to analyse the noteworthy features of the interviewees’ life experiences, especially where interesting topics emerged for the study of awareness-raising and sexuality. This approach prevented me — mainly as a result of time constraints — from giving due consideration to the life stories of each interviewee: this was a historiographical limitation, but it allowed me not to force the narrative, achieving good results with regard to such a delicate topic as sexual history. Finally, although the interviews were conducted throughout Italy, this article only contains testimonies from women from the large central-northern cities (Genoa, Milan, Turin and Florence); therefore, the socio-geographical specificities of provincial cities and, above all, southern Italy remain to be analysed.

⁹ I have analysed the columns published in the following sources: *Grazia* (from 1958 to 1960, answers by Mike Bongiorno and Donna Letizia); *Bolero film*, later renamed *Bolero teletutto* (from 1960 to 1974, answers by Enrico Dallarno); *Confidenze. Settimanale di vita femminile* (from 1958 to 1960, answers by Bianca Maria; from 1960 to 1967, answers by Mike Bongiorno; from 1968 to 1972, answers by Alberto Lupo); *Arianna* (from 1960 to 1972, answers by Enrica

I approach the subject from the analytical perspective of the history of emotions,¹⁰ which is at the heart of a field that has by now gained a certain visibility, especially in the Anglo-American context. Understanding the emotional states of the agents of history enables us to examine the expressive/repressive context in which these feelings developed and to understand the close link between events and emotions from a historical perspective. In other words, it is a question of identifying the ‘emotional communities’ that exist in each society,¹¹ the extent to which they represent a common standard,¹² and the changes — real and potential — that these standards undergo.

Feminist awareness and demands have led to the demolition — or transformation — of highly significant cultural and emotional models: not only a re-evaluation of that universe of feelings hitherto considered “feminine”, hence worthy of neither a man nor an emancipated woman, but also a social request to recognise and interpret new emotional roles. In its ‘karstic path’,¹³ neo-feminism was thus able to create a new emotional community,¹⁴ as part of an array of proposals for new emotional models that had already emerged with the cultural revolution of the 1960s and underground culture. In particular, it created what Maud Bracke defines as an ‘emotional counter-community’: one that consciously rejects the hegemonic emotional standard in a given context and proposes a shared political alternative.¹⁵

Cantani). I also used the selection of answers that Brunella Gasperini gave readers in *Annabella* and *Novella* contained in Brunella Gasperini, *Più botte che risposte*, Milan, Baldini&Castoldi, 1997.

¹⁰ In reference to the contemporary era in particular, see at least: Rebecca Clifford, *Emotions and Gender in Oral History: Narrating Italy’s 1968*, “Modern Italy”, May 2012, vol. 17, n. 2; Penelope Morris, Francesco Ricatti, Mark Seymour (eds.), *Politica ed emozioni nella storia d’Italia dal 1848 ad oggi*, Rome, Viella, 2012; Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions. An Introduction*, Croydon, Oxford University Press, 2005; Jeff Goodwin et al. (eds.), *Passionate Politics. Emotions and Social Movements*, USA, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

¹¹ Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Worrying about Emotions in History*, “The American Historical Review”, June 2002, vol. 107, n. 3, pp. 821-845.

¹² Paul N. Stearns, Carol Z. Stearns., *Emotionology. Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards*, “The American Historical Review”, October 1985, vol. 90, n. 4, pp. 813-836. For a discussion of the difference between emotional standards and emotional communities, see Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns*, “History and Theory”, May 2010, n. 49, pp. 237-265.

¹³ Maria S. Palieri, “*Ce n’est qu’un début*”. *E le donne hanno fatto il resto*, in Paola Cioni et al. (eds.), *Donne nel Sessantotto*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2018, p. 14.

¹⁴ Although I am aware of the many different forms of neo-feminism that have existed, I have decided here to talk about it in the singular to highlight the collective, pervasive and ‘karstic’ bearing that the women’s movement had in the 1970s, beyond the distinctions proposed by different groups and collectives. It was not a denial of the particularities of each political expression, nor a simplification of the plurality of the feminist cultural landscape, but rather an attempt to highlight commonalities rather than divergences: common points that, from a historical perspective, trigger, create and pursue important cultural and social changes.

¹⁵ Maud A. Bracke, *Building a ‘Counter-community of Emotions’: Feminist Encounters and Socio-cultural Difference in 1970s Turin*, “Modern Italy”, May 2012, vol. 17, n. 2, pp. 223-236.

As an emotional counter-community, the feminist movement made extensive use of non-verbal expressions; the importance that philosopher Robert Solomon attaches to bodies and the social order in which they move, when ‘making’ emotions,¹⁶ is perfectly embodied by 1970s feminism. The latter brought physicality into play in an active and meaningful way, very different from the culture of words that characterise 1968; the dances in the squares, the theatrical performances and the music of the feminist demonstrations are a world apart from the self-restrained and masculine rigidity of the “political” demonstrations, where the body was used as a tool of passive resistance during sit-ins or for warlike violence.¹⁷

At the same time, feminism as a global movement put into practice a fundamental aspect of the proposal for a new emotional standard, which in fact gave its title to a key text of those years: *Les mots pour le dire*.¹⁸ Not only did emotions change, or what was expected of them, but also how they were communicated: the women’s movement undertook a thorough self-analysis — through consciousness-raising, self-reflection and theoretical writings — of a female lexicon that was found lacking, if not stigmatising. Finding the words to express your feelings — old and new — meant appropriating them but also making them public, bringing them out of the private sphere of feminine sensitivity (not emotionalism).

In my research, I have analysed the emotions involved in the process of sexual liberation: emotions understood as the feelings of individuals, as agents of social change and, finally, as factors contributing to the creation and cohesion of the feminist movement itself, according to the paradigm outlined by James Jaspers.¹⁹ In this sense, consciousness-raising proves to be a perfect ground for the investigation of emotional history: as Ida Dominijanni brilliantly suggested, it is simultaneously a *presa di parola* — the finding of a voice — and a bodily practice.²⁰ In the transition between the 1960s and 1970s, finding the words to talk about sexuality sometimes forced women to

For a definition of ‘emotional community’, see Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2006, p. 2: ‘[Groups in which] people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value — or devalue — the same or related emotions.’

¹⁶ See M. Scheer, *Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is that Makes Them Have a History)?*, cit., p. 194.

¹⁷ On the importance of movement and music as cohesive factors in a social movement, see James M. Jaspers, *Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research*, “Annual Review of Sociology”, August 2011, n. 37, pp. 285-303.

¹⁸ Marie Cardinal, *Le parole per dirlo*, Milan, Bompiani, 1976. On the importance of the lexical context for changing emotional standards, see P. N. Stearns, C. Z. Stearns, *Emotionology*, cit.

¹⁹ J. M. Jaspers, *Emotions and Social movements*, cit.

²⁰ In Barbara Sandrucci, *Aufklärung al femminile. L'autocoscienza come pratica politica e formativa*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2005, p. 291.

go beyond the emotional meaning, as they lacked the ability to describe their organs, their ailments and their intimacy; not coincidentally, many consciousness-raising groups started their exploration of sexuality precisely from manuals.²¹ There were simply no words to think, say or describe female pleasure because it had not yet been explored by science.

Sexual revolution: new forms and old legacies

The year is 1969. Over the past decade or so, the pill has spread from the United States throughout the Western world, despite legislative resistance and the moral directives issued by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*.²² The sexual revolution is everywhere, in the way people consume — from the miniskirt to pornographic magazines mainly produced in Denmark — and behave.²³ Starting in San Francisco, the ‘Summer of Love’ invited girls and boys around the world to make love freely and without limits, proposing nudity as a revolutionary alternative to the military uniform and the banker’s suit. Similar imperatives spread from the barricades of Paris in May 1968 to West Germany, Italy and every single country in Western Europe, each with its own peculiarities.²⁴ Attention to sexual issues became compelling even beyond the Iron Curtain and in non-aligned countries,²⁵ while pressure in this direction was also exerted in European countries,²⁶ as well as in Latin American countries emerging

²¹ The most popular manuals were The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Noi e il nostro corpo*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1974 and William Masters, Virginia Johnson, *L’atto sessuale nell’uomo e nella donna*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1967.

²² Lara V. Marks, *Sexual chemistry. A history of the contraceptive pill*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2001.

²³ D. Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe*, cit., p. 140.

²⁴ See, for example: Michel Brix, *L’amour libre. Brève histoire d’une utopie*, Paris, Molinari, 2016; Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011; Fiammetta Balestracci, *La sessualità degli italiani. Pratiche, consumi e culture dal 1945 ad oggi*, Rome, Carocci, 2020; Hannah Charnock, *Teenage Girls, Female Friendship and the Making of the Sexual Revolution in England, 1950-1980*, “The Historical Journal”, 2020, vol. 63, n. 4, pp. 1032-1053.

²⁵ Dan Healey, *The Sexual Revolution in the USSR. Dynamics Beneath the Ice*, in G. Hekma, A. Gami (eds.), *Sexual Revolutions*, cit., pp. 236-248; Angieszka Koscianska, *Sex on Equal Terms? Polish Sexuology on Women’s Emancipation and “Good Sex” from the 1970s to the Present*, “Sexualities”, 2016, vol. 19, pp. 236-256; Zsófia Lóránd, ‘A Politically Non-Dangerous Revolution is Not a Revolution’: *Critical Readings of the Concept of Sexual Revolution by Yugoslav Feminists in the 1970s*, “European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire”, 2015, vol. 22/1, pp. 120-137.

²⁶ Nikolaos Papadogiannis, *Confronting “Imperialism” and “Loneliness”. Sexual and Gender Relations among Young Communists in Greece, 1974-1981*, “Journal of Modern Greek Studies”, 2011, vol. 29, pp. 219-250; David Beorlegui Zarranz, «“Detrás de lo que quieren que seamos, está lo que somos”. *Revolución sexual y políticas sexuales feministas durante las décadas de los setenta y de los ochenta. Una aproximación al caso del País Vasco*», “Feminismo/s”, 2019, vol. 33, pp. 199-223.

from dictatorship.²⁷ Counterculture emphasised sex in demonstrations, artistic expressions, and hippie communes; the publishing market opened up to the new stimuli, publishing manuals on the “joys of sex” and on family and couple management that no longer ignored carnal love.²⁸

Nevertheless, this ferment, which presented itself as universal, had its limitations. First of all, as John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman noted, it completely excluded forms of sexuality that were judged unacceptable or even pathological, from homosexuality to sadomasochism: ‘The sexual liberalism of midcentury perpetuated notions of good and bad, and drew a sharp line between what was judged acceptable and what was labeled deviant.’²⁹ Moreover, the focus was essentially on male sexuality, and not even the most radical advocates of sexual liberation raised the issue of gender equality in the sexual sphere or, more generally, of female pleasure. William Masters and Virginia Johnson, authors of the groundbreaking *Human Sexual Response*,³⁰ which in 1966 had introduced sexuality — both on a personal level and in the media — to a wide, non-specialist audience, declared themselves fiercely anti-feminist, going so far as to claim that ‘emancipated women’ risked causing ‘sexual dysfunction in the male’.³¹ Largely absent from the debate, women saw their role in the mainstream sexual paradigm change, and the duty of purity was replaced by the duty of promiscuity.³² In the United States, a boom in sex and love education

²⁷ With the obvious specificity of countries marked by instability and democratic transition. See Karina Felitti, *La revolución de la píldora anticonceptiva y la cuestión demográfica en Buenos Aires. Apropiaciones y resignificaciones de un debate internacional*, in Kathya Araujo, Mercedes Prieto (eds.), *Estudios sobre sexualidades en América Latina*, Quito, FLACSO, 2008, pp. 161-178.

²⁸ On this theme, see Anna E. Ward, *Sex and the Me Decade. Sex and Dating Advice Literature of the 1970s*, “Women’s Studies Quarterly”, 2015, vol. 43, pp. 120-136. One of the most widely used manuals is Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex. A Gourmet Guide to Lovemaking*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1972, but it was anticipated by Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl*, New York, Bernard Geis Associates, 1964 and by “J”, *The Sensuous Woman*, USA, Lyle Stuart, 1969. In Europe, German Oswalt Kolle’s sex education films were also well known (D. Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe*, cit., p. 137). The volumes by Alfred Kinsey and Masters & Johnson, instead, had a more scientific slant: Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Philadelphia/London, Saunders Company, 1948; Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, Philadelphia, Saunders Company, 1953; William H. Masters, Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1966. For an analysis of the impact of these publications in Italy, see Fiammetta Balestracci, *The Influence of American Sexual Studies on the ‘Sexual Revolution’ of Italian Women*, in Ann-Kathrin Gembries et al., *Children by Choice? Changing Values, Reproduction, and Family Planning in the 20th Century*, Munich, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018, pp. 145-163.

²⁹ John D’Emilio, Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters. A History of Sexuality in America*, New York, Harper & Row, 1988, p. 277.

³⁰ Published by Feltrinelli in Italy the following year as *L’atto sessuale nell’uomo e nella donna*.

³¹ S. Jeffreys, *Anticlimax*, cit., p. 170.

³² See Massimo Perinelli, «*Second Bite of the Apple*». *The Sexual Freedom League and Revolutionary Sex in 1960s United States*, “Genesis”, 2012, XI/1-2, pp. 41-66.

manuals helped girls to break away from 1950s decorum and the new “revolutionary” impulses by showing them the limits and boundaries of what was “right”, albeit in a heteronormative and premarital logic,³³ as these examples show: ‘Clean hair is sexy. Lots of hair is sexy too. Skimpy little hair styles and hair under your arms, on your legs and around your nipples isn’t. [...] Smiles are sexy... Talking all the time about anything is unsexy. Sphinxes and Mona Lisas knew what they were doing.’³⁴ In Italy, the main problem remained the lack of information on the subject; if, in private, girls learnt about the workings of their bodies only through the few conversations with family and friends, at a “public” and popular level, it was mainly illustrated magazines that talked about sexuality. The best reflection of the ambivalent nature of women’s magazines were advice columns, those ‘dichotomies between cultural and social models that characterised the emancipation of Italian women’.³⁵ Girls in the 1950s and 1960s conquered a small degree of autonomy by turning to an “other” authority, outside the family or institutions. In this way, the magazines interpreted a rupture that was immediately “frozen”, made systemic, but which had in the meantime found its own way of expressing itself: through the ‘socialisation of problems’.³⁶

A good example of this ambivalence is Mike Bongiorno’s answer to a young girl in the columns of *Grazia*, in 1958, who asked why she could not have a boyfriend like American girls: ‘In Italy, a 15-year-old girl is considered a child (which she in fact is), and therefore in need of help and guidance. At 20, 21, she is a woman who, in most cases, does not yet know what path she will take.’³⁷ Bongiorno kept a column with an American progressive approach, but never missed the opportunity to highlight those age limits that the Italian

³³ By “heteronormative” I refer to a cultural model where heterosexuality is perceived as normal, expected and taken for granted, at the expense of other sexual expressions and orientations. Michael Warner introduced the concept (*Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet*, “Social Text”, 1991, n. 29, pp. 3-17), which spread rapidly in the field of LGBTQ+ studies.

³⁴ H. Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl*, cit., p. 78. A few years later, Gurley Brown became the editor of *Cosmopolitan*.

³⁵ Manuela Di Franco, *Rotocalchi femminili nell’Italia Fascista. Grazia (1938-43)*, “The Italianist”, 38/3, 2018, pp. 402-417, p. 413.

³⁶ Anna Del Bo Boffino, *Prefazione*, in B. Gasperini, *Più botte che risposte*, cit., p. 14. For references on the historiographical use of advice columns and women’s magazines, see Anna Bravo, *Il fotoromanzo*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2003; Penelope Morris, *The Harem Exposed: Gabriella Parca’s Le italiane si confessano*, in Penelope Morris (ed.), *Women in Italy, 1945-1960. An Interdisciplinary Study*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 109-130; Ead., *Problems and Prescriptions. Motherhood and Mammismo in Postwar Italian Advice Columns and Fiction*, in Penelope Morris, Perry Willson (eds.), *La mamma. Interrogating a National Stereotype*, New York, Palgrave, 2018, pp. 77-104; Alessandra Gissi, *Corpi e cuori della Repubblica: privato e politico nella produzione di Anna Del Bo Boffino*, in Stefania Bartolini (ed.), *Attraversando il tempo: centoventi anni dell’Unione femminile nazionale (1899-2019)*, Rome, Viella, 2019, pp. 145-163.

³⁷ *Grazia*, “Parlate con Mike Bongiorno”, 25 May 1958.

middle class would not question for more than a decade to come. The failure to accept the fact that adolescent girls were growing up fast and that times were changing went hand in hand with a lack of sex and love education, sending girls off the rails with innuendoes and vague reassurances. It was a paralysing situation that compromised personal and relational freedom in the name of an unspecified moral virtue whose guidelines, however, were not known; despite the different editorial lines and chronological time frames,³⁸ this seems to be a perfect application of the Foucauldian theory according to which the replacement of the metaphysical categories of sin and virtue with the categories of normality and abnormality is one of the fundamental ways in which sexuality is socially controlled in the Western world.³⁹

At the same time, not even “medical” (the inverted commas are necessary) popularisation succeeded in undermining the pervasiveness of morality. In 1960, the readers’ questions were not mentioned in a column published in *Grazia*, ‘I consigli del medico’ [The doctor’s advice]. The expert responds allusively, referring to the ‘failed arrival of the stork’ when talking about infertility and describing the Ogino-Knaus method as ‘the only physiologically and morally acceptable method for the prevention of pregnancy’,⁴⁰ all the while using suggestive italics: ‘Rossella’s fear... does not seem to be *seriously* well-founded’;⁴¹ ‘from *that perspective*, she is no more different than she thinks from many of her peers’;⁴² ‘does she not think she can *personally* contribute to [her husband’s] recovery?’⁴³ The reasons for concern remain unknown, albeit imaginable. The ‘answers in disguise’, as Enrico Dallarno called them in *Bolero film*,⁴⁴ or Bongiorno’s ‘salacious letters’ in *Confidenze* give clarity neither to the modern reader nor to the anguished girl who scanned the magazines in search of even the slightest reassurance, trapped by the ignorance of her anatomy that filled her with unnecessary anxiety: ‘I have to have an appendicitis operation and I am worried that the doctor will notice that I am no longer pure.’⁴⁵

³⁸ For a detailed examination, see Penelope Morris, *A window on the private sphere: Advice columns, marriage, and the evolving family in 1950s Italy*, “The Italianist”, 2007, n. 27, pp. 304-332.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *La volontà di sapere*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1978.

⁴⁰ *Grazia*, “I consigli del medico”, 24 July 1960.

⁴¹ *Grazia*, “I consigli del medico”, 7 August 1960.

⁴² *Grazia*, “I consigli del medico”, 24 July 1960.

⁴³ *Grazia*, “I consigli del medico”, 23 October 1960.

⁴⁴ For example: ‘You can be perfectly at ease. The same answer applies to Viriani Fi, La ragazza con un dubbio atroce, Contadina catanzarese, Ragazza in pena 20271, Giuseppina Roma, Maria di via Castelmanzo, Carpediem 1888, Ragazza ansiosa E 104 B [...],’ *Bolero film*, “Chi sono?”, 31 December 1967. *Bolero film* was the second Italian periodical to publish photo-stories, aimed at a young audience, as shown in the description of the column ‘Chi sono?’ [Who am I?]: ‘If you have doubts about matters concerning yourself or others, turn to “Who Am I?” [...] Who am I? will be a slightly wiser and more experienced friend, who will always be happy to give anyone advice or clarification.’

⁴⁵ *Bolero film*, “Chi sono”, 26 November 1967.

In the 1970s, sexual liberation first had to pass through the knowledge and liberation of one's own body, which was meticulously analysed and compared in a search for self-knowledge that had until then been prevented both in practice and in theory. Thus, in 1970, the first anatomically detailed response appeared in *Bolero film*, with an explanation of menstruation and the hymen.⁴⁶

The situation was no better in the family context, as the oral sources tell us. 'Educastration',⁴⁷ as Mario Mieli called it, began with modesty about the female body — to be hidden, as opposed to that of the brothers — and continued with missing information, omissions and, at best, allusions. There is no mention of menstruation, pregnancy or childbirth, let alone sexual pleasure or intercourse, and the transmission of knowledge about sexuality was entrusted to confidential conversations with friends, to whispers under the stairs. Although local parish priests sometimes distributed small premarital manuals, these glossed over sexual matters as much as possible, at most illustrating the physiological functioning of the reproductive apparatus.

Maternal recommendations hardly conveyed a positive sense of sexuality; in a well-known survey conducted by Lieta Harrison in 1972, women talked about (marital) sex in terms of 'a vice', something done 'like dogs', 'like a kind of beast' and 'degrading'.⁴⁸ Even in environments where sex was not a taboo (e.g. peasant communities), sex education was not on the agenda. In this case, what was lacking was not so much physical contact but actual pleasure and familiarity with the subject and with bodies.

Self-discovery: menstruation and masturbation

One of the great educational taboos of the 1950s was undoubtedly menstruation. A 1966 survey by Harrison found that only 18 out of 256 parents had tried to discuss sex education with their daughters; 14 of these had limited themselves to explaining the menstrual cycle.⁴⁹ Menstruation was not discussed at school, and mothers vacillated between total reticence and some practical rules about hygiene. A few deviating indications were sometimes passed on by older sisters or friends, with half-truths that only added to the sense of prohibition and taboo that surrounded menstruation. Harrison shows us that the information available to girls was confusing ('it's ovaries that haven't been fertilised and that burst and break every month'),⁵⁰ when not completely wrong

⁴⁶ *Bolero film*, "Chi sono?", 28 June 1970.

⁴⁷ Mario Mieli, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2002, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Lieta Harrison, *La donna sposata. Mille mogli accusano*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1972, p. 26.

⁴⁹ Lieta Harrison, *L'iniziazione. Come le adolescenti italiane diventano donne*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1966.

⁵⁰ L. Harrison, *L'iniziazione*, cit., p. 39.

(‘it’s crazy blood that we all throw away. Sure, men have them too’).⁵¹ The first period is a moment of transition from childhood to puberty. Many of my own interviewees had bad memories of their first period, as the women in the family only spoke about its negative aspects, thus implicitly condemning the female condition; the underlying message was that you are a woman, you can no longer play, have fun, you have to behave like a “decent” person. This is how Francesca, born in 1947 to a working-class family from Genoa,⁵² described it:

Back home, my aunt clearly told my mum, [and] my mother says to me (to think that my mother has always talked to me in Italian, even though she spoke Genoese dialect, because she didn’t want to). She said: ‘Vui, vegni chi!’ [You, come here!]. She addressed me with the formal ‘voi’ pronoun. In Genoese, ‘voi’ can indicate respect, but it can also mean detachment. ‘Vui, vegni chi!’ I went, I followed her into the bedroom and there were six linen sanitary pads with fringes [...]. And she says to me — I don’t know how to say it in Genoese: ‘You know very well what these things are for!’ And I felt ashamed.

Ignorance could have tragic consequences, as emerges from one of Harrison’s interviews with a girl who, convinced that she was bleeding to death like a cousin who had been in a motorcycle accident, drank bleach to speed up her death. Rushed to the emergency room, she explained her fears, which were met with ‘mad laughter’ from the doctors on duty and the girl’s relatives.⁵³

On the other hand, even when the topic was approached calmly, the results were not always positive, owing to the climate of sexophobia that prevailed in families. It was not easy for daughters to accept that their mothers talked about intimate topics, and embarrassment could turn into anger, as Emilia — born in 1946 in Genoa — told me:

I remember my mother telling me — quite well, I must say — the whole story about menstruation. As a result, I remember very well that when I had my first period, I even had a stomach-ache, and I yelled at her: ‘I got it! Did you see?’ In the sense of ‘you bitch’, as if she had made me get it.⁵⁴

⁵¹ L. Harrison, *L’iniziazione*, cit., p. 46.

⁵² The long interviews with Francesca proved valuable material for my research. The friendship that binds us — and a general nonchalance on her behalf — allowed me to gain her confidence in discussing certain elements of sexuality that I was unable to discuss with other participants, as well as to contextualise her experiences within a life story that Francesca told me on several occasions. The frequent references to her interviews are therefore not meant to make her representative of an entire generation; they are an attempt to trace an “ideal” biography of a 1970s girl who discovered her sexuality in the feminist context. The interviews were conducted in 2014, 2016 (collective) and 2017, at Francesca’s home, and are now preserved at the Archivio dei Movimenti di Genova.

⁵³ L. Harrison, *L’iniziazione*, cit., p. 44.

⁵⁴ Collective interview conducted in Milan in October 2017, at Emilia’s home. Five women were present, all members of a consciousness-raising collective formed on a professional basis (high school teachers) and still active today.

Where the female social network was still strong, the first period represented, if nothing else, entry into the community.⁵⁵ Thus, another interviewee reported that she ‘finally felt like a woman worthy of being considered’,⁵⁶ with the possibility of sharing ancient ‘female knowledge’. Ferdinanda, born in 1949 into a Turinese family in which the social value of menstruation — as a distinction between women and men, as a moment of rest and sometimes even as a means of escape — was clearly still visible, describes her experience in the following words.

I was with my grandmother and she had had daughters who were suffering a lot. So she says: ‘Ah, come here my child!’ She pours a big glass of brandy and says: ‘Drink it up.’ ‘Look grandma, I’m fine.’ ‘Don’t think about it: drink it all up.’ So I ended up feeling great, but I was completely drunk.⁵⁷

The period was usually accompanied by a series of superstitious prohibitions that made the experience even more traumatic, as in the next extract from my interview with Francesca, cited earlier on, which shows how the prohibitions turned into physical paralysis. Francesca recounted the very first day of menstruation, before returning home and suffering her mother’s “reproaches”:

I knew what menstruation was because some of my friends had had it before me — in fact, I couldn’t wait to get it, too, so that I could grow up. I told my aunt. She was nice, my aunt, I don’t remember anything in particular, [but] she gave me a sanitary pad, still the linen ones. I remember the woman who hosted us, she said a phrase in Genoese that has stayed with me. She said: ‘Oh, a l’è sciupà a tumata.’ The tomato burst. Terrifying, I still remember it now. ‘Ah, good, you’re a young lady now.’ Then my aunt says to me: you must be patient now, you can’t come to the sea with us, you can’t wash your feet or your head, you can’t do anything — you can’t wash yourself. And I say: ‘Auntie, not even partially?’ ‘No.’ ‘Because my hair is dirty...’ ‘No.’ So I stayed there. [...] And I remember spending hours reading [...], there in the house. By the way, something happened... I remember it well. I remember the light beam... I remember I washed my head. I couldn’t resist. My hair was dirty, with salt maybe — I don’t know. And I sat by the window where this light beam was coming in, to dry it. And then I did this [to get up] and I couldn’t get up. I felt a terrible twinge in my uterus, in my vagina, I don’t know where. I didn’t try again, thinking my aunt’s prophecy had come true. And so I stayed there for a long time, until they came... that was my first period.

In other testimonies, too, the first period is associated with a sense of immobility that is imposed on young girls on several levels. It is the shock of discovering blood — possibly followed by a reaction of fear and/or fascination — but

⁵⁵ A similar case is that of the female boarding schools, where “menstruating” women were often entitled to a separate bathroom, and thus to a “superiority” status in the eyes of their female companions.

⁵⁶ Paola, Milan, born in 1933.

⁵⁷ Collective interview conducted in May 2017 in Turin, in the studio of one of the interviewees. In addition to Ferdinanda, three other women were present, linked by a ten-year friendship but who had not shared the consciousness-raising experience.

also a kind of moral paralysis (e.g. the need to behave like “young ladies”, the end of childhood activities and company, etc.) that often turns into a feeling of physical paralysis, that is, the idea of no longer being able to move because of pain or fear.

Italian girls growing up between the 1950s and the 1970s learnt to manage their period from an exclusively hygienic point of view, and the prescriptions only exacerbated the sense of social stigmatisation. The discussion was difficult also in the feminist field, and even Simone De Beauvoir — one of the intellectual symbols of the movement — was not at all comfortable talking about her own period: ‘And once the first surprise has passed, the monthly annoyance does not disappear, time after time the maiden finds the same distaste for that foul, rotten smell rising from her body — a smell of swamp, of withered violets.’⁵⁸

Similar taboos surrounded autoeroticism. To defy the prohibition of masturbation was to defy not only your parents but also divine wrath, in a travesty of magical thinking that marked an incomplete transition from childhood. During the 1970s, the feminist magazine “Sottosopra” often published excerpts of conversations that took place within feminist collectives: these quotations were used at the time to provide insights, and we can use them today as subtle guides to understand the feelings of that emotional community. For example, a woman talks about autoeroticism in an article titled ‘Alcune testimonianze tratte dalla riunione su educazione cattolica e sessualità’ [Some excerpts from the meeting on Catholic education and sexuality]: ‘When I tried to masturbate, violating one of the main prohibitions of repressive Catholic education, I was terrified of being punished by the people I loved (the death of my grandma).’⁵⁹ When Harrison asked her 300 respondents if they had ever masturbated, she discovered that 53 per cent had done so between the ages of 12 and 13, but only 26 per cent continued to do so in adult age.⁶⁰ The condemnation of the autoerotic act places blame on the sexual body (especially the female body), one’s anatomy and one’s pleasure, as we can read in “Sottosopra”: ‘Masturbation was the first guilt-induced confrontation with my body. Mum discovering me, disapproving, excluding me from her love: the biblical fable repeats itself. You lose someone’s love: you have sinned.’⁶¹ Autoeroticism thus emerges as the discovery of the “sinful” body, removed from the purity of childhood, which included nudity: a body that, in the case of women, had

⁵⁸ Simone De Beauvoir, *Il secondo sesso*, Milan, il Saggiatore, 2002, p. 367.

⁵⁹ “Sottosopra”, 1974, n. 2, p. 81.

⁶⁰ L. Harrison, *L’iniziazione*, cit. According to Alfred Kinsey’s studies, as of 1948, more than 90 per cent of male respondents in the United States were masturbating; five years later, the same habit affected 60 per cent of women (A. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, cit.; A. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, cit.).

⁶¹ *Alcune testimonianze tratte dalla riunione su educazione cattolica e sessualità*, “Sottosopra”, 1974, n. 2, p. 75.

already been punished by menstruation and which, through masturbation, lost all social legitimacy. In Italy, the taboo on masturbation took on religious connotations that added to pseudo-medical superstitions; it was the priest who watched over the good deeds of young men and women, creating a universe of untruths that were inevitably confusing and guilt-inducing for young boys and girls, summed up in the commandment ‘when you sleep, put your hands on the sheets’, which many interviewees remembered as an unbreakable rule, however obscure.

If, in the consciousness-raising groups, the theme of menstruation emerged spontaneously from the very first discussions and was confronted openly, the discovery of masturbation was one of the turning points for many feminist collectives — whether it was practised collectively to compare the various sensations or discussed to analyse modalities and break taboos. In the following extracts, two interviewees — whom I consider to be representative of a certain political generation — from different cultural backgrounds but with the same need to experiment evoke memories of the way they explored their intimacy: ‘When I masturbated, I thought I was the only one in the world who did it. Because you didn’t talk, and if you talked to your friends, you knew things in a distorted way, [because] nobody talked to you about these things, there was no literature, there were no films, there was nothing’ (Mariangela, born 1950 in Turin);⁶² ‘I looked at my vagina in the mirror, I masturbated in front of a mirror, I wanted to see what happened, how I reacted... I did all these things’ (Francesca, Genoa).

Consciousness-raising collectives rarely went so far as to analyse the symbolic value of menstruation and autoeroticism for women’s bodies. While reflection on the menstrual cycle developed a few years later, in the context of a form of feminism that was more concerned with restoring harmony with the earth and with one’s own deepest being,⁶³ the works of Betty Dodson proved to be most representative for female masturbation.⁶⁴

⁶² Mariangela was part of the only “mixed” consciousness-raising collective that I have come across, which briefly gathered feminist women and homosexual men in Turin. The interview was conducted in July 2017 at the participant’s home.

⁶³ In Italy, Luciana Percovich has worked extensively on this topic, from the translation of Barbara Ehrenreich, Deirdre English, *Le streghe siamo noi*, Milan, La Salamandra, 1975 to her own book *La coscienza nel corpo. Donne, salute e medicina negli anni Settanta*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2005. For a more detailed analysis, see Elise Thiébaud, *Questo è il mio sangue. Manifesto contro il tabù delle mestruazioni*, Turin, Einaudi, 2018; Sophie Laws, *Issues of Blood. The Politics of Menstruation*, Houndmills, MacMillan, 1990.

⁶⁴ Betty Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation. A Meditation on Self Love*, New York, Dodson, 1978.

Virginity, first times and frigidity

The “ultimate proof” of one’s “dedication” was something that a girl from a good family should never concede. ‘[H]ow can you still be such a silly girl at 20?’ wrote Donna Letizia in June 1958,⁶⁵ answering a young woman who had asked whether her partner’s requests were appropriate. It is through advice columns that we can trace the ideal development of the concept of virginity that was proposed to the “model reader”.⁶⁶ The myth of virginity had unclear boundaries; in response to a girl worried about compromising herself, Enrico Dallarno wrote — a few years later in “Bolero film” — that at the age of 24, ‘[a] kiss can take nothing away from your purity’.⁶⁷ Another recurrent element is the bugbear of one’s own morality, which indicates the right direction and the right measure, as Mike Bongiorno suggested in “Confidenze”, in 1966:

We cannot make ultra-careful and detailed lists of what a girl can and cannot do with her boyfriend, of what is permissible and what is not. You gave the answer yourself: an honest girl defends herself instinctively and controls herself following her instincts, and she knows very well what she must and must not concede. However, there is a very charming popular saying: An honest girl concedes nothing, and when the lover begs or threatens her, she concedes even less. Very nice, isn’t it? You must behave accordingly.⁶⁸

The myth of virginity was at the root of the double standard in Italian society.⁶⁹ Sociologist Laura Carpenter has identified three interpretative frameworks within which the loss of virginity can be inscribed, and which can be useful — in analytical terms — in the Italian context: gift (i.e. expression of the subject’s value), stigma (discrediting the subject) and passage (loss of virginity as a transition to adulthood). The frames sometimes overlap (for example, when virginity is seen as a female gift and a male stigma),⁷⁰ and in the 1960s moral “variants” occasionally emerged that sought to integrate the double standard into the new models of adolescent intimacy, as Francesca explained:

Love. Love above all. You can do anything for love. When there is love... well, my father even told me explicitly, when I was a bit older: if I had come home pregnant they would have welcomed me with open arms if I had done it for love. Ça va sans dire, that I would have

⁶⁵ *Grazia*, “Saper vivere”, 22 June 1958.

⁶⁶ See Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula*, Milan, Bompiani, 1979.

⁶⁷ *Bolero film*, “Chi sono?”, 5 June 1960.

⁶⁸ *Confidenze*. *Settimanale di vita femminile*, “Confidenze con Mike Bongiorno”, 13 February 1966. *Confidenze*, founded by the writer Liala and directed for almost forty years by Emilio d’Emilio, was aimed at a popular audience.

⁶⁹ The concept of the “double standard”, introduced by Keith Thomas in 1959, refers to the different expectations in terms of sexuality that society imposes on men and women (Keith Thomas, *The Double Standard*, “Journal of the History of Ideas”, 1959, vol. 20, pp. 195-216).

⁷⁰ Laura Carpenter, *Virginity Lost. An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, New York-London, New York University Press, 2005.

done it for love! [...] It was all about falling in love/not falling in love: falling in love was a good thing. Sex without love would have been the most perverse thing.

On this topic, the experiences described by the interviewees are highly diverse, and it is impossible to find a social pattern in the families' reactions.⁷¹ Analysing the excerpts of three interviews with women coming from similar social contexts (working-class families in northern Italy), I came across extreme statements ('Either you change your life or you have a day to pack your bags'),⁷² moral condemnations ('When my parents found out that I was sleeping with my boyfriend, they took me to a psychologist because it was not normal for me to say that I wanted to sleep with him. Then they told me: "Society has absolved you, but we haven't"'),⁷³ and lukewarm positions ('I alone created this virginity reticence of mine').⁷⁴ Each family set its own emotional standard, which seemed to be much more elastic and varied than the women's press suggested.

If women were still virgins when they got married, virginity presented itself to them in all its drama, loaded with a symbolic-sacral value that could certainly not put the newly-weds at ease. In addition, the "loss of virginity" marked a break between love games and "adult", reproductive sexuality. This was a real loss of innocence — or carefreeness — and of the equal relationship that may have existed during the engagement, as Paola (born in 1933 in Milan) said:

When I got married and went on my honeymoon, G. did not penetrate me for 15 days. We tried many times, and on each occasion I pulled back [...] while when we were engaged, I remember that in the evening we went to a place where the power station was, a bit secluded, where we would make out passionately. But I was always very careful that he didn't penetrate me because my mother had told me that men are rascals, that they first get you pregnant and then don't marry you. So I told him: 'Until I get married I don't want to do that thing.' Then when I got married, I couldn't do it any more!⁷⁵

The women who met in the consciousness-raising groups therefore came from various repressive contexts and questioned the concept of virginity at length,

⁷¹ I would like to stress that even the paradigm of a more liberal North as opposed to a more conservative South did not emerge from the interviews I conducted. Although the sample is not representative in a statistical sense, I believe that the myth of "southern virginity" has yet to be investigated.

⁷² Piera, Genoa, born in 1950 (?). Interview conducted at the Archivio dei Movimenti di Genova in April 2017.

⁷³ Toni, Milan, born in 1955. Interview conducted at the participant's home in June 2017; in addition to her, three other women from the same consciousness-raising collective were present.

⁷⁴ Rosalba, Turin, born in 1943. Interview conducted in May 2017 in Turin, in the studio of one of the interviewees.

⁷⁵ Interview conducted in June 2017; in addition to her, three other women from the same consciousness-raising collective were present.

trying to move from the interpretative paradigm of the ‘gift’ to that of the ‘passage’, defending the personal relevance of the “first time” while denying its social value. This is what “Our Bodies, Ourselves” — the most popular feminist manual on sexuality at the time — wrote on the topic:

The loss of virginity, and hence the loss of the state of purity and innocence, is viewed as a proof of maturity, a definite breaking away from parents and a move toward autonomy and independence. Autonomy is surely a good thing, but the cost of sexual exploration should not have to be a sharp, brittle separation if that doesn’t seem necessary.⁷⁶

Virginity is presented as something alien, something that does not belong to one’s real experience. Hence, just as young girls in the 1950s anxiously wrote to the magazines about not being able to “understand” whether they were still virgins or not (which testifies to the social and non-biological construction of the concept), feminists once again overturned the model and began to point to virginity as a male myth to which it was better not to succumb — at least on a theoretical level. Within the New Left, virginity thus became something to get rid of as soon as possible, precisely in order to not submit to the bourgeois blackmail of waiting for the “right” man — that is, the one with whom to walk down the aisle — or to that of sex (and virginity itself) as the only power in women’s hands. In this regard, the interviewees often spoke of a ‘burden’: ‘At one point, it became an issue for me: “Here, I can’t be a virgin any more!”’;⁷⁷ ‘[I]t was something I had to get rid of, I was almost ashamed to say it, at my age’;⁷⁸ ‘Enough. There I decided I would give it away without being married. It seemed too much of an insult to my intelligence’.⁷⁹ They also claimed to have waited ‘a long time’ before they had sex for the first time, which reflects a generational anxiety to free oneself from virginity. In reality, almost all of them lost their virginity between the ages of 19 and 21, reflecting a stable trend that belies the fears of every single woman,⁸⁰ but the testimonies report the urgency felt at the time.

Tales of first times are often tragic: on the one hand, there was the urge to free oneself from virginity, from the bourgeois heritage that prohibited free love; on the other hand, the inexperience of one’s body, combined with

⁷⁶ The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Noi e il nostro corpo*, cit., p. 47.

⁷⁷ Franca, Turin, born in 1947. Interview conducted in May 2017 in Turin, in the studio of one of the interviewees.

⁷⁸ Vanna, Florence, born in 1950. Interview conducted in September 2017 in Turin, in the studio of one of the interviewees. Seven women who were once part of the *Collettivo Femminista delle Cure* were present.

⁷⁹ Toni, Milan, born in 1955.

⁸⁰ The figure is also confirmed by the results of Fabris and Davis’ survey of 1978, which found that the average age of first sexual intercourse was 19 (regardless of gender). Giampaolo Fabris, Rowena Davis, *Il mito del sesso. Rapporto sul comportamento sessuale degli italiani*, Milan, Mondadori Editore, 1978.

the boys' own immaturity, made the first experiences of sexual intercourse demanding, painful and by no means pleasant. Let us again take Francesca's words as an example:

In November '68 — so at the very end of that year — I had 'full' sex for the first time, as they used to say. In [the] occupied physics [department]. It was after the demonstration for Avola: we did the demonstration, then we went to physics, which was occupied, and at a certain point R. took me by the hand and we went to the dean's office. [...] We got on the floor and I had penetrative sex for the first time — not very pleasant, to be sure. Not very pleasant. I learnt after [some time] that it had been his first time too, but he never told me — he told me a long time after. So: the hurry, the darkness... Then I absolutely wanted to wash myself, because I was afraid [of getting pregnant], so I went... Where are the toilets? I went [to the toilet] and then I couldn't find him any more: I couldn't find the way back, because it was so dark. So I went down to where the light was, where the assembly was, and I didn't see R. any more: he had probably stayed up there waiting for me. But it was getting late, I had to go back because my parents were not so liberal about these things, so there was a guy who lived near me, he gave me a lift and I left. In pain, really, it hurt... With the fear of getting pregnant.

This testimony merits an in-depth analysis as it contains several important elements. The narrative moves on two levels: the political environment of 1968 and the intimate, almost fairy-tale-like sphere of sexual intercourse. The first level is solar, open and luminous (in the strict sense of the word: 'I went down to where the light was, where the assembly was'). The presence of the comrades, the community and the occupation, and the choice of the dean's office act as a further reflection of the insult to the institutions. Interestingly, though, the two temporal indications do not correspond: the demonstration in support of the victims of Avola took place after 2 December 1968,⁸¹ hence not 'in November', as the interviewee says at the beginning. This minor error could be the result of a need to anticipate her first time (confirmed by the aside 'so at the very end of that year'), or perhaps she wanted to identify a more "deserving" context, namely a demonstration worthy of her sexual initiation.⁸² This political level is juxtaposed with the personal level, marked by fear. Here the discourse becomes broken while suggestive, fairy-tale-ish images recur: the darkness, the lost 'path', the anguished questions and, finally, the homecoming that separates her from her beloved. The contrast between light and darkness, collectivity and solitude perfectly represents the dichotomy between the "duty" to make love in the spirit of 1968 and the girls' resistance, difficulties and fears.

But how to find pleasure in sex after losing one's virginity? Starting in 1964, "Confidenze" published a column by a 'Dr Morgante', who reassured

⁸¹ On 2 December 1968, the police fired on a peasant demonstration near Avola, killing two people and injuring several others. In the following days and weeks, mainly students and workers — in contrast to the trade unions — participated in various solidarity demonstrations.

⁸² Alessandro Portelli proposed this paradigm for the incongruity he found in the case of the killing of Luigi Trastulli. A. Portelli, *Storie orali*, cit., chapter I.

readers that there was no link between frigidity and infertility, talked about female anatomy and dispelled certain taboos about the menstrual period. The following year, Gabriella Parca attributed men's unwillingness to take women's needs into account to the habit of visiting prostitutes, and this led to accusations and self-accusations of frigidity.⁸³

Yet, despite attempts to tear the veil on an intellectual level, the "myth" of frigidity continued to haunt young women, who were accused by their husbands of not being able to enjoy sex. In consciousness-raising sessions, frigidity was one of the first issues to be analysed on a personal level; on a political level, it was seen as a form of 'passive resistance' to 'predatory' male sexuality, in which female erotic urges could not find room for expression and were destined to be repressed — often even unconsciously, without being named.⁸⁴ Feminism interpreted frigidity in terms of its functional role in maintaining male power: not only as a limitation of female sexuality, which was not explored at the level of couple dynamics but under the threat of frigidity as a fault, but also as an expression of desired female passivity. With the slogan 'neither whores nor madonnas, just women', feminists reappropriated the search for a sexual dimension of their own, not modelled on the male dichotomy that separated erotic potential from the virtues of a good wife. Brunella Gasperini introduced the topic to the general public in the pages of *Annabella*, where she finally explained (we are now in 1970) how to overcome — most of the time — that "frigidity" that torments women:

More than frigidity it is, in my opinion, a kind of sexual misunderstanding due to the lack of complete confidence, mutual fear of hurting each other [and] reluctance (frequent among spouses) to talk about 'certain things'. [...] Many women who consider themselves frigid (and are considered as such by their man) are, in reality, women who are not understood: and they are not understood precisely because they keep silent and pretend. Physical understanding is not always easy nor always immediate: most of the time, it is a conquest that requires time, attention, imagination, tenderness, but above all mutual trust.⁸⁵

Sexual liberation

The consciousness-raising sessions — and the various self-published documents that resulted from these — marked the transition from sexual revolution to sexual 'liberation', as it was called at the time, especially in the United States and Western Europe. The term was first used in the title of a workshop held in 1967 in Newark (US), organised by the female members of the Students

⁸³ Gabriella Parca, *I sultani. Mentalità e comportamento del maschio italiano*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1965, p. 62.

⁸⁴ Ada Ribero, *Una questione di libertà. Il femminismo degli anni Settanta*, Turin, Rosenberg&Sellier, 1999, p. 216.

⁸⁵ B. Gasperini, *Più botte che risposte*, cit., p. 245.

for a Democratic Society, but the concept was deemed too radical. And yet, the most well-attended workshop at the national conference commemorating the first congress for women's rights in the United States, the following year, was a meeting on sexuality organised by Anna Koedt and Ti-Grace Atkinson; the exchange of intimacies and fantasies (even those outside the norm, like sado-masochistic or lesbian ones) continued throughout the night and provoked deep reflection. In Italy, feminist sexual liberation came slightly later but was driven by the same problems as those faced across the Atlantic, enhanced by the burden of a society struggling to adapt to the innovations brought about by young people, not just women. The critique of the family institution, which David Cooper decreed as the 'death of the family' in 1972,⁸⁶ was elaborated in Italy as a difficult network of compromises and small personal revolutions, in which free sexuality was more a consequence than a cause of rebellion.

Sexuality was a dominant theme in the consciousness-raising sessions. Its political and psychoanalytic interpretation made it the best terrain on which to confront each other, starting with one's doubts and weaknesses. Paradoxically, talking about sexuality was "easy": sexual repression had already been questioned for years (even by mainstream culture); repressive education was common ground for all; and the "enemy" was not difficult to identify — though not so easy to defeat. With the exception of a few critics of this 'sexocentric' approach,⁸⁷ the discourse on sex opened the door to a mutual trust that allowed women to gradually analyse emerging dynamics, problems and personal anxieties. Furthermore, sexuality embodied feminist slogans and ideals: the 'personal-political', the recovery of a denied identity, the centrality of the body and women's right to physicality outside the domestic space. Group consciousness-raising was the main tool to achieve this further liberation, that is, the creation of new parameters of sexuality, with the search for a "widespread sexuality" that was not strictly coital: this idea was taken up by Shulamith Firestone, who in "The Dialectic of Sex" incorporated Marcusean concepts and the notion that sexual liberation meant freeing oneself first and foremost from the 'tyranny of the genitals'.⁸⁸ As suggested by the anthropologist Margaret Mead, whose studies became an important intellectual reference for 1970s feminism, for a woman to achieve full sexual satisfaction it is necessary that she lives in a society that recognises and values her desire, that she can understand the mechanisms underlying her sexual anatomy and that her culture provides for the teaching of sexual techniques that can bring her

⁸⁶ David Cooper, *La morte della famiglia*, Turin, Einaudi, 1972.

⁸⁷ Typewritten document by Agnese Piccirillo, "Autocoscienza", 1977 in Archivio delle Donne del Piemonte, Fondo Agnese Piccirillo, AP 1.

⁸⁸ Shulamith Firestone, *La dialettica dei sessi. Autoritarismo maschile e società tardo-capitalista*, Rimini-Florence, Guaraldi, 1976, p. 7.

to orgasm.⁸⁹ Clearly, none of these factors were present in 1960s Italy: feminism tried to give answers in this direction and, at the same time, to offer a horizon of meaning to the many who felt inadequate to both the current “free” model and the repressive one proposed by the previous generation. Reclaiming a female form of sexuality meant subverting the masculine symbolic and structural order, as well as reasserting one’s femininity (i.e. one’s right to difference) outside the stereotypical canons of the dichotomous “saint or whore” model. The most fundamental step was confrontation: the discovery that one’s private distress (at the time only women’s magazines provided a hint of comfort) was actually a collective problem — even a political one, as would happen later.

During the consciousness-raising sessions, the symbolic, individual and political levels of the discourse on sexuality overlapped, creating a narrative that moved seamlessly from the difficulty of reaching orgasm to the rejection of seeing the female body reduced to a reproductive apparatus, from the value of sex in a patriarchal society to personal experiences with men. In this way, a ‘collective heritage’ was formed,⁹⁰ namely a common base against which to compare oneself in order to distance oneself *personally* from the perception of subalternity in relationships (especially physical ones) with men, and *socially* from the phallogentric conception of sexuality and from the reification of women’s bodies. The fact that women came together to talk about sexuality triggered a “naming” process that also concerned sexual pleasure, as with all issues raised during consciousness-raising sessions. For feminists, it meant getting a grip on reality, an affirmation of the self in the couple’s relationship and on a public level that women had never felt before, and which led to greater confidence even in sexual terms, as Piera from Genoa (23 years old at the time) explained:

You were perfectly happy to demand pleasure if you didn’t feel it. [...] It’s like when Pennac said that we were allowed to not finish books. You say, ‘Didn’t you know that?’ Well yes, but... And the same with the idea of clitoral pleasure: it was so established that we felt entitled to demand it if we didn’t achieve it. So from that point of view I got a lot out of it, because I felt very confident in a relationship.

The feminist political demand was for a sexuality free from the productive and productivist rhythms that capitalism imposed not only in the workplace but also in private life, in moments of leisure and in relationships, as summarised in a 1974 document by the Collettivo Femminista Genovese.

How do we break the reproductivist mode in which love is understood (reaching coitus or, at least, “coming” one, two, three times) when productivity is taken as the general criterion

⁸⁹ Margaret Mead, *Male and Female. A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*, USA, Morrow, 1975, p. 294.

⁹⁰ A. Ribero, *Una questione di libertà*, cit., p. 213.

of capitalist social organisation? How can we surrender to the time needed for pleasure to expand when our everyday life is punctuated by tight schedules, [when it] is a sequence of time cards to be punched? [...] The kind of sexuality that emerges from our needs as women [...] is revolutionary precisely because it violently shocks [and] denies, [because] it has a logic that is profoundly different from that of the system, and only we women can concretely push it forward to the extent that it prefigures different human relationships.⁹¹

The discourse on the rediscovery of female pleasure cannot be separated from the two key texts of the time: Anna Koedt's "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (1968, published in Italy in 1970) and Carla Lonzi's "La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale", first published in 1971.⁹² As much as we can criticise both these texts for their rigid approach to the distinction between a 'free' orgasm (clitoral) and one rehearsed for the 'pleasure of the patriarch' (vaginal),⁹³ at the time, they were launching pads for the all-feminist concept of a 'diffuse', non-genital and non-coital form of sexuality, which could break out of the crumbling logic of male sexuality and the capitalist system.

In the reconsideration of the modalities of making love and giving pleasure, the phallus was the main target, understood as a symbolic and factual element of male dominance in the sexual domain. The battle was ideological — with a radical and subversive interpretation of Freudian paradigms — but also practical, as women rejected coitus in favour of a more playful and less genital sexuality. Lesbian women, among others, emphasised this.⁹⁴ The homosexuals of FUORI! DONNA 'see contemporary society as one that practises sexual terrorism in order to transform sexuality from a joyful and open potential into something trapped in procreative and heterosexual sexuality; one that deprives sex of the magnificent plurality of expressions to which lesbians nowadays look, and to which non-lesbians can look [...]'.⁹⁵ Feminism turned the body, the primary agent of sexuality, into a political body. The awareness of the reification and commodification of the female body was one of the first commonalities between feminist groups, who often came together to organise exhibitions and design posters against sexist advertising, or who reviewed periodicals, illustrated magazines and even "La Settimana Enigmistica" to refine their

⁹¹ Collettivo Femminista Genovese, "La nostra sessualità", 1974 in Archivio dei Movimenti di Genova, Fondo Elvira Boselli.

⁹² There is no certainty about Carla Lonzi's contacts with overseas feminist writings. The Italian translation of Koedt's document was circulated by Anabasi in 1972, but it is possible that Lonzi had read it during her visit to the United States. However, there are no explicit references to the text in any of her writings (see Maria Luisa Boccia, *L'io in rivolta. Vissuto e pensiero di Carla Lonzi*, Milan, La Tartaruga, 1990).

⁹³ Carla Lonzi, *Donna clitoridea e donna vaginale*, Milan, Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1971, p. 7.

⁹⁴ See Elena Biagini, *L'emersione imprevista. Il movimento delle lesbiche in Italia negli anni '70 e '80*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 2018.

⁹⁵ "Documento del gruppo Fuori! e del Fuori! Donna di Torino per il II Congresso del MLD a Roma", April 1975 in Fondazione Sandro Penna, Archivio del FUORI!, fascicolo 193.

critique of the female model that appeared in the articles and jokes of these publications.

The denial of the female body (and of the comparison with the male body) can be traced back to childhood, when games are censored by the watchful parental eye that allows neither the vision nor the sharing of one's physicality, both with adults and between children. The following words by Francesca reveal how the participants of a childish game ('when I was a young child') turn into older subjects ('there was a boy') when maternal censorship intervenes, semantically symbolising the awareness that the body concerns adulthood.

I have two brothers and I had a father. They walked around in their underwear, if anything, but my mother didn't want it. She would say: 'Go get dressed!' — to my father, especially — "*gh'è a figetta!*" can't you see the little girl is here.' So I didn't get a chance to see [...]. I remember, when I was a young child, playing doctors in the country — we built a kind of tent in the garden with some friends. And there was a boy who examined my belly. My mother came — she gave us hell!

The rediscovery of the body was a collective act that took place during self-visit sessions, or a private one, when the stimuli of consciousness-raising led women to want to know more about themselves. At the same time, the male body was rediscovered, no longer seen as virile and indestructible but as a tender, welcoming materiality. In the 1970s, the visual language also changed in this direction, and men's bodies became (also) the bodies of fathers, actively seeking physical contact with their children.⁹⁶ This would have been unthinkable only a few years before.

In addition to the body, feminists discovered that they had sexual fantasies. Already in "Our Bodies, Ourselves", the Boston Women's Health Book Collective opened the door to erotic 'fantasies', emphasising that they could be far removed from feminist 'political correctness':

Learning from our fantasies instead of repressing them can be liberating and help us to take the initiative in sexual intercourse, even to accept feeling attracted to a person of the same sex, knowing that we can choose whether or not to act on our fantasies. Learning to accept our fantasies has been so exhilarating that we want to describe some of them. Their variety shows how complex our sexuality is, and we are pleased to begin exploring this complexity.⁹⁷

And yet, Brunella Gasperini replied — in the aforementioned publication in *Annabella* — to a woman complaining that her partner was not 'satisfied' with her 'conjugal duty' and demanded more from her, that 'there is nothing that can "humiliate" a wife if it is done with love and for love'.⁹⁸ Censorship

⁹⁶ N. Lodato, *Il caso Duepiù*, cit., p. 80.

⁹⁷ The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Noi e il nostro corpo*, cit., p. 49.

⁹⁸ B. Gasperini, *Più botte che risposte*, cit., p. 246.

of sexual practices that go beyond coitus resulted in women (but, to a lesser extent, also men) not having collective parameters with which to compare their fantasies or their partner's demands, and hence not knowing how to behave.

Apart from allowing a basic confrontation with what was frequent or infrequent, “normal” or “perverse”, consciousness-raising ultimately led to an attempt to gain an awareness of the psychic dynamics underlying sexual fantasies: an awareness that did not disregard a certain degree of ideology, but which was undoubtedly functional to a path of acceptance of one's inner world. At least, this is what was hoped and theorised; in practice, confidence within consciousness-raising groups suffered severe blows when the collective did not consider some sexual fantasies or practices “politically” acceptable, or rejected them — from homosexuality to pornography, via fantasies of domination that “returned” to man the symbolic power he had been deprived of in the political sphere. In this sense, Francesca touched upon one of the cornerstones of emotional communities: the sharing of ‘moral emotions’.⁹⁹

I really felt guilty using porn. I could talk to my female friends about what I was doing, even a bit out of bounds, [...] with the man. But to say that [I used porn]... I think I would have provoked a negative reaction: “Ah, me, porn...!” There were a lot of people who said, “Ah, I can't even watch those things!”

Conclusion

Sexuality acted as a testing ground for the consciousness-raising technique, highlighting its merits and limitations, strengths and weaknesses. The discourse on sex is the clearest example of how new modes of self-narrative and the political analysis of experience led to a different everyday practice, which deconstructed interpersonal relationships and categories of interpreting reality. Consciousness-raising is the feminine, or feminist, strategy of reappropriating — at least in part — the discourse on sex: that ‘endless grinding of the word’ that Foucault later identified as the main characteristic of sexuality in the Christian Western world,¹⁰⁰ but which had until then remained the prerogative of a masculine and male-centred language. By replacing censorship with a hitherto unheard nonchalance of the body and speech, including dances, gestures and slogans, feminists reappropriated an expressive, even vulgar, dimension of great disruptive value. This operation took place on both a relational and a personal level, owing to the young age of most of the participants in the consciousness-raising sessions — and in the feminist movement in general — but also to the constant attention that society reserved (and still

⁹⁹ J. M. Jaspers, *Emotions and Social movements*, cit., p. 295.

¹⁰⁰ Michel Foucault, *La volontà di sapere*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2013, p. 43.

reserves) to the sexual sphere: from a “class” perspective (not new to the feminist movement, which had many points of contact with the New Left, especially in Italy), this was one of the terrains on which to fight the bourgeoisie, which had made sexuality a central point of its identity.¹⁰¹

The sexual relationship, as a primary instinctive experience, is the terrain where emotional communities clash most: personal unease about the proposal of a new model of sexuality — free, uninhibited and revolutionary on paper, but systemic and masculine in practice — was soon transformed into a collective revolt against a world seen as the exclusive prerogative of masculinity, incapable of accommodating female needs, necessities and pleasure. For feminism, finding the words to say it and, immediately afterwards, the gestures to do it meant going on to construct a (self-)conscious sexuality, no longer imposed or suffered but pursued with curiosity. It is also through words that the proposal of a new emotional standard is shaped, endowed with a specific, generational vocabulary — one that young women lacked, especially in the field of sexuality, as the letters to the magazines show. It is no surprise, then, that the theories of the time were imbued with a rigidity that did not sit well with the concept of free sexuality; this not only reflected the ideological imprint of those years, but the difficult process of appropriating a new emotional standard also brought along a certain radicality — at least in words. The denial of pleasure in the coital sexual experience, which recurs in numerous testimonies and even more so in the writings of the time, was not necessarily the result of a personal experience, but rather the discovery and claiming of new and different pleasures that called for a rejection of previous practices in order to assert themselves and gain legitimacy.

Nevertheless, this process was neither simple nor immediate, and consciousness-raising failed to undermine the deepest part of the self, leaving it to experience — bodily experience — alone to serve as an example, as a ‘historical sign’ against which to fight.¹⁰² For consciousness-raising feminism, the inability to change the psychic world and transform it into political discourse meant becoming aware of the impossibility of affecting the deepest structures of the self and reality. Whether it was a question of self-preservation, self-protection, a sin of youth or a genuine political will, this failure prevented consciousness-raising from asserting itself outside the unique experience of 1970s feminism.

Consciousness-raising has opened new paths and changed lives, allowing women to position themselves outside a relationship with a man, to value themselves in a political and active dimension, and to find ways of asserting them-

¹⁰¹ In addition to Foucault’s theories, for a historical examination of the link between sexuality and the bourgeoisie, see D. Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe*, cit., and Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution. English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁰² M. Foucault, *La volontà di sapere*, cit., p. 35.

selves in almost every area, public and private. However, each of these discoveries has been an opening rather than a conclusion, and too many denials and too many unspoken words (particularly regarding power and leadership) have undermined the completeness of the discourse. In the following decades, women's groups have tried to understand the shortcomings of 1970s feminism, often by claiming that consciousness-raising failed to address the transcendent level: the unconscious, female "naturalness" and motherhood.

What remains of consciousness-raising is a new methodological proposal, *partire da sé* [starting from oneself], with the potential to change the political discourse and open up trajectories that the feminists of the past were not always able to fully cross, but which paved the way for future generations. The new perspective on sexuality is one of these trajectories: a projection into the future rather than an achievement to be attributed to activists, who often struggled to manage the clash between theory and reality, between discoveries and inhibitions, between the desire to explore and the education they received. The path to identifying female pleasure involved not only bodily, almost anatomical discoveries (surprisingly simple, even if shocking) but also the difficult task of finding a mental and physical space that had not been shaped by male, mainstream sexuality. For feminists, this meant confronting internalised models, figuring out if and how to make them their own, sometimes accepting the arousal derived from male forms of sexuality (e.g. pornography) or "politically incorrect" sexual fantasies (e.g. sadomasochism), sometimes deconstructing them and giving them a new ideological value.¹⁰³ This task has been carried out on several levels, from the personal — even psychoanalytical — to the political, especially in the homosexual milieu, but historically it has manifested itself more as a subtle trace than as a real revolution.

Translated by Andrea Hajek

¹⁰³ For Pat Califia, a lesbian sadomasochist feminist and founder of a sadomasochist society on the West Coast, sadomasochism has an ideological function. It is a way of using sex to demonstrate real sexual power, in this case, a female one: 'Sadomasochism is power, not pain' (B. Ehrenreich et al., *Remaking love*, cit., p. 130).