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Mario Mieli: Queer Dynamite

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1. Introduction

Mario Mieli (1952-1983) was a major figure of the Italian gay liberation movement, most well-known in the English-speaking world for his book *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, which was first published under the title, *Elementi di critica omosessuale*. His theoretical writing and militant practice greatly impacted the lives of queer people from the 1970s until today; yet, we must understand Mieli's role in the history of the Italian gay liberation movement as distinct from what has become the institutionalization of gay politics with which we are now familiar. Mieli rejected assimilationist gay politics; instead he sought to incite revolution, to radically transform society through the purview of perversion. There has been a surge of interest in Mieli's work in recent years, resulting in a number of excellent entry points to his political thinking, theoretical innovations, and personal biography¹. Given that there is very little writing on Mieli available in English, I have chosen to use this brief portrait of Mieli as a way to introduce him to anglophone scholars and activists interested in his political work². I draw on this significant body of writing and scholarship, which, like Mieli, straddles the line between academic and activist reflection, in order to give an impression of Mieli as, in the words of Francesco Paolo Del Re (2008), “dinamite frocia” (queer dynamite)³. My writing is meant to give an impression of Mieli's persona, but not to be an immobile demarcation of how we might view him and his work. I think one of the key lessons we

¹ Paola Mieli, a psychoanalyst based in New York and Mario's sister, and Massimo Prearo have been pioneers on this front, connecting Mieli's theoretical innovations with his militant activity in the gay liberation movement. In 2002 Paola co-edited the Feltrinelli edition of *Elementi di critica omosessuale* with Italian historian and journalist Gianni Rossi Barilli, which was re-released in 2017, and has recently co-edited a collection of Mieli's lesser known writing with Massimo Prearo: see Mieli (2017) and Mieli (2019). An online archive of Mieli's work is also currently under construction, and can be found at: <https://mariomieliarchives.com/>. Besides the critical appendix included in the Feltrinelli edition, with essays written by Paola Mieli, Tim Dean, Christopher Lane, Teresa de Lauretis, Claude Rabant, David Jacobsen, Gianni Rossi Barilli, and Simonetta Spinelli, other general introductions to Mieli's biography and his work can be found in: De Laude (2016), Schettini (2015), Lo Iacono (2007), and Silvestri (2002).

² For introductions in English I would refer readers to the front matter from the newly translated *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, written by Tim Dean, Massimo Prearo, and Evan Calder Williams. For a biographical and concise general overview of Mieli's life and work in English see Frascà (2019). There have been some interesting scholarly takes on Mieli published in English, or soon to be, which I include in relevant footnotes below.

³ All translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise noted.

might take away from his life's work is that to categorize too firmly runs the risk of halting the possibility of living our multiple, and infinite, potentialities.

2. *Gaia scienza: Approaching Mieli's Conceptual Formulations*

Italian historian Gianni Rossi Barilli (2017, 303) has referred to Mieli as “the spiritual guide of the radical wing of the Italian homosexual movement,” yet, he qualifies this by suggesting that “this was probably more because of his living example and political activity than through his major piece of writing”. Mieli's legacy, therefore, is suspended between his exuberant theoretical writing which has become familiar in *Towards a Gay Communism* and that of his militant political practice. Given that in the English-speaking world Mieli is more well-known for the former, I will begin with a brief exposition of Mieli's theoretical contributions, which deserve greater attention from both scholars and activists. I would suggest, moreover, that his *Towards a Gay Communism* be viewed as itself a militant practice, a record of Mieli's homosexual experience recharged as performative politics.⁴ In this section I will provide an overview of Mieli's conceptual contributions to the politics of the Italian gay liberation movement.

2.1. *Freud, Marx, and Repression*

Though Mieli makes use of a range of philosophical sources in *Towards a Gay Communism* his theoretical perspective has been described most often as Freudo-Marxist⁵ There are various trajectories and arguments associated with Freudo-Marxism in the intellectual history of the West, however, much of it can be boiled down to an abiding concern with the philosophical and political possibilities of social revolution while also considering the mechanisms of the human psyche. Lorenzo Bernini (2017, 146) summarizes this theoretical frame's approach to sexuality succinctly: “Freudo-Marxism consid-

⁴ On the text as an act of militancy see Prearo (2018). For more on Mieli and the politics of performativity see Zundel (2019). I linger on this point in my conclusion.

⁵ The book was a revision of his *tesi di laurea* which he completed in Moral Philosophy at the University of Milan, defending his thesis with the notable Sartrean philosopher, Franco Fergnani.

ers power's action on sexuality as essentially, even if not exclusively, in the form of repression, and figures sexuality as, above all, repressed sexual desire asking to be liberated".

For Mieli, the repressed sexual desires asking to be liberated are not singular sexual identities. One would think, given the original title of his book, *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (*Elements of a Homosexual Critique*), that the sexuality waiting to be unleashed is homosexual desire alone, that the book is addressed to closeted homosexuals and to repressed heterosexuals who simply need to release their desire for the same sex. While the book itself is addressed to as wide an audience as possible (he describes it as having a "carattere divulgativo" [popular character] meant for reading by a popular audience rather than for a specialized academic one), Mieli's argument is more complex than this simple transgressive reversal. Using Freud's concepts of 'polymorphous perversity,' and 'original bisexuality' Mieli argues, indeed, that "homosexual desire is universal", and that in order to access one's homosexuality they must break through the yoke of repression.

Within Mieli's theoretical language, one might notice a conceptual slippage in use of repression. Mieli uses it to mean both psychic repression (*rimozione*) and the clinical and juridical forces of institutional repression (*repressione*). According to de Lauretis, Mieli does not devote enough attention to this central problematic. This poses grave consequences for the revolutionary subjectivity Mieli wants to elaborate; for, even though Freud was in favor of liberating the world from most forms of institutional repression, he would remind Mieli that "to liberate the subject from psychic repression, if that were possible, would be to render them absolutely defenceless not only to their parents, to adults, and to social norms, but also to the demands of the Id" (de Lauretis 2017, 265). Moreover, Foucault's famous repudiation of the "repressive hypothesis" has all but eradicated the validity of Mieli's view of repression as the sole seat of social power⁶. This is not the place to get into a prolonged discussion of Mieli's view on repression, nor his theoretical influences in that regard⁷. However, I would like to briefly elaborate on the

⁶ See Foucault (1990).

⁷ Smack in the middle of the emergence of the "New Left" in the wake of the social struggles of 1968, Mieli's theoretical influences were familiar reading for many in this new wave of militancy against oppression, including the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, mainly Herbert Marcuse, the American

concepts he crafted by using repression as his core analytic, which might cause us to refrain from casting his thinking off as simple naiveté and emphasize his intellectual creativity.

2.2. “Sono tutti checche latenti”: Transessualità, Educastrazione, Schizophrenia

In the first chapter of *Towards a Gay Communism* Mieli scandalizes the reader:

But since it is not always easy to distinguish the two, I shall speak sometimes of latent homosexual desire and in other contexts of the repression of homosexuality, without establishing too fine a distinction and thus using the concept in a somewhat elastic sense. In any case, faced with the skilled seduction by a gay person, it is not repression that wins out; sooner or later, all heterosexuals give in. All are latent queens⁸ (Mieli 2018a, 6).

Note here that Mieli is aware that he is playing fast and loose with the idea of psychic repression. In Freudian language, ‘latency’ designates the period of sexual development associated with a moment suspended between the dissolution of the ‘Oedipus Complex’ and the child’s entry into puberty, during which time psychic repression of the sexual is at its most intense (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, 234-235). To be ‘latent,’ however, is something different. Mieli’s use of ‘latent queens’ is a synthesis of the ‘latency period’ in Freud’s stages of sexual development with the ‘latent content’ that Freud discusses primarily in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Latent content refers to a conglomeration of psychic material that psychoanalysis works to decode and interpret, whether they appear in dream form, or in other sublimated forms (Ivi, 235-236). According to Laplanche and Pontalis, this latent content is viewed in psychoanalytic language as the full or “correct” content of the mind and is opposed to “manifest” content: “the latent content means the complete and genuine translation of the dreamer’s discourse, the adequate formulation of his desire; as such it stands in opposition to the manifest content, which is both incomplete

philosopher of the body and schizophrenia, Norman O. Brown, and hearty critique of both psychoanalysis and capitalism by Deleuze and Guattari. These were also brought into conversation with the intellectual insights of the 1960s and 70s anti-psychiatry movement put forth by Cooper and Laing.

⁸ As I discuss a bit further below, Mieli’s specific target with “all” are heterosexual cis men.

and mendacious” (Ivi, 235). Mieli appropriates these terms, correctly or not, to our adult subjectivities and the identifiers used to divvy us up; thus, according to Mieli, every heterosexual’s homosexuality is in a period of latency, making them latent homosexuals. Moreover, he refers to himself and other gay people as “manifest homosexuals”, meaning that their heterosexuality too is in a period of latency. However, the reality of stigmatization makes these subjective situations unequal. While Mieli calls for homosexuals to explore intimacy with women, it is more important for heterosexual men to explore their desire for men and their lost identifications with women⁹. Mieli neatly makes this association by claiming that “*sono tutti checche latenti*” (all are latent queens): all those heterosexual men are not just latent homosexuals – they are latent *queens*, faggots, fairies. The root of homosexual oppression is not just the repudiation of same-sex desire, but in the masculine revulsion to the feminine, to an identification with femininity.

Forcefully treading beneath the surface of our (“incomplete, mendacious”) manifest sexualities and gender identifications, be they cis male or female, heterosexual, homosexual, trans masculine, trans feminine, and anywhere in-between, lies a potential state of pure transsexuality (*transessualità*). This term has often been compared to our contemporary understanding of pansexuality, however Mieli’s meaning incorporates both gender and sexual identification:

I have defined as *transsexual* our potential erotic availability, constrained by repression to latency or subjected to a more or less severe repression, and I have therefore indicated in *transsexuality* the telos (a genuine telos, insofar as it is *internal*) of the struggle for the liberation of Eros [...] ‘Transsexuality’ seems to me the best word for expressing, at one and the same time, both the plurality of the erotic tendencies and the original and deep hermaphroditism of every individual (Mieli 2018a, xxxviii/6).

Transsexuality in Mieli’s use has a distinct conceptual genealogy, different from the popular use of the term at the time (before the development of ‘transgender’) to mean

⁹ Elena dalla Torre explores this theoretical move alongside contemporaneous theories of ‘feminist difference’ in her essay, Dalla Torre (2017).

someone who identifies with a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth. Its original basis lies in a combination of the aforementioned Freudian concepts of ‘polymorphous perversity’ and ‘original bisexuality’ discussed in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in which Freud makes the bold claim that “a disposition to perversions is an original and universal disposition of the human sexual instinct and [...] normal sexual behavior is developed out of it as a result of organic changes and physical inhibitions occurring in the course of maturation” (Freud 2017, 50). Mieli holds fast to Freud’s assertion that these “perversions” are original and universal, but he goes on to challenge Freud’s contention that we grow out of this polymorphous disposition and into “normal sexual behavior” because of “organic changes and physical inhibitions”. Mieli, instead, calls this process of “maturation” educastration (*educastrazione*), a term which displaces the repressive force of the trope of castration onto the normalizing procedures of social mores. In this way, Mieli sets up the idea of a universally repressive system that is embedded within the framework of society that seeks to repress our inherent multiple and undifferentiated sexual dispositions. He combines this notion of polymorphous perversity with Deleuze and Guattari’s use of transsexuality from their infamous *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and Luciano Parinetto’s critical reading of Deleuze and Guattari in a 1973 essay, “L’utopia del diavolo. Egualitarismo e transessualità” (The Utopia of the Devil: Egalitarianism and Transsexuality)¹⁰.

If *transsexuality* is the telos, the end goal of human activity, then one must pose the question: how do we reach a state of transsexuality? An answer: schizophrenia. His use of schizophrenia as another revolutionary analytic comes not only from the intellectual currents of the 1960s and 1970s “New Left” philosophy and anti-psychiatry movements, but also from Mieli’s own experiences with schizophrenia¹¹. Mieli writes: “The perception of transsexuality, one’s own and that of others, is of particular importance in the ‘schizophrenic trip’” (Mieli 2018a, 196). The ‘schizophrenic trip’ maps the common use

¹⁰ Parinetto’s essay was originally published in the Italian Marxist periodical *Utopia*, and was republished in an edited version in his 1976 book, Parinetto (2015), and his collection of essays Parinetto (1997). Lorenzo Bernini discusses this theoretical genealogy in his book, Bernini, (2019).

¹¹ See Brown (1966) and Laing (1999). He discusses his own schizophrenia most notably in his posthumously published autobiographical novel, see Mieli (2018b). Armando Maggi also reflects on Mieli’s use of schizophrenia alongside Pier Paolo Pasolini, see Maggi (2009, 339-353).

of ‘trip,’ referring to the use of the psychedelic drug Lsd, onto the experience of schizophrenia as an opening up of consciousness. “Just as hermaphroditism is a gateway to magic, so the ‘schizophrenic’ adventure is magical because, in this sudden progressive change in experience, a central element proves to be the (re)discovery of ourselves which Jung defined as ‘anima’ or ‘animus” (*Ibidem*)¹². Mieli’s descriptions of his own ‘schizophrenic trips’ in *Towards a Gay Communism* and in other writings are some of the most lyric moments of his writing, shedding light on the importance that poetry held for his revolutionary theories. It is often in these moments that Mieli offers a glimpse of his own revolutionary transsexuality, which, if not readily recognizable to us before, becomes more potently visible when we read passages like the following:

The transsexual sentiment was one of the reasons, and also one of the results, of a gradual alteration in my perceptions of my body and mind, of the ‘external’ world and other people. At times I felt myself really a woman, spiritually pregnant, at other times a reincarnation of a woman [...]. The transsexual perception is double: it discovers that the majority of people are at least half buried. The city looks like the realm of the living dead. And yet other people’s faces reflect the divine along with the ghosts and demons. In nature, in the sky, and in other people, the ‘mad’ person contemplates himself and the grandeur of life, without anyone else seeing within him. The unconscious sees itself... (Ivi, 198-199).

A further word on theory. It is clear that Mieli has a distaste for the theories that heterosexuals have dreamed up on the subject of homosexuality. Point number one of *Towards a Gay Communism*:

I have tackled from my own perspective, one that has matured and rejuvenated in the ambits of the gay movement, many of the most widespread anti-homosexual commonplaces and some of the best known psychoanalytic theories that bear on homosexuality. I did this because I think it opportune, even on a ‘theoretical basis’, to

¹² The influence of Jungian psychoanalysis as well as transformational theories of alchemy are also a crucial intertexts to Mieli’s writing, and ones that are often mentioned, but little explored.

oppose the opinions of us gays to the traditional opinions of the heteros, which as a rule share – more or less deliberately, more or less consciously – the prejudices of a certain reactionary rabble, i.e. all those doctors, psychologists, magistrates, politicians, priests, etc. who peddle as truth on the homosexual question the crudest lies – or, more rarely, the more subtle ones. We, who refuse to identify ourselves with their ‘science’, base ourselves rather on a *gay science* (Ivi, xxxvi).

The book is thus meant to be a major intervention, and disruption, of the ways in which homosexuality has been pathologized, criminalized, and demonized. At the foundation of Mieli’s theoretical writing, not only in *Towards a Gay Communism*, but in his essayistic journalism, fiction, poetry, and theater, is a reconfiguration of traditionally heterosexual epistemological methods. Despite Mieli’s dependence on the category of ‘repression,’ we might think of his theory alongside rather than in conflict with that of Michel Foucault’s theorizations of sexuality: as an attempt to open up the struggle for homo-sexual liberation by reevaluating the discursive terms of the struggle itself. “It’s very difficult to carry on the struggle using the terms of sexuality”, says Foucault, “without, at a certain point, getting trapped by notions of sexual disease, sexual pathology, normal sexuality. Hence the need to pose the problem differently” (Foucault 2011, 388).

Mieli’s *gaia scienza* (gay science) is a way of “posing the problem differently”, which, I would argue, does not wholly depart from Foucault’s own epistemological method of posing the problem¹³. Indeed, like Friedrich Nietzsche’s grappling with the problem of knowledge in *The Gay Science*, a problem split between the joyous knowledge of *frölich* and the serious knowledge of *Wissenschaft*, Mieli reevaluates gayness by inverting its modern scientific and juridical reception as a problem for a functioning society as the solution to aid a society that is itself, sick. His theoretical process is therefore experimental: throughout *Towards a Gay Communism* Mieli tests the limits of society’s moral

¹³ There have been a number of scholars who have reflected on the convergences and divergences of Mieli’s theories and those of Foucault. See especially: Dean (2017), de Lauretis (2017), Bernini (2007), Prearo (2012).

values by positing what appears to be an absurd hypothesis: homosexual desire is universal. “Why, then, we might ask, if all people are also homosexual, do so few admit this and enjoy their homosexuality?” (Mieli 2018a, 3-4).

3. Revolutionary Queer Transformation in the Face of Gay Pragmatism

Mieli came of age at a time of immense social upheaval in Italy, a time suffused with experimentations with gay life in Milan and in writing poetry. After having grown up in Lora, on the outskirts of Como, Mieli’s family moved to Milan in 1968 when he was 16 years old¹⁴. It was in these early years that he began to become familiar with the local gay hot-spots at the same time as the Student Movement and the “Strategy of Tension” diffused into everyday social and political life¹⁵. By 1970, while still in high school (*terza liceo*), Mieli joined a poetry reading group run by Milo de Angelis and Angelo Lumelli at the University of Milan, through which he began to explore themes that endure in all his work. In a 2018 interview with Mieli’s sister Paola, de Angelis describes Mieli’s approach to poetry at the time: “What struck me about Mario as a poet was that while each of us thought that we should seek out our origins, our poetic masters [...] Mario seemed to come from an irreducible place, one not easily traced”. Michelangelo Coviello, another group member in the same interview, remembers Mieli’s poetry as “simultaneously demonstrative, political, aesthetic, mystical, revolutionary and erotic” (Mieli and Prearo 2019, 330).

When he finished high school in 1971 Mieli enrolled in the philosophy department at the University of Milan before going to spend some time in London. In London he joined

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, most of the bibliographical information is taken from Mieli and Prearo (2019).

¹⁵ “Strategy of Tension” refers to a series of violent acts (from the bombing of Piazza Fontana in Milan and two others on the same day in Rome) carried out in 1969. The Italian police initially thought it to be the work of anarchists, however, it was eventually uncovered that the neo-fascists were most likely responsible for the bombings. These events had an immense effect on public opinion towards the government, and when paired with the collective action taken by the student and worker movements, led to an era of immense social upheaval in Italy throughout the 1970s, lasting longer than and post-1968 protest movements in Europe. For more on this trend of collective action from a cultural studies perspective see Lumley (1990).

the ranks of the Gay Liberation Front (Glf), effectively beginning his life-long commitment to gay militancy. It was in the collective actions of the Glf that Mieli began to model his own views of revolutionary homosexual politics, based on the practice of radical drag. In an article documenting his time spent in London, Mieli writes that the Glf:

cross-dress not in order to imitate the feminine stereotype proffered by Capital, but in order to protest against the polarity of the sexes (generally one finds them combined in the same person: hairy shins, drooping mustaches, fake eyelashes, and wool *bouclée* maxi skirts) and to indulge oneself into the fantastical game of destroying gender roles (Mieli 2019b, 58).

Radical drag was a key political tactic for the rapidly internationalizing gay liberation movement, and it should be viewed as distinct from what we might now refer to as the neoliberalization of drag aesthetics in mass media productions such as *Rupaul's Drag Race*¹⁶. Mieli's radical drag was both direct political action and a style of everyday life. It is a tactic of disruption meant to violently unsettle the congealed norms of sex and gender both for those who practice it and for those who witness its practice. Cross-dressing, *travestimento* in the words of Mieli and his queer comrades, holds within it a transformative potential for the self as a method of glimpsing the plurality of selves held in the yoke of our repressed unconscious.

When he returned to Milan from London in the Spring of 1972 Mieli became directly involved with the first public protest organized by the newly created gay liberation collective, Italian United Homosexual Revolutionary Front (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano /Fuori!)¹⁷. On April 5th in Sanremo the Italian Center for Sexology was hosting an International Congress on sexual deviancy; under discussion: homosexuality as a sickness and the prospect of reparative therapy. The congress was met by public resistance from Mieli and members of Fuori! as well as other newly formed gay liberation

¹⁶ See Lovelock (2019).

¹⁷ For more on the history of Fuori! and that of the Italian Lgbt social movements in general see: Pellegata (2019), Biagini (2018), Voli and Marcasciano (2017), Prearo (2015), Dragone, Gramolini, Guazzo, Ibry, Mamini, and Mulas (2008), Rossi Barilli (1999), Cristallo (1996).

groups from around Europe, including France's Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (Fhar), Belgium's Mouvement homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (Mhar) and the British Glf. This is where we see one of the more familiar images of Mieli in drag, described by Silvia De Laude as "having just arrive from London, distributing flyers in a diaphanous white blouse, a foulard tied around his forehead, well-placed lipstick and large sunglasses reminiscent of Jacqueline Kennedy" (De Laude 2016, 14).

Following his experiences in London, combined with his philosophical education, Mieli made a name for himself early on in *Fuori!*'s militant activities through his acerbic wit and incisive political analysis. He not only published short essays and reflections in the main magazine of the group, *Fuori!*, but his writings extended to other publications of the 1970s and very early 1980s including *L'erba voglio*, *Re nudo*, *Gong*, *Lambda*, *Grattacielo*, *Donna*, and *Cosmopolitan*. As Massimo Prearo notes, "The tone of his writings, which will later become a stylistic mark, was so merciless that many of his articles published in the *Fuori!* magazine were preceded by a note from the editorial staff taking distance from him" (Prearo 2018, xvii).

In his writing on the "homosexual question", published in the third issue of *Fuori!* in 1972, Mieli attempts to provoke a debate over the theoretical presuppositions of the politics of homosexual liberation based on the past actions of the movements, both in Italy and abroad. In it he solidifies the Marxist foundations of his views on liberation by drawing a parallel to one of Marx's earlier essays "On the Jewish Question". Following Marx's argument that in order to resolve religious divisions and oppression, religion itself must be abolished; so too in the case of sexuality:

The Jew as a member of the religious community of Judaism weighs the same as a Christian: that is, they possess the burden of being counter-revolutionary. Likewise, we will say: the possibility of a homosexual emancipating himself completely from the bosom of capitalistic society does not exist. The total liberation of the human being within him will not occur without the revolution conducted by the proletariat for the emancipation of humanity. This revolution, *returning to man his very essence, will return to him his sexuality, which is structural insofar as it is a fundamental component of his being animal*. Sexuality will rediscover itself as free from those forms of

behavior which exclude one another, those phenomena with which today presents itself as the alienated sexuality of man (Mieli 2019c, 39).

Here we can see Mieli's early foray into the repudiation of homosexual identity. According to him, splitting sexuality further into identity categories is anathema to revolution: to proclaim oneself as homosexual, and to put faith into the integrity of that identity, causes one to fall into a trap set by the alienating apparatus of late-stage capitalism. Yet, unlike the figure of the worker and the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat originally theorized by Marx, the homosexual does have the capacity to provoke a critical process that disrupts the foundational mechanisms of capitalism (e.g. the oedipal family, the phallocracy and the oppression of women) which the uncritically heteronormative *operaio* (worker) reinforces: "Thus, the homosexual becomes a *revolutionary*, recognizing the vehicle of emancipation of the whole of humanity [i.e. their repressed sexuality common to all] in the proletariat" (Ivi, 40). Mieli's key theoretical insight for sexual politics foregrounds the irreducibility of the sexual to any project of political emancipation, including that of the gay movement itself. In other words, the goal of the politics of homosexuality is not simply to create a space of equality in the existing state-forms, but it is to revolutionary transform society from the ground up. Massimo Prearo phrases this effectively in his introduction to Mieli's *Towards a Gay Communism*, "According to Mieli, the desire for emancipation is an illusion, an oasis in the desert, a fake reward for homosexuals, the siren song of capital. Yet, his theoretical and political reflections do not just review or rephrase in homosexual terms the communist project of revolution, but call for a mutation of homosexuals themselves, or, as Mieli puts it, for a 'critical process'" (Prearo 2018, xvii).

Towards a Gay Communism is a call to initiate this critical process. It is a process, moreover, founded on the feminist practice of *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising). To practice *autocoscienza* is to analyze one's own experience in dialogue with the experience of other's like you. For feminists it was a way to collapse difference with similarity, and to use that similarity to fight the oppressive conditions of patriarchy. This is the core of the practice – it is not merely an intellectual exercise, but a tool for political action. Kathie

Sarachild, a second-wave American feminist who often wrote about the practice notes the importance of action:

The purpose of consciousness-raising was to get to the most radical truths about the situation of women in order to take radical action; but the call for “action” can sometimes be a way of preventing understanding – and preventing radical action. Action comes when our experience is finally verified and clarified. There is tremendous energy in consciousness-raising, an enthusiasm generated for getting to the truth of things, finding out what’s really going on. Learning the truth can lead to all kinds of action and this action will lead to further truths (Sarachild 1978, 148-149).

Mieli’s writing of *Towards a Gay Communism* is itself a form of consciousness-raising. It contains not only bits and pieces of self-analysis, but brings to a wide readership, through the important publishing house of Einaudi, some of the ‘truths’ obtained from the consciousness-raising meetings Mieli held with his gay comrades in Milan.¹⁸ Chief among the truths discovered in these meetings was that the feeling guilt and shame (*senso di colpa*) is a shared experience among gay men. The method of consciousness-raising championed by Mieli pulls personal experience, the history of homosexuality and its constant, violence, together with the analytic frames of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism in order to lay bare the truth: this sense of guilt is rooted in the systemic nature of late-stage capitalism and is, in fact, a false guilt (*falsa colpa*). False guilt: transmitted and transmuted from the Marxist debates over ideology in the 1970s; “false consciousness”, refashioned¹⁹. Indeed, we might view the whole of Mieli’s *Towards a Gay Communism* as a call to reveal the ‘truth’ of the affective condition of homosexuals: their guilt is imposed on them by a socio-psychic system of repression, which is only allowed to thrive

¹⁸ For more on these meetings see Levi (1974).

¹⁹ Many readers will recognize that these debates in Marxism are severely outdated since Louis Althusser’s writing on ideology and Slavoj Žižek’s major reformulation of the concept; see Althusser (1984) and Žižek (1989). Rather than dismiss Mieli and his comrades use of outdated theoretical language, which textures much of his work, I find that we are better served to approach reading Mieli in a more sympathetic fashion, to appreciate the complexity of his conceptual shortcomings rather than disregard them. In this way I aspire to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed ‘reparative reading’ when reading Mieli; see Sedgwick (2003).

because it represses the polymorphous sexualities in us all. The book begins with this direct call to action:

I hope this book will promote the liberation of gay desire among all who now repress it, and will aid gay people who are still enslaved by the sense of guilt induced by social persecution to free themselves from this false guilt. It is high time to root this out, as it only helps to perpetuate the deadly domination of capital. It is time to oppose both this determination and the heterosexual Norm that contributes to maintaining it by labour and divisions between men, between women, and between women and men (Mieli 2018a, xxxviii).

The political urgency pulsing through this text permeates the whole of *Towards a Gay Communism*. As Teresa de Lauretis (2017, 264) has made clear, “in his urgency to imagine a livable world”, Mieli puts his intellectual energy into creative but “careless” readings of Freud and Marx. Yet the urgency of his political moment should not be discounted when we revisit Mieli’s intellectual output. By 1974 there was a decisive and polemical split in the Italian gay liberation movement when members of Fuori! decided to ally themselves with the Radical Party (PR), and thus with the liberal process of parliamentary politics²⁰. Mieli, and many of those in the Fuori! collective in Milan, saw this decision as a devastating blow to the project of revolution. In his speech at Fuori!’s 5th Congress in 1976, he notes that while the political parties on the left are beginning to change their attitudes towards homosexuality it comes at a dangerous cost. Instead of being ‘exorcised’ from the left there is a movement to ‘adorcise’ homosexuality by the left (and by the consumerist society of postwar Italy): instead of casting them out, the left seeks to assimilate homosexuals into the hetero-capitalist system, and to instrumentalize them, to exploit them for the benefit of the system and for the heterosexual hierarchy of the parties that still refuse to liberate their latent polymorphous desires²¹. “Now I know I am about to say something extremely unpopular”, Mieli writes:

²⁰ Massimo Prearo deals extensively with the context and consequences of this split, see Prearo (2015).

²¹ Mieli counterposes *esorcizzare*, to exorcise a spirit from the human body, and *adorcizzare*, the antonym to exorcise, or to allow the incorporation of that spirit into the body. For text of the speech see, Mieli (2019d).

those who act from the perspective of the politicization of homosexuality, act from a perspective that, at the end of the day, dances a minuet with the meager, deadly, and liberalizing *avances* of capital. I may be mistaken, perhaps I'm wrong, but my impression is that for homosexuals to put themselves up for political elections is still a situation that falls within the capitalistic perspective. Parliament represents that great carnival or deadly spectacle that is bourgeois society, therefore for me it will not be entertaining but more a displeasure to see homosexual representatives in Parliament. I want to see homosexuals scattered throughout those environments in which one creates revolution: the factories, those huge occupied factories, feminist circles (i.e. female homosexuality), supermarkets, on the trains, at the cinema, in the toilets, which can transform from our ghettoized spaces into ones in which we make love²² (Mieli 2019d, 166-167).

This polemical contrast he makes between liberation and liberalization is fundamental to Mieli's politics. It closely tracks with Marcuse's notion of "repressive desublimation", a term he uses to describe how late industrial capitalist society contains forms of social disruption, like perversion, into profitable forms²³. As can be seen from the continued violence towards marginalized queers resultant from the neoliberalization of queer politics in the more than forty years since Mieli published *Towards a Gay Communism*, the urgency and danger he and his queer comrades felt was well-founded²⁴.

My hope in teasing out his evocation of urgency is to orient our impressions of Mieli along a spatio-temporal axis. Paola Mieli and Massimo Prearo characterize Mieli's political writings as an "archive of the present":

²² By 'feminist circles' (*ambienti femministi*) and 'female homosexuality' (*omosessualità femminile*) Mieli means groups of homosexual women. Notably in *Towards a Gay Communism* he opens by saying that, insofar as he is a gay man, he discusses "female homosexuality (*omosessualità femminile*) as little as possible; for only lesbians can really know what lesbianism is, rather than just speaking about it in the abstract" (Mieli 2018a, xxxvi).

²³ See Marcuse (2002). For a reflection on the use of Marcuse's theories for contemporary queer politics see Ferguson (2019).

²⁴ Two versions of this neoliberalization of gay politics can be seen in Lisa Duggan's use of the term "homonormativity" and Jasbir Puar's coinage of "homonationalism". See Duggan (2003) and Puar (2007) respectively.

Mieli does not stop exploring and documenting the concrete manifestations in which his thinking and practice of sexual liberation express themselves. He produces an extraordinary archive, which goes well beyond the concern of simple historical reconstruction. (Mieli and Prearo 2019, 13)

Haunting Mieli's archive of the present is the critical hope for the future. His political writing and his *Towards a Gay Communism* bear traces of what Ernst Bloch has referred to as 'concrete utopias' and it is toward those future-oriented spaces in the present that Mieli takes aim²⁵. One need only sit with the image he evokes in the aforementioned speech at Fuori!'s 5th Congress, the promise of revolution is held in those spaces that we've already transformed for ourselves, and those which have yet to be transformed.

Conclusion: A Politics of Performance

I have not given nearly enough attention to a central, and I would argue, defining aspect of Mieli's work and career: performance. In addition to his militant writing and organizing, he was also an actor; yet, more than that, performance was, for him, inseparable from militancy²⁶. Often the first written impressions of Mieli begin with his brazen, and often obscene, theatricality: eating his own shit, putting on an impromptu drag show for civilians on a commuter train, shouting slogans at heterosexuals at Parco Lambro in Milan in 1976 ("lotta dura contro natura!" ["the hard fight for nature's flight!"]), or, most famously, seizing the microphone from Dario Fo at the infamous Bologna conference against repression in 1977. Mieli recalls this latter moment in a letter written to a friend upon his return to Milan from the conference. That afternoon the police moved the protesting leftist crowd out of Bologna's Piazza Maggiore into a smaller, less central piazza, so that Mass could be celebrated at the main cathedral in peace. On this act of policing Mieli writes:

²⁵ On this point and the temporality of queerness with which I associate Mieli's project see Muñoz (2009).

²⁶ On Mieli's involvement with theater see, Casi (1992) as well as the new edition from Asterisc* Edizioni of the classic work of 1970s "teatro frocio" (queer theater), which Mieli helped create, *La traviata Norma, ovvero: vaffanculo...ebbene sì!*. See Collettivo Nostra signora dei Fiori (2020).

The meek Left in one piazza, the most holy defended by the miter²⁷ in the other. You know, it's like letting the historic compromise²⁸ pass through Bologna, and therefore Italy...and letting it pass as many consenting spectators, dazed by a theatre *star*, without anyone putting to discussion the fact that our access to the other piazza has been blocked! (Mieli 2019e, 179-180).

True to form, Mieli took it upon himself to point out the hypocrisy of the leftist crowd, and to spark a discussion; he climbed onto the main stage, grabbed the microphone from Dario Fo, and yelled out one of the many slogans of the gay liberation movement:

I yelled out your slogan, "Fighting for peace is like fucking to stay chaste!", and I was told that in that moment, with that phrase, I had the entire crowd in my hand. Then there came the avalanche of booing. That made me happy, so I showed my ass: I was dressed as a defenseless country maid. They were like sheep and their bleating boos confirmed the justice of my intervention: yes, that yellow skirt large as a flower petal, that green sweater, that red flower on my chest, red like the stockings over my black tights, those Turkish espadrilles, that ageless make-up – they made for beautiful dress [...]. I returned to Milan with clearer ideas, and much less agitated than when I wrote you before leaving (Ivi, 180).

I share this story not only because it has attained mythic status in Mieli's biography, but because it evokes the centrality of performance to Mieli's political project, and especially his playing with modes of performative disruption and pleasure. In Mieli's work not only offers written rationalized critiques of normality (which, in Mieli's case, I would argue are imbued with a similar performative dimension), *stages* a disruption of normalizing procedures. I emphasize the stage in keeping with José Muñoz's reworking of the

²⁷ The Italian word here is *mitra*, which is a religious vestment usually reserved for bishops. It is also used colloquially to mean a machine gun or assault rifle. Mieli makes ample use of puns in his writing, this one meaning to associate the repressive power of the Catholic Church with that of state violence.

²⁸ Here Mieli refers to the Historic Compromise between the Italian Communist Party (Pci) and the Christian Democratic Party (DC). During the 1970s this calculated political move gained the ire of the extra parliamentary movements which swept through Italy in that decade, including the revolutionary wing of the gay liberation movement.

normalizing dictum “It is only a ‘stage’”, often launched at queer children by their parents, along the lines of what he calls the “utopian performative”²⁹. Muñoz reminds us that utopia, as a temporal coordinate oriented towards the future, also offers a spatialized critique of a stultified present that is not enough. “Utopian performativity”, he writes, “suggests another modality of doing and being that is in process, unfinished” (Muñoz 2009, 99). In my view Mieli offers a version of this in Bologna by confronting a crowd of a presumed heterosexual left that was bowing to the demands of a repressive state when they were supposed to be protesting that very procedure of repression. Instead, Mieli saw fit to spark a different conversation by offering his body as vision of the transsexual utopia that he argues for in *Towards a Gay Communism*, one which invites its audience to experience the potentialities of their lost selves. As Mieli writes in his little-known interview on the importance of theater for militancy:

Everyone must experiment with the self: this theater should be an invitation to people to experience themselves, because in the society of spectacle, which is the neurotic society, each one of us tends in general to not know ourselves, and the limits of our potential, not only on a mental level, but physically as well. Another very important point is that the actor should make people see how everything can be done in public; that the actor succeeds in overcoming their modesty and in attempting to convince others to conquer theirs through theatrical experience. (Mieli 1978, 102)

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²⁹ See Muñoz (2009, 97-113). I also see this as prescient of the fact that Mieli’s revolutionary gay communism has been contained as merely the early ‘stage’ or phase in the ‘evolution’ of the gay movement in Italy. Once again see Prearo (2015) for a critique of this view on the history of the LGBT movement in Italy.

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