

The “white hole” of gay studies in Italy

I have come here to give a personal account of what I have called in the title of my talk “the white hole” of gay studies in Italy. Black holes we know a lot about, they are strange and powerful attractors of energy, white holes we don’t even know if they are there, they are holes that can easily go unnoticed, they are elusive and hardly visible. I am using the metaphor of the white hole instead of that of the “closet” because I am not sure that the hard and fast dichotomy between visibility and invisibility, affirmation and repression is the one that best applies to the Italian situation. One reason for my saying so is that the violent dialectics of power that typically produces the awareness of the closet and that of its opposite, the public space of discourse, is typically muted in Italy, or has been so up until now and especially in all institutional cultural agencies, among which the University, of which I am about to talk briefly.

Gay studies do not exist as such in Italy. I teach English literature at a small and fairly new faculty of Letters in the provincial town of Vercelli (midway between Turin and Milan, in the north-west of Italy)¹ and I am therefore more informed about the situation in the disciplines related to the human and social sciences. But I think it is still possible to generalize and say that gay studies do not exist as such. Obviously in order to say this, we would have to try and define what qualifies for us as “gay and lesbian studies” (not necessarily an easy and uncontested definition) but I take it to mean a field of cultural studies where gays and lesbians speak as subjects on the subjects that have constituted them as gays and lesbians. Gay studies would represent a critical project of articulation where, by using some of the recognized instruments and methodologies within the several academic disciplines, gays and lesbians take in hand the representations that most of the time have confined them to being objects of study (or confined to silence altogether), and by taking them in hand reshape them, that is, recirculate them both in the teaching/learning context and in the appointed critical arenas.

This is what I would recognize today as being “gay/lesbian” studies. There may be different or better definitions, different emphases on some aspects rather than on others, e.g the stress on “the recovery from silence”, or the gay-affirmative and therefore political approach of such studies, or again, the special value for *gay and lesbian students* of such studies (the fact that the institution of gay/lesbian studies have to do with acknowledging not only the worthiness and indispensability of listening to what gay and lesbian teachers and intellectuals have to say, but also the crucial recognition of what gay and lesbian students may learn about themselves by listening to gay and lesbian teachers in the public space of the university).

I would like to sum up five main constraints or obstructions that have nipped in the bud the potential rise of gay studies in Italian universities. I am going to suggest only brief illustrations of each.

Firstly, the widespread culture of homosexual invisibility and its resistance to “uncloseted gayness”. This is an area where the more general status of relative invisibility in the society at large carries on and is in turn reinforced by the cogs of University teaching. I would like to stress two terms: “relative” invisibility, turning around the

¹ The “Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia” is part of the “Università del Piemonte Orientale”; just over 1,000 students are enrolled in its three degree courses (Philosophy, Letters, Foreign Languages). The degree course in Foreign Languages and Literatures is a hybrid mixture of practical-linguistic and literary-historical disciplines.

paradox, as I have put it, of the white hole, and “resistance”. By “relative” I mean to say that by and large homosexuality is present and evermore visibile (I am speaking of male gayness here) but it is not spoken of as such. There is a certain element of being visibly gay and yet passing without using identity names. Such “resistant” (or compliant) mode is shared not only by virulent homophobic discourse, it is also prevalent in many gays that resist the notion of gay culture. Whether or not this might be interpreted as “internalized homophobia”, I think we cannot help but start from this largely incomplete sense of gay specificity in Italy, shared by large sections of the population. After all, “gay studies” can only be imagined and constructed if there is a hypothesis of cultural specificity to investigate, even only in order to question or qualify it.

Secondly, the resistance and failure to theorize a politics of difference and its attendant practices. This is more specifically to do with the gay liberation movement in Italy, which after the first few years of radicalism, of political and theoretical reflexivity (in the late ‘70’s), has largely embraced over the decades the path of least resistance, on its way to cultural homologation in the face of entrenched values. Obviously, for as long as Italian gay activists are bent on getting equal rights, there can be no powerful sense of the usefulness of cultural projects that might take into account the multiple differences among homosexualities. Even the interest for a certain specificity of the gay experience and its historical and cultural codes will vanish before the paramount needs of legitimation. The “positive image” slogans that have been so enticing for the younger generation of gays (the budding generation of “out” gays whose number is slowly increasing) risk to run counter to a concurrent interest in cultural and historical variation. In this severely restricted context gay studies are virtually dead before getting a chance to be born: gay history, for example, is egregiously a black hole in Italy. By mentioning this second point I intend to suggest the uneasy relationship between political activism – especially an exclusively civil rights activism – and cultural activism, a marriage that has never really been consummated in Italy. Since gay studies can never be entirely detached from political activism, the position of gay and lesbian researchers in the University (supposing there were any) is strained indeed, as, on one hand, their legitimation is questioned by dominant hetero-universality while on the other immediately useful strategies appear to be called for by gay politics.

Thirdly, the compartmentalization of academic disciplines with hardly any attempt to acknowledge the importance, both didactic and scientific, of multidisciplinary approaches. This is a serious flaw of Italian academia in general, especially in the field of human and social sciences that would most benefit from a cross-fertilization that is happening elsewhere, especially, it seems, in English-speaking countries. This is terribly bad news for gay and lesbian studies as well, since in my opinion gay studies are, or should be, one of the best examples of multi-disciplinary terrain, since politics, representation, science and medicine, psychoanalysis, cinema and literature, law and theology all combine to speak the overdetermined figure of the “modern homosexual”. How could we even think of doing “gay studies” if we fail to allow the interconnectedness of discourses into our academic syllabuses? The specificity of gay studies does not mean autonomy and having a gay literature, a gay genetics, a gay law or a gay theology section or program does not constitute *per se* a field of gay studies. As gay and lesbian critics, teachers and cultural activists we are bound by (and bound to) all of these discourses, we have to shuttle and weave out of and into all of these. If this is the case, the recognition of a multi-disciplinary approach in the academic education of students and scholars would be crucial - a pre-condition that is unfortunately absent in Italian faculty departments.

Fourthly, the lack of an explicit demand for gay studies syllabuses on the part of gay and lesbian students themselves. This entails the question of the audience, or the destination of our gay and lesbian studies. Although gay studies have an important role to play in fighting heterosexual prejudice and therefore in enlightening all students, surely the pleasure and necessity of gay studies come from a much wider range of interactions, transferences and identifications. There is an element of “working against”, of opposing subtle and less subtle forms of homophobia and heteronormativity, but also an element of “working together” (gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers...) within the learning/teaching space, which is predicated on a certain provisional “sexual positioning” by students and teachers alike; finally, an element of “working with”, given by the empowering knowledge that there *are* gay and lesbian students for whom and with whom one is opening up a public space in Academia that was not there before. As a gay University teacher who has had no openly gay University teachers to learn from, there is an inescapable element of projection, whereby I fulfil my wish as a former student to also have had gay teachers to learn from. This means that gay studies need the empowerment coming from gay and lesbian young people, which in turn means that the former contribute to the upbringing of gay and lesbian subjects while at the same time taking life from them. What happens to gay studies when they are actually not demanded by gay and lesbian students because there are no gay and lesbian students that are willing to identify (even provisionally) as such? In Italy there are virtually no gay and lesbian student organizations, so that in Vercelli I sometimes feel that bringing gay perspectives to my teaching lacks the special feedback, or shall we say the pleasures of mutual identification, that can only come from even few openly gay and lesbian students willing to engage openly in gay and lesbian discourse, who apart from accepting their own sexuality also accept that gay and lesbian social and cultural figurations are inescapably part of their own subjective sexual experiences².

Finally, the political question of how the academic staff is recruited. This has virtually barred in the past any access to gays and lesbians openly engaged in gay research (though not to openly gay teachers). Visibly gay teachers are obviously there, not many of them maybe, but still there, only they are not even remotely interested in gay studies, in that they tend to see it as parochially “gay-affirmative”, a partiality that sounds alien to the presumed disinterestedness of “culture” and to its apparent universality. But the fact that gay studies lack gay scholars is not just a result of the complicity of those gay academics who work with “liberal-humanist” definitions of culture and are bound by traditional loyalties to their disciplines. It is also specifically the product of a system which in practice has stopped gay scholars (scholars with a commitment to gay studies) from ever getting in. It is no mere chance that most gay research (what little is done) is done outside the Universities by people who are not paid to do so and therefore are deprived of funds, are marginalized and easily end up with a notion of gay studies as the private preserve of the erudite or as the compulsive search for biographical hints of homosexuality across the ages. Italian Universities have proved disastrous for the establishment of gay and lesbian research: the system has promoted only those gay academics who were willing to waive the hypothetical notion of gay and lesbian studies and has consequently bred in those who have been kept out a justifiable resentment and suspicion against all forms of intellectual discourse coming from the “elite intellectuals”.

² I have found out that being an “out” gay teacher may at times even be detrimental in connecting with gay or lesbian students, if they are themselves closeted. A closeted gay or lesbian student will tend not to come to seminars with gay/lesbian content, as they are afraid of being outed in the process.

The second part of my talk will offer a survey of what is being done in gay studies in the Italian universities, often without any mutual knowledge and hardly any collaboration at all.

First of all, it should be made clear that there are no courses or programs of gay studies; what has been done is fragmentary, only dependent on the curiosity and personal initiative of the teachers, without any form of networking and consequently without establishing any continuity or funding. No wonder, since even programs of gender studies and women's studies are only slightly better off in Italy.

There have been seminars here and there, sometimes in conjunction with local gay associations, like the series of seminars that took place last year in Padua at the Faculty of Psychology³. The fields where most dissertations are given on topics related to homosexuality are psychology and sociology, with an emphasis on quantitative analyses and fieldwork questionnaires. The intellectual resources of these departments have been used more than once by local councils promoting sociological research projects on gay and lesbian lifestyles, on the social perception of homosexuality and so on. In these cases, though, there is no fallout on teaching, in that those psychologists or sociologists, many of them with no specific interest in gay and lesbian studies, are only drafted in as technical experts. There is now in Turin a project initiated by local GLT associations, calling for a sociological research project on gay/lesbian lifestyles and discrimination, where the Local Council is the political sponsor engaging the Department of Sociology of the University of Turin with the active participation and collaboration of GLT groups. Another such project involving the University is nearing completion in Bologna⁴.

I have mentioned these projects because they are still the most common examples of an approach towards gays as "objects of study", therefore most definitely *not* "gay studies"; on the other hand, gay subjects (associations) are often called in to help since it is their "insider knowledge" that is useful in order to ground the research and approach the informants.

An example of mixed approach between gay/lesbian associations and the University sees the former as the active organizers of cultural events and public debates, with the University as an external supportive agency. This is the experience of the LUO, the Free Homosexual University in Bologna, which has established some connections with the University of Bologna. It started in 1995 as a voluntary effort of the "Centro di Documentazione del Cassero" in Bologna (the Cultural Centre and Archive of the Gay and Lesbian Association "Arcigay")⁵. Its main goal was to promote discussion on gay/lesbian issues and cultural identities, open to gays and non-gays. It has organized a series of seminars twice a year and has increasingly involved the University of Bologna, and a number of University teachers have been asked to talk. Most of the speakers come from outside the University, though, which is understandable since Italian universities have been hostile or at best indifferent to the notion of gay/lesbian cultural specificity. The LUO has shown some openings for a mutual collaboration between gay and lesbian associations and the University. In particular, the University of Bologna currently sponsors the LUO programs, but does not provide any kind of funding or other practical support. In one case, a seminar on AIDS representation in the

³ In 1998, with the support of Arcilesbica (the leading national lesbian organization).

⁴ The research project on homosexuality from a sociological/psychological point of view has been carried out with the supervision of Marzio Barbagli.

⁵ Arcigay "Il Cassero", piazza di Porta Saragozza 2, I-40123 Bologna. The programs of LUO can be viewed at: www.gay.it/cassero/luo

mass media has been integrated as part of a University course (Mass Media course, held by Prof. Roberto Grandi).

One possible area of development of gay/lesbian studies is the attempt to launch programs of gender studies in the universities. There is one “dottorato” of Gender History (dottorato is the Italian correspondent of a Master or Ph.D) based at the University of Naples⁶. Another program of Gender Studies at Ph.D level is being proposed in Rome at the Faculty of Letters. Recently a network of young researchers and graduates has been set up nationally, “Rete 30-something” (connected with the European “Next Generation”), with the sponsorship of the Ministry for Equal Opportunities. It is attempting to organize seminars and circulate information (something which is very rare in Italian universities) on conferences and events of interest for women’s and gender studies. Unfortunately the signs are that gender is mainly seen as another word for “female gender”, and hardly any account is being taken of the implications, at least, between gender and sexuality. Gay and lesbian young researchers are the ones who could forcefully call for an integrated approach to gender studies, so as to connect gender and sexuality (among other axes of intersection). In its first cycle the doctorate program in Naples did not include one single research project on gender and sexuality. This is not surprising, since gays and lesbians are not visibly working in those areas and there is too scant awareness of the necessary implication of gender and other categories, and, especially, of the mutual implication in the modern definitions of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality”. In February 1999 the doctorate of Naples organized a conference on “The construction of modern masculinity”, featuring John Tosh from the North London University. It marginally dealt with male homosexuality. As far as I know no graduate has so far been awarded a grant to carry out specifically gay/lesbian research. It must be borne in mind that competition to get the few grants available is fierce; that there is a complex selection procedure through written examinations; and that, as nearly always happens in Italian universities, candidates are chosen in order to reflect the power-balance among the different professors who oversee the proceedings and set up the selection committees. In the midst of these manoeuvres and political compromises it is to be expected that any timid sign of burgeoning gay/lesbian studies should be quashed, or less dramatically, just be neglected or downplayed.

I have attended a local conference of “Rete 30-something” in Turin. They are mainly young female graduates or Ph.D students, with the support of some University professors. As their name implies, there is a hint of generation-struggle and some uneasy relationship with older feminists. It is remarkable that a new generation of students increasingly interested in gender matters (often after study-periods abroad) should seek political support from the Ministry of Equal Opportunities (the former Minister Laura Balbo was a feminist and gay-friendly) in the attempt to circumvent the entrenched stronghold of tenure professors, who are mainly seen as staunch defenders of privilege (generally speaking, they are so indeed). It is hard, nonetheless, to imagine a chance of institutional acknowledgment. And if this is the state of things now for gender studies (whose denomination sounds less confrontational), you can understand how bringing gay/lesbian studies into the Universities looks a definite impossibility. I personally would welcome an integration of gay/lesbian studies within a gender studies approach, but this will be feasible once “gender” is seen as something other than “women’s studies”, offering a chance for more subjects to work together on the complex and hybrid mesh of identities⁷. The Turin conference showed how far we are

⁶ Dottorato di Storia dei Generi, supervised by dott. Angiolina Arru.

⁷ I have argued for this approach in a recent article published by the sociological review *Inchiesta*: “Soggetto e oggetto di genere”, *Inchiesta* XXIX, n.125 (July-September 1999), pp.82-85.

to go yet. There was also a disturbing tendency to see the field of gender studies as though it were made up of the separate fields of “women’s studies” and “men’s studies”, magically coming together under the banner of “gender”.

It is no coincidence that Liana Borghi and myself teach, respectively, American and English Literature. We have been exposed to gay and lesbian studies, and to queer theory, as Anglophone scholars with inevitable connections with the Anglo-American gay and lesbian culture. Therefore the most important openings for explicitly gay/lesbian/queer studies have been restricted to the Departments of Foreign Languages, of English and American Literature: e.g. a few seminars that I have held in Vercelli on gender and sexuality (see below); Liana Borghi's work at the University of Florence; Fabio Cleto, a Ph.D graduate who is an expert on camp and has done some important pioneer seminars and course modules on Oscar Wilde and the discursive origins of camp and on "Sexual Anarchy" in fin-de-siècle Victorian England, both at the University of Bergamo and more recently in Genova.

There is a limit inherent in this Anglophone-centred interest in gay/lesbian/queer issues. I sometimes think that maybe it has been possible to sneak in gay/lesbian themes only insofar as they were seen as marginal contributions to our own fields. Above all, it is possible and legitimate to introduce queer and gender matters because in our Departments of English and American Literature we are exposed to English-speaking culture and its overwhelming academic output. In a way if we end up talking about these controversial matters, it could be interpreted as a kind of scientific duty that we have to report controversies raging elsewhere. The challenge is to make these issues relevant to other Departments in the Italian universities. Given the entrenched traditionalism of Italian Studies it is far from an easy task.

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