

**The 'post' in the past
Queer radicalism - in the spirit of Stonewall**

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Abstract

According to a famous image of Walter Benjamin, the Angel of History is propelled into the future by a violent storm blowing from paradise, but keeps his face turned toward the wreckages of the past. In times of crisis looking forwards seems to be compulsory: we are asked to sacrifice our present for the future, and at the same time the future is paradoxically conceived as but a repetition of the present. If on the other hand we try to be maverick or angelical enough to look backwards, we may discover that the 'post' of our democratic politics may be already in our past. This pages will focus on gay liberation movements of the Seventies in order to investigate how their radicalism represents an alternative to the progressivism of present movements for the civil rights of gay, lesbian and trans people.

Keywords: Queer Theories, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Guy Hocquenghem, Lee Edelman.

1. Angelus queer

Curly hair resembling parchment rolls, big eyes wide open, a disproportionate head. The *Angelus Novus* drawn by Paul Klee is no doubt a queer figure. Which becomes, if possible, queerer in the posture which Walter Benjamin (1968) attributes to him. The imagination of the Jewish philosopher adds in fact some meaningful details to the picture: for him it represents the Angel of History who has wings like a bird but moves like a shrimp, propelled backwards by a force which he cannot control. A violent wind blowing from paradise, «the storm that we call progress», has caught his wings and pushes him to the future. But to the future he turns his back, his gaze fixed on the past. He «would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed». But his resistance is in vain: the Angel is relentlessly dragged away by the progress. According to Benjamin, «where we perceive a chain of events, [the Angel] sees a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet»¹. This is therefore what his big eyes are open on.

Actually, if we observe Klee's painting, the Angel stares at us: *we* are the remains he uselessly tries to recompose, *we* are the dead he would like to awaken. He has mercy upon us, but we neglect his pity and we gladly walk past him. Especially in times of crisis, looking forwards seems to be compulsory: we are asked to sacrifice our present to the future, which is paradoxically conceived as but a repetition of the present. If on the other hand we are maverick or angelical enough to look backwards, if we gaze upon all those small histories that the big official History with a capital H generally hides among the wreckages, we may find examples of a different attitude towards time: in our *past* we may discover that we do not necessarily need a *post* to give sense to our present. This pages will focus, in particular, on gay liberation movements of the

¹ «A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress» (Benjamin 1968, 259-60).

Seventies in order to investigate how their radicalism represents an alternative to the progressivism of current movements for the civil rights of lesbian and gay people².

2. Investing in the storm

In the first century, Seneca (1965, I, 2, my translation) already warned his friend Lucilius against human obsession with the future: «while we wait for life ô he observed ô life passes»³. After two thousand years, the obsession is still here, but in a globalized world governed by economy, «the storm that we call progress» has taken a particular shape. Even celebrated economists such as Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi have denounced how we are accustomed to measuring public happiness by the yardstick of economic productivity, understood as an infinite rise in time. In Europe, for instance, ô with a lexical torsion that reminds the Newspeak of Orwell's Big Brother ô the *stability* pact has imposed sacrifices on the citizens of member States with the promise of future *growth*. But at the moment the never-ending development that the Union should guarantee has been bogged down, in what several analysts understand as the worst economic phase of global capitalism, whose end is often announced and then deferred again.

Even in this situation, we turn out not to be able to stand in the present, or to inhabit the end times⁴: the rhetoric used, by both those who should govern this so called «crisis» and those who protest their decisions, are in fact inflected in the future tense. In the name of the future a present of austerity is imposed on new generations; and most of all, new generations bemoan the impossibility of planning their future and the future of further generations⁵. In other words, contemporary political conflicts seem not to mind

² My article represents a development of the reflection on the temporality of queer politics which I have begun exactly on this journal (Bernini 2013a, 2013b, 2014), and is mostly conceived as a contribution to the theoretical debate of LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual) activists and scholars. It has to be understood as a philosophical text on political imaginary, and it does not aspire to be exhaustive in the fields of sociology or history of social movements.

³ See also Seneca 1965, IV, 5: «Most men waver in wretchedness between the fear of death and the torments of life; they do not have the courage to live, and they do not know how to die» (my translation).

⁴ There are, of course, some exceptions, like fiffek 2011.

⁵ Even pope Bergoglio, interviewed by the Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari (2013, 1) declared: «The heaviest evils which afflict the world in the last years are the unemployment of young people and the

Seneca's rebuke but rather confirm Schopenhauer's pessimism. Allied with Economics, Nature keeps on making use of us: for the sake of the development of human life, the individuals feel the duty not only to survive but to project their life in the future of the human species. And when they do not succeed, a frantic sense of failure catches up with them, such a heavy feeling of depression that the chronicle of the crisis is sprinkled with suicides⁶.

Another philosopher, closer to us in time, has clearly explained which relationship neoliberal politics maintain with the government on human life, or biopolitics. In one of his courses at the *Collège de France*, Michel Foucault (2004a) pointed out that classical economics understood the human being as an *homo oeconomicus* who trades in commodities, while neoliberalism understands human beings as «entrepreneur of themselves» who invest their whole life in the market — conceived as a financial market. Already in the seventies, two Nobel prize winners in Economic Sciences such as Theodore W. Schultz (1971) and Gary Becker (1976) interpreted even the phenomenon of social reproduction in terms of «human capital». According to them, the first patrimony of the individuals is their genetic makeup, to which a series of educational investments are added, taken out on their behalf by their family and community. For example, the cultural level of the parents, their expertise in care, their openness to migrate in order to obtain better conditions for their family; or the public offer of education, the competence of teachers and professors, and so on. Like more than anyone else the queer theorist Lee Edelman has pointed out, some years before the crises blew up, in his disquieting essay *No Future* (2004)⁷, in neoliberal biopolitical

solitude of old people. Old people need cares and company, young people need work and hope, but they have neither the first nor the second and, what is worst, they do not look for them anymore. They have been pressed on the present» (my translation).

⁶ Two counter-current voices on this topic are the queer scholars Judith «Jack» Halberstam and Ann Cvetkovitch. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) Halberstam explores the feelings of failure of queer life in order not to claim for a future «redemption» in a better society to come — this is in case Judith Butler's intention in *Antigone's Claim* (2000) and *Prearious Life* (2004) —, but to show the possibility of existences which here and now back out of the imperative of success that characterizes contemporary societies. In *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012, 13), Cvetkovich understands depression as a biopolitical device which punishes who can not or does not want to contribute to the progress of humanity.

⁷ «Choose life, for life and the baby and meaning hang together in the balance, confronting the lethal counterweight of narcissism, AIDS, and death, all of which spring from commitment to the meaningless eruption of *jouissance* associated with the «circuit parties» that gesture towards the circuit of the drive. This fascism of the baby's face, which encourages parents, whether gay or straight, to join in a rousing chorus of «Tomorrow Belongs to Me», suggests that if we can bring up a child without constantly bringing

imagination, the rhetoric of «the Child» has become a powerful normative device, which disciplines each human being to find the sense of their existence in the contribution they may give investing in the reproductive future of humanity. It is in fact, exactly for the sake of young people and for our children, that nowadays we call «stability» what we understand as a necessary progress. For their sake, GDP has to grow and the spread has to drop. For their sake, technology has to become more and more sophisticated, means of transport have to become faster and faster and earth resources have to be more and more intensively exploited – or on the contrary for their sake, we have to learn to respect and to take care of the planet, to live slowly, and to prefer a degrowth to development. And all this attention is not naturally for free: a heavy sense of responsibility lays even on the shoulders of children themselves. Children have, in fact, the moral duty to make the most of the inheritance they have received and of the investments which have been made on their behalf – and above all they have the moral duty, when their turn comes, to invest in future generations.

The sacrosanct claims of mainstream homosexual movements – the right to marriage, adoption and access to assisted reproductive technologies – are therefore perfectly integrated in this interpretive framework. In a neoliberal State, the fulfilment of juridical equality for lesbian and gay citizens cannot but consist in the full recognition of their right and duty to take part in social reproduction and thus contribute to the future of the human species as heterosexual citizens already do. This is one of the reasons why, in the furious ideological struggles undertaken about the «equality» of homosexual parenthood, the focus is not so much on the right of lesbians and gays to become mothers and fathers and gain access to assisted reproductive technologies, as on the right of their potential babies to-be-born to become good reproductive investments and to play a part in their turn in the beaming future of humanity: on 11th April 2014, for instance, Pope Bergoglio confirmed the foucauldian thesis (Foucault 2004b) of the historical relationship which brings together neoliberal biopolitics and catholic pastoral

it up – as if the future secured by the Child, the one true access to social security, could only be claimed for the other's sake, and never for one's own – then that future can only belong to those who purport to feel for the other (with all the appropriative implications that such a «feeling for» suggests). It can only belong to those who accede to the fantasy of a compassion by which they shelter the infant future from *sinthomosexuals*, who offer it none, seeming, instead, to literalize one of Blake's queerest Proverbs of Hell: «Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse enacted desires» (Edelman 2004, 75).

power and claimed that *children* have the right to grow in a suitable milieu for their development and maturation, that is in relation to the masculinity of a father and the femininity of a mother⁸. We have had clear examples of these ideological struggles in France, where a wide conservative and reactionary movement called *Manif pour tous*⁹ has grown as a reaction to the approval of the bill of the *Mariage pour tous*¹⁰, the law on lesbian and gay marriage approved in 2013. The movement soon increased on an European scale, and has reached even Italy — where actually reactionary people for the moment have precious few reasons to protest. In fact, compared to other democratic European and non-European countries, regarding lesbian and gay rights, Italy appears to have a heavy delay due to the influence of the Catholic Church on the parliamentary debate¹¹: as is well known, the country lacks both any form of recognition for homosexual couples and any anti-discriminatory law for sexual minorities¹². This situation leads lesbian and gay people to a particular hold-on attitude, that is once again an attitude that projects them forwards in time. «The storm that we call progress» still seems far away from Italy: Italian gay and lesbian people long for a future that elsewhere is already present and for them seems impossible to reach. For this reason, it is easy for them to be taken by a sort of political dejection. But how would their mood vary if they tried to turn their look backwards, rather than forwards — like the queer angel, painted by Klee and celebrated by Benjamin, suggests to do?

3. Wreckages

⁸ The occasion was given by the visit in the Vatican of the nongovernmental organization The International Catholic Child Bureau.

⁹ Demonstration for everyone.

¹⁰ Marriage for everyone.

¹¹ Of course it is necessary to distinguish the parliamentary debate from public opinion, the political arena from societal representations: Italian society often turns out to be much more secular and friendly with sexual differences (and at the same time much more intolerant) than Italian laws are. But this article does not aim to give an exhaustive analysis of Italian society, rather to contribute to Italian philosophical-political debate (see also footnote 2, *supra*).

¹² In 2005 Italy has been rebuked by European institutions (infringement procedure nr. 2005/2358) for not having adequately included anti-discrimination measures concerning sexual orientation into its employment legislation (Directive 2000/78); and in 2007 the Country received a letter of injunction from the European Commission. According to a recent report by Amnesty International (2014), Italy ranks second in Europe (after Turkey) for number of transsexual/transgender people murdered during the past three years.

Among the wreckages, for instance, they may discover that in the United States some small groups of gay and lesbian activists already existed¹³ in the fifties, which promoted a reputable vision of homosexuality and claimed its integration in heterosexual liberal society. But on the night between 27th and 28th June 1969, the starting event of LGBT liberation movements was not due to gays in suits and lesbians in skirts. That night the patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a bar in the Greenwich Village neighbourhood of New York City, revolted against the umpteenth police raid: they were transvestites and drag queens in brazen dresses, short-haired butch dykes with leather jackets, homeless sissies in hot pants, half-undressed gay hustlers and their tricks. At first it was a trans woman called Sylvia Rivera (1951-2002) who threw an empty gin bottle at a cop – the legend says she threw a high heel shoe –, then the riot kicked off and went on for two nights. The Beat poet Allen Ginsberg went to visit the bar the day after and commented «The guys there were so beautiful – they've lost that wounded look that fags all had ten years ago» (Truscott 1969, 18; Teal 1971, 7).

This is the event that every year all over the world the LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual) community celebrates in the Pride Parades; not everyone remembers it, but, as a matter of fact, the first homosexual liberation movements preserved the irreverent spirit of that outburst of dignity for a long time. Their names did not call for liberal democracy but for liberation and revolution: to give a few examples, the US movement was called *GLF*, *Gay Liberation Front* (after the name of the Algerian Liberation Front), the French one *FHAR*, *Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire*¹⁴, the Italian one *FUORI!*, *Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano*¹⁵. It is important, however, to be careful not to be misled by the words which compose these acronyms. The three groups were in fact deeply anti-capitalist, and nevertheless the temporality of their struggles was not at all the temporality of Marxist politics: in the texts of the young intellectuals who took part in these movements, preceded by the adjective «sexual» the noun «revolution»

¹³ In 1951 in Los Angeles the Mattachine Society was founded, and in 1955 in San Francisco the group of the Daughters of Bilitis. The first was a gay organization, the second a lesbian one: both promoted visibility and emancipation of homosexual people in the form of assimilation (Adam 1987; Engel 2011).

¹⁴ Homosexual Front of Revolutionary Action.

¹⁵ Italian Unitary Revolutionary Front: in Italian the acronym «FUORI» means «OUT»

acquired a totally different meaning, that was much closer to the Stonewall unexpected uprising than to the Bolshevik planned conquest of power. The temporality of their revolution was then the temporality of the event which burst into the present, and not of a project which plans the future.

It is true that in 1977 Italy the twenty five year-old Mario Mieli (1952-1983) published a book entitled *Elementi di Critica Omosessuale* which was deeply inspired by Marxism; but it dealt with Marxism in the *Freudomarxist* version of Herbert Marcuse (1955): Mieli was well aware that his idea of liberation of human polymorphous perverse desire, that he called «original transsexuality», would unlikely cope with the machist discipline that Marxist parties and movements imposed on their members while waiting for the «sun of the communist future» to rise¹⁶. One of the texts which most influenced Mieli was in fact *Le Désir homosexuel*, issued in France five years before. The author was another twenty-five year-old theorist, Guy Hocquenghem (1946-1988)¹⁷, one of the founders of the FHAR, who did not follow Herbert Marcuse's Freudomarxism but Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's schizo-analysis (1972), and explicitly affirmed the incompatibility of homosexual desire, which he provocatively called «anal desire», with every political project, even revolutionary¹⁸. In the *Three Essays in the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud had stated that in the psychic development of children the anal stage precedes the formation of the civilised individual who is able to distinguish public and private, signifier and meaning, means and end — all of this, according to the father of psychoanalysis, depends on the control of the sphincter! Hocquenghem recalled and overturned this thesis in order to give value to the anus as

¹⁶ In his autobiographic novel *Il risveglio dei Faraoni (The Awakening of the Pharaohs)*, with these words Mieli (1994, 219) narrates how *Elementi di critica omosessuale* was received: «Some did not like that I announced the gay communism. A copy editor of the publishing house told me that, ok, he agreed with my thesis, but he found counter-productive that I addressed only communists and not, for instance, radicals. [í] Had he not understood that when I spoke of communism I referred to the realm of Freedom, and certainly not to the so-called real socialism or to the political program of the Italian Communist Party? On the contrary, I especially had it with the Italian Communist Party [í] because that party kept proletarians under restraint instead of driving them to refuse that kind of work which was ruining the planet and would destroy humanity» (my translation).

¹⁷ Mieli and Hocquenghem got to know each other in 1973, when a delegation of FUORI! went to Paris in order to meet the FHAR, and naturally they detested each other. Mieli, for instance, was struck by the «theoretical arrogance» of the «very glossy star of the FHAR» (Mieli 1973, 16, my translation).

¹⁸ «Something always seems to go wrong somewhere between desire and revolution; we get the same continual wail both from those who want but can't (the far left) and from those who can but won't (the Communist Party)» (Hocquenghem 1972, English translation 1993, 135).

the site of an unproductive and unproductive desire which makes the subject unable to recognize any hierarchy and thus to defer enjoyment for the sake of higher purposes. According to him, for a man homosexuality is tantamount the refusal of occupying the role of the father at the vertex of the Oedipal triangle and thus the refusal of any responsibility in the development of the human species: being gay corresponds therefore to his words to the «killing of the civilised egos»¹⁹.

Another document of the FHAR contained an even more radical rejection of the moralistic sacrifice of the present for the future which in those years neoliberalism, communism and new left had in common, and nowadays characterizes the public discourses of the crisis. Here, in fact, it is not the fathers-to-be who contest the rhetoric of «the Child», but the present children themselves²⁰. Queer present children, to be precise, or better queer youngsters, who «attack» the capitalist society which has of them «the same image it has of surplus-value» (FHAR 1971, 58, my translation), claim the right to betray the expectations of their parents and declare their will to squander their human capital in enjoyment and pleasure:

«The attack to society and its moral order which comes from its youth is the attack which strikes society at its most vulnerable and dearest points. The most vulnerable one because the dear babies that we are, are so gullible, so unaware of the things of life!!! The dearest one because we represent the future. BUT WE DON'T GIVE A FUCK ABOUT THEIR FUTURE. We want to enjoy right away. We affirm our right to have the use of ourselves, our right to pleasure»²¹.

4. The moral of the story

Nowadays lesbian and gay movements depict homosexuals as responsible and reputable adults who aim to be the perfect citizens of the Liberal State and give their contribution to the well-being of the nation and the perpetuation of its life in the future. Gays and

¹⁹ «Homosexual desire is neither on the side of the death or on the side of life; it is the killer of civilised egos» (Hocquenghem 1972, English translation 1993, 150).

²⁰ The same point of view was undertaken by Beatriz Preciado in her article on the *Manif pour tous* (Preciado 2013). See also Preciado 2009.

²¹ FHAR 1971, 99, my translation.

lesbians — one often hears it said — produce wealth as the others and as the others pay their taxes; therefore they demand the same rights as the others: to get married as the others, to breed as the others (more or less), even to serve in the army as the others. On the contrary, the first gay liberation movements affirmed that the aim of the homosexual struggle had to be the immediate sexualisation of the public sphere in contrast with the privatization of sexuality in the family: to bring sex (and not reproduction) directly into the social camp, without mediations or sublimations, in spite of the values of the —Oedipal society— which in their opinion constituted the common framework of the struggles between bourgeoisie and proletariat. For this sake they expressed their sexual desire in a way that we may consider immature or even childish. Polymorphic or anal, in any case anarchist, this sexual desire could not postpone its satisfaction, and could not be disciplined in the forms of the couple, the family, and least of all the Party or the State: it had to be fulfilled at once, in the present. For this reason the gay liberation movements were properly neither communist nor liberal democratic, but democratic in a radical sense: they refused the principle of representation and the mechanism of delegation, they were not mass-movements but preferred the dimensions of small collectives, they did not have the patience for convincing the others of their reasons but rather scandalized the others with their impatience and insolence, speaking of sex and *doing* sex. Their insurrection against civilization and society consisted primarily in their refusal to ask the institutions for those rights that heterosexual people already had (Adam 1987; Engel 2011). These youngsters simply felt no need to wait for any authorization to take their right to sexual enjoyment — here and now.

Undoubtedly it was a different time, when — despite the aspiration of the gays in suits and lesbians in skirts — the hiatus between homosexual people and good mothers, good family men, good soldiers and good prig heterosexual citizens seemed impossible to fill. But I don't think gay liberation movements lacked imagination. Nowadays they remind us that bridging the gap is a rightful claim, but it is not the only one possible, and most of all that one cannot take for granted that this claim is the definitive solution to the questions of sexual freedom and discrimination of sexual minorities. Mainstream LGBTIA movements of today seem to have renounced their sexual *difference* in order to embrace a political *egalitarian* agenda whose claims were already written in

neoliberal common sense (Adam, Duyvendak, Krouwel 1999; Rossi Barilli 1999; Trappolin 2004). On the contrary Hocquenghem and Mieli, and their comrades of the FHAR and of the FUORI! opposed their capricious stubbornness in *every* common sense. They were «unruly bodies» ô one may say once again in foucauldian terms (Foucault 1975) ô which proudly affirmed not only their difference but also the social negativity they represented²², in order to resist every discipline, every biopolitics, every economic government in life.

In the present time of crisis, «the storm that we call progress» still seems far away from Italian homosexuals, for whom the future of gay and lesbian rights that elsewhere is already present seems impossible to reach. If they keep on looking only forwards, it is easy for them to be taken by dejection. But if they are queer, or even post-queer²³ enough to look backwards as the Angel of History does, among the wreckage they may discover that the present was not already written as a destiny in the past, and that the future has not necessarily to repeat a present that already exists. That there was a time when against Capitalistic society, following the spirit of the Stonewall riots, some young gays opposed the rhetorics of «the Child», both liberal and communist, the children that they had been, unable to wait, eager to live in the present. For someone this may add grief, nostalgia or melancholy²⁴ to depression. Some others may remember that sometimes it is possible to take the rights that the State does not allow and public opinion does not approve, and that for sexual minorities it is in any case always necessary to be strong and provocative enough to act on their rights even when they have already been granted. For those who live in Italy, at this time, this is no small thing.

²² On the concept of «queer negativity» see Edelman 2004 and Berlant and Edelman 2013.

²³ James Penney recalls both Hocquenghem and Mieli in his essay *After queer Theory* (2014).

²⁴ Because many of those young gay men overpaid their sexual liberation: Mieli committed suicide in 1983, thirty one years old. Hocquenghem died of AIDS in 1988, forty two years old, as many other gays of his generation.

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