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# An Ambivalent Object. Sex Work, Discourse and Policies in Italy, from Merlin to Berlusconi

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## Abstract

By delving into the recent history of sex work in Italy, and the related practices, discourses and policies implemented in the past sixty or so years in the *Bel Paese*, this essay suggests that commercial sex is at the center of a plurality of forces and phenomena, which are apparently very distant from it, but converge on this «hub» and, while transforming it into an observation point able *to see* the changes in the surrounding society, on occasions use it as a lever *to produce* transformations. The instrumental and changing nature of commercial sex makes of this object and the people involved an ambivalent lieu, situated between freedom and repression, change and social conservatism.

**Keywords:** prostitution, gender, social change, city, Italy.

## 1. Introduction: Sex and Vice as an Allegory of the Social

In a distinctive work, Buci-Glucksmann (1986) observes, on the traces of Walter Benjamin, that the «urban development of prostitution as a mass phenomenon leading to legislation, along with the visible «massification» of feminine bodies, expresses a historical change even more typical of the middle of the twentieth century - expressed in new relations between the visible and the invisible, the representable and unrepresentable, and their consequent practices and discourses». In this perspective, women's bodies as well as prostitution, are two allegories of the modern city, and as many collections of fragments, tantamount to the complexity of social life. In dealing with them, both legislators and society are not simply concerned with actual bodies and sex, but with the changes occurring in different realms of society. More bluntly, in such a perspective, discourse and regulations regarding commercial sex reflect, more often than not, a concern with changes in the economy, demography and the activities present in countries and cities, or in the international organization of labor division.

In this perspective, e.g., the killing of Mary Rogers – one of the most famous cases in the American history of sexual crimes – takes place in the changing New York of 1841. Over the course of the previous decade, in fact, the city had gone through significant transformations: the sudden industrialization of the area, the emergence of a politicized working-class, the growth of immigration, and the increasing polarization of the economic condition of the social classes. Within such a structural frame, the complexity of the developing city, with its day- and night-life, its new opportunities, and the changing roles of the sexes, overturns the classic family structure and produces strains between old social expectations and new individual goals. The mysterious death of Mary Rogers, an «easy girl», if not a prostitute, suspended between the new and old worlds of life, becomes, for the newspapers and public opinion, a way of debating not so much on the victim, but on the present and future of the American city and its moral life (Srebnick 1995).

The infamous case of Jack the Ripper, the killer of prostitutes in the London of 1888, is not so very different. Serial homicides took place in a city characterized by the rise of the *lumpen,* growing tensions between social classes and the physical deterioration of many urban areas. The spreading of socialist ideologies, frequent rioting and the

emergence of a moral question, intertwined with the new, ambivalent claims of the feminist movement interested in morality, as well as in the enlargement of social rights for the working class, represented the background in which Jack's murders were interpreted and understood by the audience. It is not by chance, then, that at different times Jack the Ripper has been portrayed by different subjects as a migrant anarchist Jew from Russia, a cop, a satyr belonging to the upper-class, a «scientific humanitarian» (that is, perhaps, a sociologist), and in many other ways that recall one of the «ghosts» of the different segments of that society in a specific moment of its public life. Likewise, it is not by chance that the ultimate message conveyed by those slaughters, at least in the reading provided by the opinion leaders and the authorities of the day, was that the city is full of dangers, and that women were best advised not to cross the threshold of their homes (Walkowitz 1982).

But vice also plays a seductive role. At the turn of the 19th Century, and increasingly over the next decades, Chicago and New York were the scenario for a new leisure-time activity: «slumming». As Heap argues: «The practice of slumming, firmly embedded in the bourgeois ideology, actively created the very balance of pleasure and danger that, in the alternate guises of benevolent reform and amusement seeking, it both pretended to rectify and exploited» (Heap 2009, 23). Sections of Harlem, the Tenderloin, the Levee and many other areas in both cities became home to bordellos, opium smokehouses, clubs and cabarets, which attracted, among others, women and men of the upper- and middle-class, and gave those neighborhoods their distinctive character resulting from a combination of sin and entertainment – a prelude to bohemia. Even in this case, vice intertwines with radical changes in the urban, and the emergence of new groups of interest. Immigrant and working-class entrepreneurs, e.g., opened gambling halls and brothels aimed at providing for different sexual needs and tastes, and diversified the array of raffish options available in the areas. Real estate owners speculated and endorsed the subdivision of decadent dwellings into lodging houses and tenements, participating in the vertical development of the city and the selection of the people living in the considered sections – mostly, a low-income and transient population such as the one studied by Zorbaugh (1929). Although, at different times, the same owners would be responsible for policies aimed at «cleaning up» the neighborhoods,

after that, urban decay and social unrest were said to have impacted the value of real estate.

Moreover, as both the original work of Cressey (1932) and the recent reconstruction by Heap (2009) show, such areas soon became the ground within which professional organizations of reformers, anti-vice societies, and social workers established their presence, giving shape to modern social intervention and influencing policies and visions of these specific problems. Obviously, then, vice, in its multifaceted aspects, became one of the terrains within which the very modern nexus between knowledge and power developed (Foucault 1981).

In a study devoted to the work of W.I. Thomas, Cappetti (1991) observes that the ultimate sense of the analysis developed by the American scholar in his classic *Unadjusted Girl*, is that the individual maladjustment present in certain areas of vice, is the same as that experienced by all people in their migration to «modernity», regardless of their nationality and lieu of residence. While this permits a broader analysis and the mention of cases related not only to the European and American experience of the beginning of the past century, but also to more recent post-colonial and post-socialist scenarios, characterized by «transition» (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998) and couched within complex international and domestic relationships, in recent times, prostitution in most western states increasingly involves migrants.

Regardless of whether commercial sex for migrants from developing countries is a fast way to accumulate capital to be reinvested at home (Agustín 2007) or a coercive practice due to exploitative criminal networks (Monzini 2005), since the end of the 1980s, the sex market has become increasingly «ethnic». Less than a decade later, this characterization of the market encountered the changes occurring in the public management of disorder, inspired by a mix of neoliberal principles of «Zero Tolerance» and an open institutional xenophobia (Holmes 2000; Fassin 2013).

In the light of these remarks, prostitution seems to be something more complex and articulated than a mere discourse on women, men, and their sexuality. Rather, commercial sex is at the center of a plurality of forces, that are apparently very distant from it, that converge on this hub and, while transforming it into an observation point able *to see* the changes in the surrounding society, on occasions use it as a lever *to produce* such shifts. In the next sections, then, prostitution will become this observation

point, and through it we will try to read the changes that have taken place in Italy from the end of the 1950s to the present day.

The analysis will thus draw on a body of sociological and historical literature dealing with the economic, urban, criminological and cultural changes in Italy, and will also reference articles and reports published in the period considered by the newspaper «La Stampa» – one of the oldest and most influential Italian newspapers, and the only one that provides a full online archive collection for the years under scrutiny. I will show, therefore, how the mainstream discourse on prostitution reflects the transformations taking place in the country, and how it relates to emerging ideas of modernity, and the interests of specific groups of reformers and institutions.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the analysis presented in this essay mirrors an «official» discourse – namely, a discourse that often purports to be «sex-less», voiced by groups that speak in the name of a «neutral» and impersonal idea of civility. Or, that have been pronounced by women holding solid positions within institutions, groups of interest and society; positions, social roles and interests that are very different from those held by the final recipients of their messages and policies: the sex workers.

Clearly, this is not to deny the existence of other discourses that have been voiced by different women who are active in the public sphere, nor to reproduce the idea that sex workers are just «victims» incapable of advancing their own claims. Only, over the course of the years, that mainstream discourse and the subsequent policy measures in Italy have shown themselves to be rather insensitive to this *other* discourse and self-referential. Moreover, this alternative discourse was directly addressed to the women active in prostitution very late on, only in the early 1980s (Staderini 1985). Therefore, an analysis of the general perception of prostitution in Italian society should distinguish between discourses and policies produced in the sites of power, and the advancements in the political and scholarly debate on the issues of women's self-determination and autonomy (e.g., among certain feminist groups, and sex workers' organizations) – recognizing that, in this specific field, the impact of these latter political and intellectual movements on national policies in the matter of commercial sex, has been minimal. Without taking into account that a relevant part of the feminist discourse (especially the more radical) has been against prostitution and, *de facto*, prostitutes (see, among many, the influential example of Millett, 1971). As a consequence, the discourse on

prostitution appeared, with some noticeable exceptions, as a discourse uttered *elsewhere* – that is, *by* and *among* women or groups that had nothing to do with the everyday reality of prostitution, but who held different ideological agendas, or had material stakes in providing new social services, thus shaping the early facets of the modern «rescue industry».

## 2. The Merlin Law and Post-World War II Italy

What has been suggested on the previous pages is that, usually, discourse on commercial sex is less a discussion about women than about society at large. The debate about the end of prostitution regulation in Italy is not an exception to this rule – and, in fact, it has been a discussion lead by men more often than by women (in spite of the fact that the proponent of the law which changed the features of the country with regard to sex and sexuality was a woman) (Bellassai 2006).

For now, it is important to highlight that 1958 is the year during which an era ends in Italy, and the bordellos are closed[1]. During that year, in fact, the act proposed by the socialist senator Lina Merlin (L. 75/1958) transformed Italy into an abolitionist country; or, to be more precise, into a country that does not criminalize prostitution-itself, but its exploitation.

Such a change was not sudden, and it took place over a period of about ten years. A long lapse of time that corresponds to some of the most important phases of recent national history. A decade that implies both material and moral changes, and sees dramatic changes in Italy.

The first step towards the new law was made by Lina Merlin in 1949, at the end of the Second World War. As Bellassai has shown in his accurate reconstruction of the

[1] Despite the controls and the bureaucratic management of bordellos by the State, the actual number of establishments and workers is debated. Different sources suggest that in 1949 there were between 598 and 715 houses of pleasure in Italy, and about 3,300 sex workers. Nine year later, when the law was passed, there were about 450 open houses. Moreover, during those years there were at least three types of sex workers: those working indoors; those working on the street, with a license; and those working on the street, but with no license and, therefore, illegally. All types were somehow criminalized, and were for different reasons the target of police operations. However, the third type ended up by including all those «rebellious» women who lived «indecent» lives, but were not prostitutes, and that had the disgrace of being caught over the course of one of the many nightly round-ups that the police set in motion on the streets of the Italian cities of the time. See: Bellassai (2006, 28-29); Petiziol (1961, 12).

phases, interests, and the cultural milieu within which the new regulation develops, the emanation process was delayed by many technical obstacles, which were only partially the result of fate.

Indeed, the proposed law – a document presented by a woman, a fact that should be highlighted – posed a threat to the very configuration of sex relations in Italy. Bordellos were a real institution in the social life of Italy and, as in other countries, one of the «lieu of memory» in the *Bel paese* (Franzina 1999, 27). Since the years of Unity, about ninety year before, when they made their appearance in modern guise, the collective memory of bordellos was related, among many other things, to the First World War and the colonial experience (Stefani 2007). In short, they were the places «where there was a certain management of libido, which for certain aspects was comfortable and reassuring, with which the Italians had learned to live, and where a good part of their sexual manifestations took place» (Sorcinelli 1993, cited in Franzina 1999, 29). At different times, and in dramatic phases of the national history, in men's perspective and memory, the women operating in those houses in the homeland and abroad, in times of peace and war, were not seen only as «public sewers» (Barnheimer 1989), necessary for a specific bodily function, but a representation of home. That is, places where a particular kind of «warmth», very much related to a certain idea of maternal space, could be found (D'Amelia 2005). But bordellos were also places of sexual initiation for adolescents and people affected by «sexual misery» (the ugly, the retarded, or the shy); or harbors for particular workers operating in a regime of sexual segregation (sailors and soldiers *in primis*), and also circles for the upper-class. Though very stratified in terms of standards and fees – thus mirroring class inequalities – bordellos were a real point of communality and a shared experience for different classes and social types, attended as they were by *lumpen,* workers, professionals, aristocrats, and also revolutionaries belonging to the Communist party, or anarchists like Gaetano Bresci, the assassin of King Umberto I, who utilized such spaces as a meeting place. Not by chance then, what might seem remarkable, in the words of Franzina, is the surprising social homogeneity and continuity of the phenomenon during the years 1914-1959 – from World War I to Fascism and, finally, the Republic (Franzina 1999, 41).

But bordellos were also spaces of contradictions. They were, in fact, popular and, at the same time, unmentionable. Franzina observed that present changes in culture, and

the collapse of linguistic taboos reflected by the careless use in Italian of words referring to sex, and also to bordellos (e.g., the word *casino*, extremely common in today's language), do not allow full understanding of the morbid and secretive climax connected to the attendance of «houses of pleasure». Though inhabited by women, bordellos were chiefly a realm of men, whose familiarity with those spaces had to be vigorously denied in public, and which produced verbal idiosyncrasies (Franzina 1999, 35). Glorified in the hidden and secretive discourse of men, these places and their inhabitants were also at the center of highly stigmatizing police and medical practices. Once inside the business, the women's identity was recorded in a police register, and the label of prostitute would accompany their future life forever, leaving them with almost no options other than remaining in the sex market. Moreover, this registration was connected to a coercive medical dispositive aimed at preventing venereal diseases, which consisted of bi-weekly check-ups. Under Fascism, the intertwinement between these two regimes of control and knowledge exceeded the space of bordellos, and allowed officers to stop women suspected of enticement in the street, and force them to undergo medical tests. On the basis of the «presumption of infection», the refusal to undergo a test allowed the authorities to send detained women to centers for the treatment of syphilis under surveillance of the police force[2].

In perhaps a perverse way, and with many contradictions and much resistance, especially under Fascism, bordellos were also positively connected to the sacred institution of marriage. Common and scholarly wisdom deemed that sex workers participated in the conservation of the family institution, and preserved households from the disintegration caused by real adultery, based on sentiment rather than men's physiological need to diversify their sexual partners (Wanrooij 1987; Bellassai 2006).

In the post-war years under scrutiny, all these arguments and collective feelings were not only reminiscences of the historical development of a mentality. On the contrary, they were entirely part of the social fabric of Italy in the post-war years – and were the

[2] It is remarkable that before 1931, when the «presumption of infection» was introduced into legislation, Italy, unlike other countries (e.g., the UK with its "Contagious Diseases Act" of 1864), had no such prevision within the law. The «Crispi Regulation» of 1888, e.g., was explicit in prohibiting the compulsory treatment of women who refused to be subjected to medical tests. See: Bellassai (2006, 25). Moreover, with regard to the police-related aspects of the issue, Wanrooij (1987) notices also that Mussolini was very suspicious of bordellos and the activities, other than the sexual ones, that might take place within them. Among other reasons, this is why he ordered police authorities to keep bordellos under control.

same arguments raised by eminent members of its political, legal and medical elites over the course of the debate that accompanied the emanation of the Merlin Law. They reflect, then, a common feeling and wisdom.

In 1949 – the decade during which the new debate on prostitution develops – Italy is a country where, outside major urban areas, very little has changed in terms of social organization and values. In spite of the alterations caused by war, traditional order was in fact resilient. Fascism itself, the epitome of an absolute power aimed at pursuing a radical project of modernization, had not achieved its goal of changing the very ground of sexual relations. In her study on motherhood in the modern history of Italy, e.g., D'Amelia (2005) has shown very clearly how families resisted the regime's attempts to break the traditional separation of the sexes in the social space. And also how such division and the values that justified it were shared by families belonging to the circles of political opposition. Certainly, as argued by Fincardi (1996) and Franzina (1999), in certain rural areas in the north of the country, namely in Val Padana, peasants and other agricultural workers had produced important innovations in this respect since the very beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century. Boys and girls, e.g., had common spaces destined for dancing and leisure, that were not controlled by their parents. The circulation of socialist ideologies and the related morality, together with the experience of migration abroad, and the learning of new styles of sociability, had produced in these very specific parts of Italy a sort of emancipation of the lower strata of society. But such experiences were not representative of the general feelings of Italian society in the matter of sex relations.

The year the debate begins sees Italy caught in a series of contradictions, comprising these and many others. It is a country devastated by war and grappling with reconstruction. The infrastructure and many cities need to be rebuilt almost completely. The Government and the public administration are to be consolidated, while officers and executives in many administration departments are the same as those under Fascism. The cost of goods is subject to high inflation rates. In the countryside, especially in the South, peasants have almost no land, and their attempts to have access to it are repressed by the army and the mafia. In the industrialized northern areas, unemployment, inflation and low salaries make the conditions of the working class extremely difficult. In terms of political values, the country encompasses different

ideologies and interests. The Communist Party faces the opposition of the Christian Democrats, who are supported by the United States and have the task of eliminating the communist threat and guaranteeing a transition consistent with American interests. Radical reforms sought by the social component of the Communist Party are hindered by the Vatican, that, through the wide control exercised by the parishes, keeps whole sectors of society under control. Perhaps surprisingly, due to the post-war international agreements in the matter of areas of influence and Stalin's instructions, the same Communist Party chooses to keep a much lower profile than the masses would expect[3].

Therefore, the debate on prostitution, which is really a debate on the relations between the sexes, sexuality, and human rights, begins within a world characterized by many fractures and ambivalences. On the one hand, there are the claims of an emerging component of society, embodied by a female socialist, Lina Merlin, to overcome a certain sexual order, the traditional exploitation of women, and the limitation of liberties related to such an order. On the other hand, we find the conservatism of eminent members of the political parties, who resist «feminist» visions of society; the male chauvinism common to the right- and left-wing; the role of medicine, which fears the possible sanitary effects stemming from the closure of bordellos, and the negative opinion of police authorities. Finally, there are also international pressures – such as those from the United Nations, that, in 1949, ratifies an abolitionist convention.

What–made the closing of the bordellos possible in 1958, was the sudden «acceleration» that characterized Italian society during that decade. Moreover, these were the same years that laid the basis for the so-called *miracolo italiano* (the Italian miracle), that took place between 1958-1962, during which Italy experienced one of the highest development rates in the world. The end of economic protectionism; the full inclusion of Italy in the European Common Market (ECM); mass internal migration, and the low cost of labor; the slow industrialization of formerly rural areas; the diffusion of television, and the physical and demographic growth of city centers, launched Italy into «modernity». During these years, family structure and organization changed dramatically. Households became considerably smaller, and more and more young women entered the labor market (with much resistance, in the presence of strong

[3] For a discussion concerning all these aspects of recent Italian history, see: Ginsborg (1990).

economic inequalities, and in a moral climate that, in general, did not favor their employment outside the home) (Ginsborg 1990).

Moreover, new styles of consumption, unprecedented «moral panics» related to the emergence of a youth culture, and the diffusion of new sounds, dances, clubs and forms of leisure made their appearance. And, together with them, the real or alleged «decay» of the upper-classes and the «predatory» tendencies of the lower strata of society – the same as those portrayed by Fellini in «La dolce vita»[4]. Within this field – in reality, far more multifaceted and complex than this description suggests – Italian society began to think of bordellos as an unhealthy and outmoded institution – something very distant from the very notion of «modernity» that was developing in the country. At the same time, a more tolerant morality towards sex began to develop, and the opportunities for men and women to meet increased. Medical advances produced a «therapeutic revolution», and most experts stopped being afraid of sexually transmitted diseases. Moreover, in France, a country that had closed down its bordellos in 1946, and which was a model for Italy in many organizational aspects, the reform had appeared to work out well from a sanitary point of view (Bellassai 2006, 22-23). Given this new climate, the Merlin law was finally passed in 1958.

It would be naïve, however, to believe that the end of bordellos was the mere consequence of a secular sentiment spreading throughout the country. In fact, considering the political balance present in parliament, the Christian democrats' endorsement of the law was absolutely necessary; and, as claimed by Bellassai (2006, 152), «the Catholics stole the issue from the hands of the left-wing». They demanded changes that altered the «feminist» character of the act, and accepted to vote in favor only in order to oppose an institution that they saw as a source of social unrest and «white slavery» (Bellassai 2006, 153).

In addition, the instrumental use of a progressive agenda in favor of women's rights and the rights of certain minorities, and the subversion of the proposed values in order

[4] For a complete political and social depiction of these years, see: Crainz (1996). A very important and critical book on the years of the «miracle» and the changes occurring afterwards, which can still be found at the center of cyclical debates, is by Pierpaolo Pasolini (1987). Already at the end of the 1950s, moreover, forms of criminalization of urban youth, resembling those studied in the UK by Cohen in a famous book, became very common in the national press. See: Cohen (1973).

to affirm opposing conservative interests – a very common occurrence in the history of modern Italy and in the interplay between right and left – probably begins here.

## 3. The Post-Merlin Law Era

With the end of the bordellos, commercial sex enters a new phase, whose features are somehow more similar to the present. As the law was now characterized in a «Christian» sense, prostitutes were considered mostly as «victims» to be rescued and re-educated (Danna 2004, 36). But, in reality, one should not stress this confessional element too much, as this consideration was intimately shared by different parties, and there are no reasons to think that, if alone, the left-wing would have addressed the issue in a radically different way. Not by chance, in 1950, a number of representative women belonging to different political wings, including the socialist senator Lina Merlin, together with a few other women from high society, had founded the Italian Committee for the Moral Defense of the Woman (CIDD), an association aimed at assisting women with problems or those on the margins of society[5].

The Committee began its activities in 1958, when, after the Merlin Law was passed, it became responsible for the organization and management of the «patronati» – that is, the houses for the re-education, assistance, and job placement of former prostitutes. In this respect, it is important to note that out of 33,079 women assisted by CIDD in the years 1958-1971, only 6,588 found a job (Danna 2004, 36). Such figures help put sex-workers in both the surrounding context, as well as that generated specifically by the Merlin law.

As previously mentioned, prostitution was a highly stigmatized activity. As noted in classic criminological analyses on labeling processes (Lemert 1951, 75-76; Becker 1963, 9), for decades the label of prostitute issued by control agencies followed women to their every destination, and prevented many of them from starting a new life. Accordingly, despite the fact that article 7 of the Merlin Law forbade the authorities from tracking the records of women suspected of being prostitutes, the police kept registering them as «habitual delinquents». As a consequence, until 1985, such women

[5] Under a different name, the Committee still exists. Its history and some documents can be read at the following link: http://www.cirsitalia.it/storia.html

could not obtain the licenses needed to start commercial activities (Danna 2004). In general, even though many of them showed interest in a different life, they became trapped within a trajectory that did not leave room for anything different.

But, beyond the labeling process and the subsequent reduction of opportunities, such entrapment also reflected the new societal structure of the time. Between 1955 and 1970, in fact, about 25 million people moved from villages to city centers. About ten million moved between regions. In the years 1958-1963, there were about 1 million southerners who moved to the north, and their number grew considerably over the following period. Within this framework of movement, Fascist laws aimed at contrasting internal migration, and the loss of population in rural areas, were still active though not integrally applied; notwithstanding that, provisions of law hindered the mobility of internal migrants and, above all, the quality of their resettlement process. The combination of labor market structure and the legal framework, thus, transformed many migrants into «outlaws»; that is, into illegal aliens living and operating in a gray space within their own homeland[6]. Moreover, the employment rate for women – particularly, in the age group of 30-49 year olds – decreased considerably in the 1960s and actually became one of the lowest in Europe. (Ginsborg 1990, 331) It was quite common for women of all classes to retire from work after the birth of their first; and, at least in the case of the lower classes, to re-enter the labor market much later, when the children were older, but under irregular working conditions, for a very low salary, and mostly part-time (Balbo 1976). Already at that time, in fact, the extension of the «black economy» in Italy was considerable, and played an important role in determining the *miracolo*[7].

In these conditions, the sex workers, who were by definition, well before these changes, transient and migrant figures themselves[8], and belonged to that underclass that

[6] Crainz (1996, 108-111). For classic sociological analyses of the time, see also: Alasia and Montaldi (2010); Ferrarotti (1974).
[7] For an economic history of Italy, see: Zamagna (1993).
[8] Women working in the bordellos used to change house and city every fifteen days (such a turnover was called, in fact, *la quindicina*, the fortnight). Moreover, a good number of them often escaped from villages, in which anonymity was impossible and there were also good chances that their occupation was known to people. In order to understand how pervasive state control was, one should consider that the brothers and sons of sex workers could not join, e.g., the police or the army. The abjection of their conditions was therefore extended to their family. Thus, the label of prostitute hindered women from returning home, and the expulsion orders issued by police on certain occasions forced sex-workers to wander from one city to another. Bellassai (2006, 32).

participated in a segmented and troubled way, to the development of the country, carried on occupying the margins of society and were necessarily drawn into a gray area at the borders of illegality and crime. It is at this point that the streets, rather than the houses of pleasure, became the «natural» environment for sex workers, and the one with which they are associated in the collective imagination – and with the streets, the pimps and the exploiters of every sort. The same urban scenario that, in addition to news reports, can be found in films made by important directors inspired by the neo-realist ethos (e.g., *La notte brava* by Bolognini), and in dozens of popular Italian B-movies of the 1970s (the so-called *poliziotteschi*)[9]. Without taking into account some of the famous novels, such as those by Pasolini or Bianciardi, aimed at describing the impact of the new development model on the city and its citizens, the clash of values between «patterns of civilizations» (the rural and the new urban), and the emergence of new classes situated both at the top and the bottom of Italian society (Pasolini 2008; Id. 2007; Bianciardi 1965).

The scenario that accompanied the shifts in the sex market, then, was the same that came to characterize Italian cities, from the north to the south of the country. Following a model sketched under Fascism, the urban environment that was taking shape in those years (1950-1960s) – whose forms and effects resemble those experienced under today's neo-liberalism (Harvey 2006; Davis 2006) – was based on the very notions of extension, modernization, diversification, and speculation. Due to internal migration and the demographic growth in both larger and smaller centers, the need for land generated new markets and the expansion of cities. A mixture of public and private investments created different opportunities for each typology of customer. The suburbs of centers such as Milan or Rome – but also, e.g., Naples, Palermo, and other smaller towns – grew inordinately, and the neighborhoods created were destined to host public projects and residential housing, and were provided with different services and infrastructures – often with insufficient or no infrastructures at all, at least in the case of those agglomerates built expressly for a low-income population. In addition, several areas grew spontaneously thanks to the initiative of builders, and were constructed with

[9] It is remarkable that, since the end of the 1950s, prostitutes have populated an almost endless number of Italian films aimed at inquiring or portraying social change in different phases of the national history. It suffices to read one of the many volumes that comprise the «Dizionario del cinema italiano» (by Gremese publ.) to substantiate this impression. See also: Bondanella (2007).

poor materials and without any regulation or control. These were zones of shacks inhabited by the *lumpen*, and home to a number of petty criminals and, certainly, prostitutes[10]. In major cities like Rome and Milan such neighborhoods were called *borgate* and *coree*, respectively, and they became part of the national imagination and real epitomes for the concept of the suburbs: violent, poor, and desperate – just like the lives of the prostitutes were said to be. Also the popular image of prostitutes as *lucciole* (fireflies), still very common in Italian usage, develops at this time: indicating groups of women standing around bonfires on cold nights, waiting for clients on dusty roads, with rows of new buildings or buildings under construction in the background.

But the streets and *borgate* were not the only places where the marginal actors of the «miracle» lived their parallel existences. During these years, the model of urban development was, in fact, variegated. The patterns of urban reconfiguration were not based exclusively on the gentrification of the historical centers, and the expulsion of the low-income population, with an internal migration towards the new suburbs. On the contrary, several different patterns operated, often at the same time and in the same city, and reverse models of urbanization could therefore be found. To mention only a few cases, places with extensive historical centers, such as Genoa, Naples, Catania, or Palermo, continued to have large enclaves of marginality within the old parts of the city (and the situation has not changed much during the last few years; although these areas have perhaps shrunk)[11]. And in most of these historical centers, some "districts of pleasure" were to be found; that is, areas specializing in prostitution, inhabited mostly by sex workers, and made up of many street level apartments and buildings that, even in the past, in some cases for centuries, had housed bordellos (and that, in Chicagoan terms, represented therefore a sort of "natural" area)[12].

These areas, however, were not separate from the rest, and were fairly integrated into the life of the neighborhoods that were being reshaped by a mixture of old and new

[10] Beyond their *lumpen* identity and their relation to an underworld of people who get by, in some cases these areas also produced some of the most famous gangs and bandits of the entire Italian criminal history: Banda della Magliana, Banda Cavallero, Renato Vallanzasca, etc. On the production of such spaces, see: Alasia and Montaldi (2010); Ferrarotti (1970); Salierno (1972); Bortolotti (1978).

[11] For discussions on these cities, their social components and life, see: Pardo (1996); Dal Lago and Quadrelli (2003) (on Genoa); Fava (2007); Longo and Graziano (2009) (on Catania).

[12] Via del Campo (Genoa) and San Berillo (Catania) are only two of such areas, otherwise present in many cities in the 1950-1960s; but these two are probably the most famous. In spite of resizing and many changes (especially in Catania), they have kept their identity and are still centers of prostitution.
On the concept of «natural area», see: Park, Burgess and McKenzie (1925).

dwellers, social types and practices. Despite the regional differences, according to the detailed reconstruction given by Quadrelli (2004), these neighborhoods should be understood in the framework of the Fordist city of the 1960s. The prevalent character of these spaces, in short, was provided by their popular and working-class identity. It was primarily a world of manual workers, artisans, and people who got by. In particular, in the case of the northern cities, the recent transformations resulting from new migrations had certainly affected the features of these places. But the new character was not so different from the original, and different groups got along in one way or another. Moreover, the shifts of the time were rather general, and they stemmed from an exposure to new cultural stimuli (values, music, life-styles, etc.). Much as anywhere else in the society of that time, clashes within such communities were chiefly generational. Moreover, as demonstrated by political affiliations and electoral results, especially in the case of the north, this working class population experienced, on the whole, a sense of membership and identity that was expressed through opposition to the bourgeoisie and the authorities (chiefly, the police)[13]. Certain «traditional» forms of deviance were widely tolerated, and prostitutes were not the object of any resentment or special attention.

In the 1960s, then, the world of prostitution appeared to be as differentiated as it had been before. What had changed was the intensity of the phenomenon on the streets. Different forms of visibility and new urban areas were interested by the phenomenon, mostly as a consequence of changes to legislation.

Some important changes concerned the tone of representations. While women working indoors were almost eclipsed, those present on the street gained visibility and found themselves at the center of new popular narrations. Novelists and film directors, in particular, paid much attention to the phenomenon, in a key that seemed to reflect the particular «social(ist) sensitivity» of the time. Sex workers were seen as part of that broad category of people excluded from the economic miracle that was shaking Italy in those years. During those years, however, Catholic thought had laid down the basis of the «victim» approach that became dominant much later; it was a way of looking at problems, however, that was somehow typical of its style of intervention in the social sphere, and that was connected to the «pastoralism» of the doctrine. It is important to

[13] For a similar description, referring to the UK, see: Willis (1977).

highlight, in fact, that very early in the history of the Republic, thanks to a deliberate strategy adopted by Christian Democratic governments, the Church and related organisms specializing in social work and assistance obtained a sort of primacy, and their role became ancillary to the State (Crainz 1996; Ferrera 2012). In any case, this type of approach paradoxically helped protect the women who were active in the lower layers of the sex market. In the public discourse of the time, in fact, attempts to portray them as a threat never developed into real systematic campaigns against prostitution. Rather, as can be seen from the online consultation of articles published between the years 1959-1979 in the national newspaper *La Stampa*, until the first half of the 1970s they were mostly portrayed as victims of robberies and violence by petty criminals[14]. Only occasionally is there news concerning round-ups, or the isolated protests of groups of citizens against the presence of *mondane* («women of the world», in the prudish language of the time) on the streets near their houses. Still, in 1974, during a Holy Synod, the religious authorities shocked the audience when, unexpectedly, they included prostitution among the themes for discussion and stated that: «vice is to be condemned, but the condition of these women generates sentiments of pity because it is caused by poverty and craftiness». The moment when sex workers were to become the public enemy was still to come.

## 4. Commercial Sex in a Complex Society (1970s)

In spite of the relative marginality of prostitution in the national media coverage of the time, starting from 1970 it is possible to witness the slow emergence of a new discursive regime, which will become quite common in the second half of the decade. In the August of that year, in fact, an article appears that poses an interesting question: «How to Tax Them? Exploiters and Prostitutes will be reported to the Revenue Office»[15]. The commentary claims that prostitution in the city of Turin is now a racket: «The most organized is the one run by the 'Tunisians' – who are all 'poor', have the status of 'refugee' and collect the dole […] Another very strong gang is that of the

[14] La Stampa, «Il sinodo parla delle mondane», October 18, 1974, p. 21.
[15] La Stampa, «Tassarli ma come? Sfruttatori e prostitute saranno segnalate al fisco», p. 4.

'Catanesi'». Both pimps and girls are said to own fancy cars and luxurious houses. The problem for the authorities, then, is how to make these people pay taxes.

In November 1970 another article explains that in Italy there are «one million prostitutes»[16]. Over the course of the 11th congress of the Italian Committee for the Moral Defense of the Woman (CIDD), the Christian Democratic delegate Pia Colini Lombardo, indeed, informs the audience that not only are there one million prostitutes, but their number is increasing. «They tend to be disguised. They are leaving the sidewalks, and are working as manicurists or escorts and provided with cars; or they seek customers in stadiums, boxing matches, thermal centers, holiday resorts, trains, airports, cruises, festivals and congresses, and casinos».

Eight years later the turnaround would be complete, and in an article dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the Merlin Law, a commentator observed that for the increasing levels of prostitution (about 1.2 million prostitutes present in the country) «it is not Senator Merlin who is responsible, but the times; a 'wild prostitution' has proliferated, infinite and often aggressive, around which pimps, the 'violent arm' of exploitation, can be found in great number»[17].

During the 1970s, then, many new discursive elements can be found: prostitution is less a matter of poverty and victims than of organized crime (the racket). Such crime has "ethnic" features (the Tunisians and the Catanesi run the business). Prostitution threatens the fiscal base of the country. Prostitutes are no longer 'innocent', but wild and aggressive. «Statistics» and quantifications are used to illustrate these deviant phenomena (so that about 4% of Italian women are estimated as being prostitutes - if, from a population of 27 million women, 1.2 million are said to be in the business). Finally, new elements of concern are accompanied, at least implicitly, by old and classic motives related to the growing presence of independent women in masculine spaces (such as stadiums, boxing matches and many others indicated over the course of the congress of the Committee for the Moral Defense of the Woman).

These sparse elements, however, are only superficially related to prostitution itself. Rather, they reflect the changes that occurred in the country during the 1970s, and are the portrait of a country under siege.

[16] La Stampa, «Un milione di prostitute», November 29, 1970, p. 11.
[17] La Stampa, «A quel tempo le chiamavano mondane», September 21, 1978, p. 3.

During the 1970s, as in many other countries, Italy was hit by frequent recessions. But, unlike other national systems, it had high inflation rates, a partial resizing of production, and a huge informal economy that, while helping absorb the social costs of the industrial crisis, had contributed to the huge inflation of the public debt (Ginsborg 1990, 476). In social terms, the «miracle» of the 1960s had produced contradictory effects: on the one hand, it had increased «privatism», consumerism, and the atomization of certain segments of society; on the other hand, it had radicalized the political struggles and the activism of other social components (Ginsborg 1990, 481; Calanca 2011; Crainz 2013, 61 passim). To those violent political demonstrations that had characterized the political landscape of the country since the end of World War II, terrorism had to be added. To the point that one commentator – but only one of many – observes that «if in 1968 the exemplary Italian picture portrayed crowds of workers or students in mass rallies, in 1978 it showed dead bodies abandoned on streets stained with blood, or inside cars»[18]; and, indeed, bombs used against civilian targets, together with the threat of military coups should also be part of this hypothetical picture. In addition, one of the most significant «crime waves» in national history struck Italy in those years, generating a widespread sense of insecurity, that added to what already existed due to the political backlash (Melossi 1997). Violent gangs of young robbers (the *batterie*), organized crime (*mafia* and *camorra*, in particular), and petty criminals were, certainly, some of the more meaningful «ghosts» and «moral panics» in a society that had, in fact, been exposed to countless traumas over the course of its transition towards «modernity», and that, as a consequence, had experienced a strong need for reassurance (something, moreover, that was concomitant to the interests of the very conservative and influential forces active in the country and with access to the media, and which would continue to nourish such sentiments in the following years).

In the light of these considerations, it seems normal that the way prostitution is narrated changes during these years: sex-workers, in fact, were seen as bit players in an «army of chaos» that was inundating the nation.

However, this list of «ghosts» is still incomplete. There is at least still one to add; namely «heroin». In 1976, the same CIDD that had been at the center of many efforts regarding prostitution argues that it is now possible to find girls aged under 14 within

[18] La Stampa, February 4, 1979. Cited in: Crainz, 2013, p. 55.

the sex market, and that drugs go hand in hand with prostitution[19]. This is only one chapter in a moral crusade that would involve different segments of the Italian society of the time, and work as a justification for the countless cases of abuse by the authorities – determining, moreover, a sudden increase in the number of prison inmates, and affecting the living conditions in penitentiaries at the dawn of the Aids era[20].

The 1970s, therefore, are the years during which Italy sketches a modern model of governamentality (Foucault 2007, 108) of control and penalty destined to last for many years to come, and which includes an increasing and differentiated number of subjects. New discourse on prostitution, then, can be considered only an epiphenomenon of a modern regime of disorder and deviance management that involved society at large, and that has not ended yet.

## 5. Sex and Modernity in Italy

At the beginning of the 1980s, then, forms for the modern treatment of prostitution and related deviances had been sketched out – or, at least, a direction had been taken. In a nutshell, such treatment consisted of the identification of new dangerous classes, and the intersection of social problems. Hyphened sets of social problems then started to develop: addiction-prostitution, addiction-crime, alcohol-homelessness, and so forth. A new type of simplifying social determinism was about to spread, aimed at seeking the origins of contemporary social problems in the nexus linking two major premises («crime» and «addiction» were probably the most common example in those years)[21]. Once the causes of the problems had been identified, treatment consisted mostly of prison, rehab centers, and coercive forms of control in general. From the 1980s on, the primacy of television in the construction of public opinion, the broadening of the offer in terms of programs, the changes in the communicative style of the media, and the dependency of Italian television on politics and the government, laid the basis for a new sensationalistic type of information, very much centered on problems and the subsequent fears they raised (Murialdi 2006; Ciaglia 2013).

[19] La Stampa, «Le prostitute quasi bambine», February 29, 1976, p. 15.
[20] On the effects and the traits of the repression of drugs in the 1960-1970s, see: Rusconi and Blumir (1983). On the changes in prisons during these years, see: Quadrelli (2004); De Vito (2009).
[21] For an international comparison, see: Szasz (1974); Ruggiero (1992); Rusconi and Blumir (1983).

As in most countries (Berk 1990; Plant 1990), also in Italy the rise of Aids affected the discourse on prostitution, and this projected the country into a worldwide dispositive that mixed public health, control on sexuality, and moral stances. However, with regard to Aids, in the early 1980s women prostitutes were relatively marginal to the discourse[22], as the new disease appeared to affect mostly homosexuals (Grmek 1990). In these regards, it is perhaps more interesting to observe that over the same years Italy became, for the first time in its modern history, a country of mass immigration from developing countries (Calavita 2005). And it was in those years that the *viados* – the Brazilian «transvestites» and «transsexuals» – began to occupy the scene. Occasional protagonists in fights and disorder[23], the presence of transgender people in the discourse signifies several other changes: the struggle for the rights of a marginalized group within Italian Society, embodied by organizations and their claims for legal changes and the enlargement of rights[24]; the emergence of new sexual tastes among clients and the development of a niche market, as a result of the shifts operating in popular culture and the exposure to new sexual practices and desires (accompanied, e.g., by the opening of sex-shops, the circulation of pornography on television, and other similar innovations related to sexuality). But newspaper headlines on this subject also suggest that Italy is becoming a country of tourists, and sex-tourists in particular. In 1987, the newspaper *La Stampa*, for instance, declares that the Carnival of Rio de Janeiro «is poisoned», and that there is much fear for the European tourists visiting Brazil that year («And if the Carnival spreads Aids?»)[25].

It is not by chance, then, that the 1980s are almost unanimously considered the years that projected Italy into full «modernity», not only with regard to levels of consumption, but also with regard to taste, life-styles and diversity (Crainz 2013). But from our perspective, it is perhaps more important to notice that during this period, Italy also latches onto trends and practices in the matter of penalties and public order that show

[22] In Italy, it is only in 1987 that prostitutes take to the street, and rally against the fear of Aids and the loss of clients. La Stampa, «Sulla strada la paura dell'Aids», January 6, 1987, p. 15.
[23] In 1986, the press informs the readers that 35 Brazilian transsexuals destroyed a police station after a round-up. In 1988, the reader learns about the war between the members of the Italian Movement of Transsexuals and the Southern-American transsexuals working on the streets of Milan. La Stampa, «Commissariato devastato da transessuali brasiliani», September 26, 1986; La Stampa, «'Guerra' fra transessuali per le strade di Milano», March 21, 1988.
[24] The creation of organizations is something that will also involve women sex-workers. The Committee for the Social Rights of Prostitutes, created by Pia Covre e Carla Corso in 1982 is the most famous.
[25] La Stampa, «Aids Poisons Samba», March 1, 1987.

the projection of the country not only into modernity, but also into the neoliberal management of the social sphere.

## 6. The Political Uses of Prostitution in Contemporary Italy

Dominijanni (2014) has argued that if one wants to understand contemporary Italy – in particular, the Berlusconi years – the «conjuncture 1968-Feminism» plays a central role. In this author's perspective, the end of Berlusconi's primacy in Italian politics, certainly related, among other things, to prostitution, would be the outcome of the new forms of women's presence in the public sphere matured since the end of the 1960s. In short, the thesis maintained by some observers is that, since the 1990s, the overlapping of cultural changes induced by new media grammars (imputable, however, to Berlusconi himself and his commercial television stations) (Boni 2002) and the transformations in gender dynamics stemming from the «revolution» of the 1960s and 1970s, has resulted both in the formation of a new neoliberal power related to the body and gender roles, and the crisis of this very same power – at least, in its Berlusconian manifestations.

While these media-induced changes, which are in no way specifically Italian, have certainly generated new images, aesthetics, and ethics of the body and practices, leading Italy towards a new «modernity» (a «second miracle», according to some commentators), they interest us here for reasons other than strictly cultural ones. My idea, in fact, is that in spite of some superficial changes, the changes that have occurred since the late 1990s do not add much to the tendencies, representations of the body, desires, and, finally, social relations that have been shaped over the course of the past decades by the new configurations of the economic structure.

In other words, my approach to the issue of prostitution in contemporary Italy is somehow «structuralist». That is, I prefer to address primarily those processes substantiated by policy implementations, rather than provide mere exegeses of cultural phenomena that do not frame the events within the network of material interests that have produced the considered reality.

In this regard, an outlook on the origin of such processes should notice that, early in the 1990s, the political class that led Italy to the «miracle» was destroyed by an endless series of scandals that showed the levels of corruption existing in public life

(Koff and Koff 2000). In 1994, Silvio Berlusconi filled the gap opened by the end of the «First Republic», and ruled intermittently for almost twenty years. Among his allies there were both post-fascist parties and regionalist parties interested in the production of a new Italian identity and the contradictory values of community and expansion. The State became increasingly streamlined, and social services were cut. Work became more and more precarious and salaries insufficient. Nevertheless, the country took in a growing number of immigrants. While their presence allowed the national economy to thrive, through the exploitation of this foreign labor force, the Northern League imposed stringent regulations on migration and policies of «Zero Tolerance». Migrants found themselves at the center of a contradictory policy that allowed their exploitation, while criminalizing them (Palidda 2011) Since the end of 1998, an unprecedented media campaign has been targeting different national groups for more than ten years. Street prostitution, now a business for foreign women, was highly criminalized. Cities were given new powers, and a number of by-laws were produced (Chiodini 2009; Simone 2010). Indoor prostitution increased considerably (Francioso 2009). But together with common motivations and interests highlighted by classic works (Wacquant 1999), in this country the war against foreigners and immigrant sex-workers has also played an international political role, directed against the European Union and the freedom of movement between member-States. The «racialization» of this struggle – for it was, at a given point, directed primarily against a specific national group (the Romanians) – allowed a restriction of such freedoms, the imposition of more stringent rules and new powers for States to expel unwanted EU citizens. Yet, a number of draconian acts were passed (the so-called *Pacchetti sicurezza*), which have produced a huge increase in overcrowding in Italian prisons.

In parallel to these processes, since 2009, Silvio Berlusconi has been involved in a number of scandals involving «escorts» – in Italian now a synonym for high-class prostitution. However, at the end of the first decade of the millennium, the prostitution scandals did not only involve the Prime Minister Berlusconi, but also a number of other political actors. For example, the President of the Lazio Region, a former popular television anchorman turned politician, was blackmailed by two police officers in possession of photos that portrayed him in bed with a transsexual prostitute, close to a desk covered with cocaine. At about the same time, other leading politicians were said

to have been photographed either by paparazzi or by police detectives while negotiating sex with transsexual prostitutes on the street.

Finally, in 2014 a scandal involving underage escorts in an exclusive neighborhood of Rome, *Parioli*, revealed a network of wealthy men – one of whom was married to a leading right-wing female politician – who had had sexual exchanges with these young women.

The abovementioned policies of contrast to street prostitution, and the biases generated by political sex-scandals, show a multiple articulation of the discourse on prostitution. On the one hand, there is the highly criminalized street-level sex market intended mostly for the poor; on the other hand, the low- and high-class indoor market for other customers, not criminalized and invisible. Finally, there is a «third space» that involves the politicians, the «judiciary complex» and the media.

Such articulation is interesting because it shows the ambivalent role of prostitution within Italian popular culture (and the sexual aversions of Italian society), and the political uses of it. On the one hand, commercial sex appears as something that must be confined to the domestic space. It is not criminal *in se*, but it should be kept out of sight. Paying for sex is, notoriously, something that everybody does, but politicians perhaps should not. Indeed it is something that they can do, possibly but not necessarily, with adult women (see the Ruby case, the famous Moroccan-Italian alleged lover of Berlusconi, who was in fact underage. The impression here is that rules apply differently, according to the status of the politician involved in the exchange). However, what is really, really important is that they do not sleep with transsexuals, or at least are not caught on the spot.

While these ironic observations confirm Boni's thesis (2002) that one of the most important changes in the popular culture is represented by the centrality of the leaders' bodies in the media discourse, and the increasing penetration of cameras into the everyday life of the elites, the Italian scandals also show the extension of secret forms of control in Italian society, and the uses of the law in the political life of the *Bel Paese*. To put it more bluntly, Italy appears to be dominated by formal and informal cliques of power that involve businessmen operating at the border between legal and illegal worlds, and politicians, criminals, police and journalists that use commercial sex as a way to obtain favors, blackmail their enemies or entrap their prey, and prosecute people

for reasons other than moral ones (see, e.g., the scandal that involved Telecom, the main Italian telephone company whose networks were used to blackmail businessmen and politicians). Certainly, all this is possible because sex is still a symbolic resource that can be activated and manipulated at given times by different actors, endowed with different kinds of «communicative capital», to raise popular sentiments and produce a sense of scandal.

What is also remarkable is the different degree of subjectivity granted to different players by the media. In such discourse street prostitutes are deprived of any will, and depicted only as passive victims of trafficking; the others are granted subjectivity, but are blamed in moral terms. In this respect, at the time of the scandals, the leftist and feminist anti-Berlusconi movement *Se non ora quando* vehemently attacked Berlusconi's call-girls, and proposed an image of femininity ultimately based on the idea of a well-to-do woman, who works, and makes sacrifices for her family, children and husband, and is opposed to the «bad woman» (embodied by Berlusconi's escorts) (Peroni 2012; Tarantino 2012). Incidentally, one may notice that, once again, women were the enemies of other less privileged or conformist women.

## 7. Conclusion

In spite of some relevant transformations, which, in my view, have only affected things in a superficial way, over the course of the past sixty years approaches towards prostitution have not substantially changed. Certainly, the landscapes of scholarly research and activism have changed enormously. Although this is not entirely the Italian case, sex workers have shown themselves capable of self-organization, and many studies have demonstrated the importance of individual agency behind certain personal trajectories. Nevertheless, I believe that the impact of these progressive forces is extremely limited and that, both at the popular and political level, the ways of perceiving, managing, and narrating prostitution do not differ much from the past. For instance, white slavery has been replaced by *black slavery* – that is, the concern for the trafficking of African women. Of course, this is not to deny the existence of criminal organizations who specialize in the exploitation of human beings for a variety of purposes, but only to remark that for most of the supranational authorities and indeed

common sense, prostitution continues to be primarily a matter of violence, without any trace of agency and self-determination.

Moreover, to the stigma of prostitution can be added the stigma of race. Those who are familiar with the Italian language know, for example, what is implied by the words *nigeriana* or *romena* (Nigerian or Romanian woman).

And yet, street prostitution is still criminalized, and although women no longer go to prison for being on the street, they are still frequently checked, sent to police stations on a regular basis, and also issued *fogli di via* (that is, they are expelled from the city, or the country).

In spite of the attempts to criminalize customers, indoor prostitution is allowed and perhaps also encouraged by means of the city by-laws that impede street-prostitution. If this appears very different from the logic behind the production of the *case chiuse* (the bordellos) before the Merlin Law, it does produce the same effect: It makes prostitution invisible. Many know where sex workers receive their customers, but they are mostly out of sight. Not by chance, the political forces of both wings still claim that bordellos should be re-opened.

Certainly, if being labeled a prostitute still feels derogatory, interestingly, certain sex workers have been able to crawl into an ephemeral status of cross-media stardom. Again, regarding Italy, this was especially the case with Ruby Rubacuori, although we might say that there is not much of a paradox in this occurrence since it was part of the interplay taking place within the confines of the trial that involved both Silvio Berlusconi and Ruby, and on which the media tycoon's political future and personal freedom depended. On the contrary, one of the facets of the second Italian «miracle» achieved by Berlusconi and his commercial media empire, consisted precisely in the opportunity given to every and anybody to become a star for fifteen minutes, regardless of his/her past, talent and skills. Moreover, what many of his «girls» (the so-called *olgettine*) had originally sought to achieve, apparently, was the chance of becoming television stars[26].

[26] It is important to highlight that Berlusconi's trials are not over. In the Italian judiciary system, in fact, there are three levels. It is thus possible that at the end of the day, the emerging reality will be different. The analysis, therefore, is based on partial elements. The roles of the different plaintiffs (the former Prime Minister, Ruby, the *olgettine* etc.) might result quite different from how they have been depicted.

However, the situation has changed little between sixty years ago and today, and we can still state that very few men would marry a prostitute, but that certainly many of them are still paying for sex. Like the bordellos prior to their abolition, today's commercial sex is just as common, and just as unmentionable. On the other hand, while many women would not blame sex workers for their personal choices and their work, many would be happy to take to the street against «Berlusconi's bitches», following the declarations of one of the most important national newspapers and a charismatic female journalist, in favor of a conformist ideal of a woman devoted to the family, hard work, and modesty (clearly, the case is that of the cited campaign *Se non ora quando*, run by the newspaper «La Repubblica» and the journalist Concita De Gregorio).

Finally, if the above-mentioned Italian Committee for the Moral Defense of the Woman constituted the very beginning of a modern rescue industry specialized in the moral treatment of former prostitutes, this industry has multiplied extensively thanks to the massive involvement of the «third sector» in the provision of social services, and the implementation of an endless number of «projects» aimed both at contrasting prostitution and supporting the self-awareness of the women involved in this activity.

In conclusion, the impression is that in the matter of prostitution and sexuality, six decades after the Merlin Law, and contrary to a certain sort of wisdom that is rife within national academia, Italy has, in general, not changed much, and the very notion of «modernity» appears related more to the diversification of the offer present on the market than to the social «resignification» of the experience and the connected roles, including the punitive one. And also that prostitution, beyond being a practice that produces effects on the bodies and lives of the people involved, is mostly a way to delve into the power relations and the structures operating in a country. Relations and structures that, again, in the case at hand, appear to have changed only on a superficial and tactical level, and that the process of «modernization» has not substantially impacted.

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However, I believe that in both cases – the events will be confirmed, or denied – the story equally sheds light on the political uses of prostitution in today's Italy.

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