

July 4, 1980
The First Trans Protest in Italy
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TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly * Volume 8, Number 2 * May 2021

Inaugurated in 1932 by the city administration, the Lido urban pool promised the Milanese “seaside pleasures” easily accessible from Piazzale Lotto, in the northwestern area of the metropolis. According to meteorological archival data, on July 4, 1980, the temperature in Milan rose to nearly twenty-nine degrees Celsius (NCEI 2020). In that heat, for the local Milanese, going to the Lido pool may have seemed like a brilliant idea. On this auspicious afternoon, about fifteen women entered the structure en masse. (You can imagine the scene of this public swimming pool, populated mainly by kids and families.) They began to attract attention for being a big group who stuck together. Then they removed the tops of their bathing costumes, a radical action that received a prickly, panicky response from pool officials: they ordered the women to cover up because topless bathing by women was forbidden. Nonchalantly, the group of women replied, we are allowed to wear just our bikini bottoms because according to our identity documents we are considered men. Their action consisted of a visual display of their bodies and a banner with the words, “We are transsexuals, enough with discrimination.” This moment was historically significant, as it formed the first protest in Italy by an organized group of trans people. According to the majority of secondary sources recounting it, the Lido protest occurred in 1979. But my research shows that the *Corriere della Sera* local edition reports the news in 1980, the day after the fact, with an article entitled, “A Transsexual Show at the Swimming Pool with a Police Appearance” (“Uno show transessuale in piscina con fuori programma della polizia”). Unfortunately, the article does not include any picture of the event, and locally, there are no accessible trans archives where I could look for further sources. It is a fragile memory, that of trans history. Even more so in Italy because, despite its historically rich and diverse sexual culture, only a few scholarly historical works detailing protests like these and important public figures are available (Schettini 2011), despite the exemplary efforts of a few historians, most notably Stefania Voli (2013, 2016), to break new ground in the scientific inquiry of trans history. Institutional recognition of the study of sexual cultures and gender, no matter from which disciplinary angle, has been superficial. In universities, no trans studies professors hold departmental chair positions, nor are there tenure lines dedicated to the field, resulting in a complete invisibility of trans studies within the Italian curriculum, at undergraduate and graduate levels alike. As a result, no gender, queer, or trans scholars can build up an autonomous field in the academic industry. Almost ignored by academic historiography, sometimes obscured by the more famous homosexual movement, the history of Italian transsexual movements has yet to be extensively and systematically investigated (Voli 2013). In terms of sources, despite the publication of some autobiographical narratives of trans-identified authors (Cecconi 1976; Bonanno 1981; Marcasciano 2002, 2008, 2018; Romano 2009), trans history has been documented solely in the judicial and medical archives or by tabloids. The courageous protagonists at that time, such as the trans women at the Lido, chose visibility as an immediate tool for political mobilization, but the historical account of their disrobing action has remained invisible in the discourse and economy of knowledge of LGB social movements. Theirs is an especially fragile memory—easily lost to the undocumented moment of action and distorted by hearsay. Nevertheless, the provocative inventiveness of that event triggered a shortcircuit between competing social norms: Who counts as a woman? What counts as obscene? From regulating bodies in space, to exhibiting them or covering some parts described as male or female, that action fully called into question the way in which Italian law and culture make bodily differences matter and move to sanction their boundaries.

The protagonists of the protest stood their ground under pressure from the police, the Lido workers, and visitors for about an hour, then they all ended up at the police station, charged with the general crime of “offense to public decency.” At the time, such confrontations with repressive police were part of everyday life for many trans women. It was the era of an urgent battle to achieve legislation that would allow access to treatment and legal gender recognition, which was fueled by the very real need to defend oneself from public, domestic, and systemic violence. In particular, institutional violence and police brutality were issues that some form of legal recognition could mitigate. In fact, in Italy, originally, the trans people who animated the movement were all women, and most of them practiced sex work, more often than not. Fines, warnings, special surveillance, internment, passport and driving license seizure, together with detentions and imprisonments, were among the cruel administrative policing instruments used to govern the presence of trans women in public space. The so-called legal infringement most often contested was that of “masking” (Article 85 of the Criminal Code): wearing gendered clothing was not a crime in itself, but disguising your appearance or hiding yourself from recognition was. Since trans women were not seen as women by the police, their wearing of women’s clothing was deemed a fraudulent, illegal disguise. When caught more than once by police, one could become designated a “habitual offender” (Article 1 of the Criminal Code). In these circumstances of basically being legally regulated out of existence, it was difficult to find a job other than sex work, problematic to rent an apartment, and impossible to access gender affirmation treatments through the public health service. The self-determination of trans women was accomplished by estrogen– progestogen tablets and with antiandrogens, bought at the pharmacy when a prescription was not needed, or imported from France, with uncertain knowledge about their legality and their potential risks. Some, if they could afford the huge sum of money required, sought surgery in Casablanca, Belgium, London, or New York. Yet, thereafter, Italian trans citizens had no specific procedure to follow to obtain the rectification of identity documents. Article 454 of the Civil Code, in fact, provided for the correction of civil status documents only in the case of “omissions, errors, losses,” with the result that very few found a pathway to safely remain stealth. However, in those early eighties when the Lido protest took place, bodies, gender, and sexuality had long been battlefields. As other groups fought for social equality, the feminist and homosexual movements created the conditions for making the personal political and sexual citizenship a field of struggle. Making one’s gender and sexual difference visible was not just an individual risk anymore; it could also be a shared desire. In this regard, the Italian sexual liberation movement also embedded the etiological myth of the LGBT global movement, which began in 1969 in New York with the revolt against police repression at the Stonewall Inn. In 1972, just three years after Stonewall, Fuori! (Italian revolutionary homosexual united front) was launched as the first large-scale Italian gay association, breaking out with an organized protest against the Italian Congress of Sexology in Sanremo, which gained considerable media coverage. The Radical Party¹, already accomplices of Fuori!, provided political backing for the mobilization of trans women in 1980, a supportive gesture that attracted the attention of all political forces. At this point, organized as the Italian Transsexual Movement (MIT), politicized transsexuals called for a demonstration in front of the Palazzo Montecitorio (seat of the Chamber of Deputies in Rome), in a manner reported to have threatened the Christian Democracy politicians with a repeat of the disrobing “show” of the Lido pool in order to highlight the injustice of the legal system for trans people. The MIT also brought their own testimony of discrimination to the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Franco De Cataldo, Radical Party member of parliament, introduced the law proposition for legal gender recognition that became approved on April 14, 1982. This was just in time, as the institutionalization of the homosexual movement on one hand, and the impact of heroin and the arrival of HIV on the other, were going to change forever the focus of sexual politics and the styles of its effective mobilization. The legal gender recognition law of 1982, known as “164,”

¹ The Radical Party was founded in 1955 on a libertarian, anticlerical, antiprohibitionist, environmental platform. It gained traction with the campaigns on divorce and abortion in the 1970s. In the 1979 general election, the party won 3.5 percent of the vote and elected eighteen deputies and two senators, its best result ever.

and formally titled “Rules Relating to the Rectification of Sex Attribution,” remains in force. It is composed of only seven articles, skimpy enough to allow conflicting interpretations in doctrine and in jurisprudence (only in 2015 did the Supreme Court of Cassation and the Constitutional Court lift the sterilization requirement). Overall, the introduction of that law made it possible to implement protocols to access gender affirming treatments, in different ways and times in the various territories, and with nonuniform reimbursement regimes. In Italy, access to transition related care is subject to a psychiatric diagnosis and technical expertise. Paradoxically justified as protection, medical gatekeeping is today the most serious risk to the health of trans people, who sometimes prefer not to enter a formal path for transition, or who become subject to it only to face insurmountable obstacles, blackmail, and delays, with all the consequences in terms of well-being and psychological health that this entails. In this sense, transitioning still remains a process that is strongly regulated by a welding of the legal rule and medical practice that together leaves little room for self-determination, the right to health, and protection from discrimination. Yet Law 164 of 1982 has been hailed as the first legislative achievement of the LGBTmovement; it was deemed progressive and advanced at the time, even in comparison with other European states. Law 164 provides trans women a form of defense from institutional and police violence, but it does not protect any trans person from the violence of the gender binary, of “non-consensual gendering” (Stryker 1994: 250). The next milestone in equality legislation would happen more than thirty years later, when on June 5, 2016, the recognition of same-sex civil unions passed into law. The debate around the law, crucially flawed because of its denial of parenthood recognition and access to reproductive rights, reinforced the homonationalist rhetoric of “civilization.” Crucially, it was not simply the nation that was the main agent of recognition, but the European Union. The same Europe that demanded austerity from South European nation-states (Acquistapace et al. 2016)—austerity measures that impacted the queer population disproportionately in negative terms—now demanded the adjustment of sexual citizenship standards for those “less civilized” Southern others (De Vivo and Dufour 2012). Trans activism today acts at a transnational level to counter stigma, violence, and social exclusion. However, the path to full liberation is still a long way away, especially when transphobia intersects with racism, classism, and sexism, and any dimensions in which trans persons themselves are often disadvantaged. And this is especially true in a country like Italy, the number one in Europe for the (reported) murder of trans people (Transgender Europe 2020). In the face of these horrific statistics, let us not forget that back in 1980, it was the most vulnerable of trans people, that is, trans women, who were less able to negotiate their visibility, who first organized themselves, even if they were few. And yet by doing so, those fifteen women who brazenly went topless at the Lido have made transitioning possible for so many others, even for more privileged people. We owe it to them to continue in the struggle. Alongside LGBT mainstream homonormativity, the transfeminist movement in Italy has recently gained considerable traction (Arfini 2020). Contemporary Italian transfeminism does not stop at the inclusion of certain identities in a given community—namely, trans women into feminism. It is a combined struggle for autonomy and self-determination in terms of one’s own body and well-being, which informs both feminist and trans politics (to a higher extent than LGB advocacy, which tends to focus on sexual identities). Italian forms of transfeminism also champion a queer materialist politics, the critique of gendered labor and of the labor of gender, and a vision of gender-based violence that accounts for both the empirical violence of men against women as well as for the systemic violence of the gender binary itself (Solá and Urko 2013; Non Una Di Meno 2017). If “gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity” (Stryker 1994: 250), then trans experiences resist this violence that is perpetrated to sustain compulsory heterosexuality. The binary norm of nonconsensual compulsory gender attribution thus shares the same matrix of patriarchal violence against women. Thanks to these genealogies of resistance to binary gender norms, to which the pool protest testifies, today we have many recognizable ways to be trans. Starting from the nineties, the transition to masculinity gains more social and even media visibility, and over the past few years we are beginning to talk about nonbinary identities and gender variance in children (Graglia 2020).

This expansion of knowledge about trans lives makes it even more urgent to continue practicing collective forms of protest politics to make the trans experience more accessible and more livable. This vignette about the pool protest, aside from setting the date of its occurrence straight, is an attempt to provide an impressionistic reflection on the changing modus of trans experience from the location of South Europe, and an invitation to take such location seriously. Italy is historically a space of contacts and frontiers, of mobility and migration (Polizzi 2020), and of entangled temporalities of emancipation, as in the case of the once cutting-edge Law 164. Now that the law needs to be reformed, can plural forms of trans liberation be pursued not simply according to a northern understanding of the world, but to a “meridian perspective” (Cassano 1996)? Such a perspective rests on the “conviction that the South is much more than a simple not-yet-North, that it represents an autonomous and different point of view” (Cassano 2012: xxvii). For example, in the context of the co-optation of LGBT subjectivities in a neoliberal era of homonormativity, queer liberation is increasingly understood as dependent on inclusion in the labor market and the acquisition of purchasing power (Duggan 2003). However, addressing the differential mode of LGBT inclusion from a Southern perspective can, for example, point out the novel and apparently contradictory alliance between neo-fundamentalism and neoliberalism (Zappino 2016). Similarly, Italian and Spanish transfeminist movements did not stop at the inclusion of trans women into the “proper” subjecthood of feminism but have also demonstrated the capacity to provide a structural analysis of gender violence that allows for a multidimensional, intersectional mobilization of affected groups. The above-mentioned lack of institutionalization of gender, queer, and trans studies can certainly be a barrier to the circulation of ideas and theories emerging from Southern experiences. However, grassroots networks can invent alternative and creative modes of collaboration and translation. They can also provide a critique of the extractive mechanism that appropriates knowledge generated by grassroots movements, an extraction that produces value for the academic industry with little to no redistribution to knowledge producers (or to precarious queer researchers). In this sense, the fundamental prerequisite of this decolonial project is for the South to be not an object of but a subject of knowledge (Connell 2007), for the production of an epistemology of the South (Santos 2014) that dispels the dichotomy between a perverse sexual past and a civilized modern sexual citizenship, and between a liberated North and a backward South.

Acknowledgment

A shorter version of this piece has appeared in Italian in the magazine *Il Mulino*, for the “*Calendario Civile*” (“*Civic Calendar*”) column. I thank Rossella Ghigi for inviting me to write about this episode in the first place and Goffredo Polizzi for helping me to explore Southern epistemologies.

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