

## Gender and queer theories, today. Inaugural lecture of the Queer Studies course at the University of Turin

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**Federico Zappino**

University of Sassari, Italy

**Antonio Vercellone**

University of Turin, Italy



Fig. 1 - The arrival of the audience at the inaugural lecture of the course.

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**Corresponding Author:** Federico Zappino, [federico.zappino@gmail.com](mailto:federico.zappino@gmail.com).

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## The Queer Studies Course at the University of Torino<sup>1</sup>

On February 17, 2025, the University of Turin launched its first course in Queer Studies.

Our university has long hosted research and teaching initiatives dedicated to queer theory, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. This new course was conceived with the aim of bringing these experiences into dialogue—opening them up to colleagues from other universities as well as to civil society—with the goal of fostering a critical and inclusive exchange for the benefit of students.

The course's truly innovative element was its marked interdisciplinarity. Philosophy, history, literature, psychology, biology, medicine, architecture, theology, law, semiotics, linguistics, economics, sociology, theater, and film studies are just some of the disciplines through which the topics were explored across the course's eighteen sessions. Some lectures focused on key theoretical frameworks of queer studies, while others served as concrete applications of these concepts, addressing a wide array of themes: not only gender and LGBTI+ issues, but also urban organization, pharmacological research, family law, theology, new technologies, and more.

This structure reflects a precise theoretical choice: to understand queer theory first and foremost as a method. A method which, while it has privileged fields of inquiry—such as gender and sexuality—can be applied transversally to every domain of knowledge. A method whose distinctive feature lies in a situated, critical gaze: the gaze of those at the margins, the excluded, the unseen. A gaze that resists the individualist rhetoric of identity and proposes instead an alternative grammar: the cooperative (and necessarily practical) grammar of intersectionality.

The course was open to all degree programs at the University, resulting in a highly diverse cohort of students from over ten departments—including Law, Psychology, Humanities, Medicine, Philosophy, and Political Science, to name just the most represented. This interdisciplinarity emerged not only through the contributions of the lecturers but also, and directly, through the dialogue with and among students, in a genuinely horizontal dynamic. The added value of the course was further reinforced by the geographical variety of its participants: taught in English, the course attracted many international students as well.

As coordinator of the course, and together with the organizing team, I chose to entrust the inaugural lecture to Professor Federico Zappino, one of the most distinguished voices in contemporary queer theory, whose work has greatly shaped the Italian debate on these issues.

Entrusting Professor Zappino with the opening lecture was intended as a symbolic passing of the torch from his pioneering course in Sassari—which our own course acknowledges as a

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is the transcript of the introductory speech given by Antonio Vercellone.

significant influence—to this new Turin-based initiative. At the same time, it was a public gesture of solidarity and support in response to the vile attacks he has recently suffered—unacceptable episodes in a democratic context and in an academic system that must place and protect academic freedom as a central and non-negotiable value.

Professor Zappino's inaugural lecture is reproduced in the following pages.

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Thank you all for the warm welcome<sup>2</sup>. I would like to apologise in advance for my English, which is not exactly that of a native speaker. It is very strange, but also challenging, to have to speak in a foreign language in the city where I was born and where my mother tongue is. It is possible that this perfectly exemplifies the condition of a queer subject who speaks another language within a national context, although the way they speak is imperfect, dirty, full of contaminations, anything but pure. And I also think it is strange that a queer subject who has long written and denounced structural gender inequalities in academic recruitment, or the academic institution itself as a heteronormative institution, should find themselves giving the inaugural lecture of a university course on Queer Studies. Inevitably, the queer subject reconfirms itself as one who acts on the basis of what is done to it, questioning any form of sovereign and independent agency in the name of a relational agency, even when that relationality is unhappy, violent and a harbinger of attack.

I would like to thank the University of Turin and those who have spoken before me today<sup>3</sup>. Above all, I would like to thank the holder of this course, Professor Antonio Vercellone. His kindness and his invitation, last November, to inaugurate this course was not only a welcome recognition of the work I have been doing for over fifteen years, the vast majority of them spent far away from academia, as a queer activist: it also helped me to slowly reconcile with the world and to heal the deep wounds of the political attacks I have suffered in the exercise of my public duties as a university professor who, just over two years ago, set up the first course in Gender and Queer Theories at the University of Sassari<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The text is the transcript of the lecture, delivered in English, for the interdisciplinary course in Queer Studies established at the University of Turin for the 2024/25 academic year (<https://www.giurisprudenza.unito.it/do/corsi.pl/Show?id=ln76>). It was held on February 17, 2025, in front of an audience of over three hundred people. The notes were added later.

<sup>3</sup> Jacopo Rosatelli (Deputy Mayor for Civil Rights, Municipality of Turin), Christopher Cepernich (Vice-Rector, University of Turin), Valeria Giusi Marcenò (Dean of the Law Department, University of Turin), Norma de Piccoli (President of the CIRSD - Centro Interdisciplinare di Ricerche e Studi delle Donne e di Genere, University of Turin), Mia Caielli (President of the CUG, University of Turin), Pier Giuseppe Monateri (University of Turin), Antonio Vercellone (University of Turin).

<sup>4</sup> For more on the matter, see:  
<https://www.msn.com/it-it/notizie/italia/teorie-queer-a-sassari-la-lettera-di-decine-di-docenti-l-arte-e-la-scienza-sono-libere-e-libero-ne-%C3%A8-l-insegnamento/ar-AA1sJhXk>;  
<https://ilmanifesto.it/leghisti-contro-la-teoria-queer-sotto-attacco-luniversita-di-sassari>;  
<https://ilmanifesto.it/teoria-queer-alluniversita-di-sassari-lappello-contro-lattacco-leghista>;

This is the first opportunity I have had to speak in public after these attacks, and it is therefore an opportunity to thank the many, many people who have spoken out publicly to denounce the interference of a political authority in the freedom of teaching and research, as well as the *ad personam* attack on someone who has dedicated his life to research, writing, cultural translation, and struggling for a world inspired by the values of equality and social justice for all. More than four thousand people, in Italy and all over the world, mobilised themselves in few days to sign a petition in my support, written by the GIFTS network<sup>5</sup>, and whose first signatory was Judith Butler, against authoritarian forms of political interference in teaching and against institutional homophobic violence<sup>6</sup>. I would also like to thank the student associations and the great number of people who took to the streets of Sassari on 25 November 2024, the International Day against Violence against Women, to protest against the banner that appeared on the front of the Rectorate building a few days after the attack on me, claimed by a neo-fascist organisation, and against the attempt at censorship and the homophobic violence that I have suffered and that they have personally witnessed while attending the course. Finally, I would like to thank the Member of Parliament Francesca Ghirra, not only because she is here in this vast audience, but also because when she spoke in the Chamber of Deputies, in the wake of the attack I suffered, I had the feeling that she was not speaking in my place, but at my side.

<https://www.editorialedomani.it/fatti/la-lega-contro-luniversita-di-sassari-chiuda-il-corso-di-teorie-di-genere-e-queer-di-zappino-qh6dfhuf>;

<https://ilmanifesto.it/chi-ha-paura-del-gender-la-lega-contro-gli-studi-queer>;

<https://www.gay.it/teorie-queer-sassari-istruttoria-governo-bernini>;

<https://www.lanuovasardegna.it/regione/2024/10/16/news/teorie-queer-i-docenti-di-scienze-politiche-di-sassari-nessun-indottrinamento-ma-soltanto-studio-critico-1.100601279>;

<https://www.gay.it/universita-sassari-federico-zappino-rossano-sasso-mario-mieli-e-corsi-teorie-di-genere-queer-tutta-la-storia> (Date of last access for all links: 14 May 2025). University courses are, as a rule, established by the Boards of Studies of the various Departments, following formal deliberation, and not at the initiative of individual faculty members. What I mean to say, however, is that it was I who submitted the proposal for the establishment of the course to collective deliberation in 2023.

<sup>5</sup> <https://retegifts.wordpress.com/>. Just a few weeks earlier, the GIFTS network had already issued a statement in support of the Laboratory for Trans and Gender-Creative Children at Roma Tre University, which has likewise come under political attack.

<sup>6</sup> The attack I experienced was unprecedented in several respects: it constituted a novel assault by political authority on an autonomous institution such as the university, but also a targeted attack on a specific individual citizen, on their right to analyse, and even criticise, anti-gender laws, political parties, and movements. What made the attack even more serious and conspicuous was the stark asymmetry between a Member of Parliament (shielded by parliamentary immunity) and a university professor (precariously employed, no less). Shortly before the attack against me, as the legal scholar Angelo Schillaci (2024) has pointed out, the presidents of more than seventy Italian scientific associations submitted a document to the Minister of University and Research, warning of the risks posed to the public university system by recent legislative measures. Indeed, during the past summer, the Italian government intervened on both financial and hiring fronts, significantly reducing the capacity of the ordinary funding mechanism for public universities, and proposing a draft law that would curtail the expectations of precariously employed academic staff awaiting stabilisation. This issue was clearly articulated during the lecture by the Assemblée Precaria Universitaria - Torino, when a precarious researcher from the collective spoke publicly to express solidarity with me and to situate the attack within broader political and economic dynamics. In fact, it is not difficult to discern, in these seemingly unrelated developments across the public university, teaching, and research sectors, the contours of a design that is both authoritarian and neoliberal. Rather than being a mere abuse of power aimed at narrowing spaces of autonomy and individual rights, authoritarianism appears as a discursive, epistemic, and power regime that complements neoliberalism, prescribing the reproduction of the social and symbolic order within which neoliberal imperatives can operate. On this point, see Zappino 2016.

This collective resistance ought not to be understood as a mere gesture of solidarity. Rather, it constitutes the performative enactment of a “counterpublic” (Warner 2002) that comes into being through resistance - a counterpublic assembled in the very act of repudiating the normative violence exercised by state authority. Vulnerability assumes political significance when it is rendered shared - when bodies risk exposure not in pursuit of protection, but in order to appear, collectively, as a force. The bodies that rose up - through petitions, in the streets, within classrooms, and even in parliamentary arenas - enacted a form of resistance that is not solely symbolic, but also materially efficacious: it disrupts the tacit normalization of censorship and proclaims, instead, that knowledge, dissent, and queer life shall not be effaced. This resistance is not merely reactive, but constitutive: it brings forth new public imaginaries, reconfigures constellations of political responsibility, and asserts the right to knowledge as a precondition for survival.



Fig. 2 - Statement by student associations against the neo-fascist banner hung on the Rectorate building of the University of Sassari ("Gender ideology out of the university"): "An attack on academic freedom. The university cannot stand by and watch".

Fig. 3 - People take to the streets of Sassari in solidarity (25 November 2024).

It seems to me that in the vast majority of philosophy, law or political theory courses in state universities, the texts of Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt or Louis Althusser are quite rightly widely used; however, it does not seem to me that parliamentarians regularly and publicly attack professors who adopt their texts in their courses, nor do they invoke the intervention of the Minister against them, accusing them of racism and white supremacy, apologia

for Nazism or femicide, or establishing an historical continuity between male heterosexuality and all these crimes. It would be a grossly defamatory statement to suggest, even covertly, that those who teach Kant's philosophy are racists and white supremacists, that those who include Schmitt's or Heidegger's texts in their courses are Nazis, or that those who share and advocate Althusser's political philosophy also justify the murder of women. On the contrary, I have experienced first-hand that if you are a homosexual professor and assign some excerpts from a book by Mario Mieli, you can be publicly and violently pilloried and the Minister of University and Research can be publicly asked to investigate you<sup>7</sup>. The cause of this difference in treatment is, to put it mildly, anti-gay hatred and violence. It has a name. We should call it by its name.

Truth be told, the Gender and Queer Theories course is not the first of its kind for the University of Sassari. It is also the first course nationwide to have the words "theory" and "queer" (and "theory" and "gender") in its name. And words are important. In fact, a theoretical cornerstone of queer theories is that languages produce specific performative effects on those who read them and put them back into circulation, helping to change reality and also encountering resistance to this change. An experiential cornerstone of queer people's lives is that these resistances may well be violent.

Of course, what I have said does not mean that in all the years before the existence of my course there had never been university courses on queer, let alone gender, in Italy. And not only those that explicitly had the words "queer" or "gender" in the name (like, for example, Queer Studies, or Gender Studies), but also those that, perhaps calling themselves Political Philosophy, Sociology of Cultural Processes, English Literature and so on, included bibliographic paths dedicated to queer and gender theories in their syllabus. What I mean is that the Gender and Queer Theories course, for the first time in an Italian university, placed the words "theory" and "queer" next to each other; and the word "theory" does not exactly coincide with the word "studies". The word "theory" - in the humanities as well as in the natural sciences - defines an assumption or a system of ideas aimed at explaining something, a systematic formulation of general principles relating to a science, an art or any branch of knowledge, and also the deductions that can be drawn from these principles, as a whole capable of interpreting known

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<sup>7</sup> The hatred harboured by right-wing parties and associations toward Mario Mieli (1977), the renowned gay and Jewish thinker and activist who died by suicide in 1983 at just over thirty years old (when homosexuality was still classified as a disease), continues to be fuelled by an infamous passage in their most well-known book, in which they express a highly questionable and difficult to endorse view on pederasty. However, this passage was deliberately excluded from the materials used in my course on Gender and Queer Theories: not only because I do not share Mieli's position (and, given that they died over forty years ago, I cannot ask them to clarify what they truly meant), but also because I do not consider it relevant to the analysis of their thought, which is of considerable historical, political, philosophical, and psychoanalytic significance. This significance is evidenced by the fact that Mieli's work has been studied for decades, and continues to be republished and translated into multiple languages. Far from including the controversial passage, the course materials instead featured the text of an anti-gender resolution passed in the Chamber of Deputies last September, which calls for "appropriate initiatives to prevent school teaching from being used to unilaterally and uncritically disseminate behavioural models inspired by so-called gender ideology among young people".

facts and predicting new ones. The intention that animated me when I expressed the will to create this course and under this name was fourfold.

First of all, I wanted to create a space within the academia - and in particular in a peripheral city, in a region characterised by high rates of school and university drop-outs - where any student who had the perception of being different from the norm could understand not only that they were not alone, but that their perception was important and worthy of interest from the public institution of knowledge. On the first day of class I referred to that space “a permanent workshop on inequality”; two years later, I can say that that workshop has been very crowded and full of passionate debates.

Second, I wanted to retrace the origins of queer theory, which emerges precisely from the deliberate pairing of an academically elevated word (“theory”) with a word that instead comes from the street, where it circulates as a homophobic insult (“queer”), as a way of re-appropriating and re-signifying an insult, transforming it into a point of view and, moreover, into a counter-epistemology.

Third, I wanted to respond in the most intelligent way I know to a decade-long reactionary, neoconservative and neo-fascist crusade against “gender theory” and “gender ideology”: gender theories exist. Speaking scientifically, the opposite of a theory is a dogma. And those who believe that gender is a dogma, and therefore not open to theoretical and political debate, also believe that certain phenomena closely related to gender, such as rape, anti-gay hatred and violence, transphobia or social and economic inequality suffered by women or trans people, cannot be studied, cannot be challenged, and therefore cannot be subverted. But there can be no place for dogma in the university, and in fact there should be no place for dogma anywhere, let alone in the Parliament or in the laws it enacts. And as for the word “ideology”, well, we know that it is the preferred way to discredit political ideas that we don’t like: so it should come as no surprise, indeed it is something to be proud of, that my political ideas about gender do not appeal to right-wing, neoconservative and neo-fascist political authorities, associations, movements and parties.

Ultimately, I wanted to demonstrate that the subjectivities encompassed today by the word “queer”, understood as a signifier to define those who reject and go beyond heteronormativity and gender and sexual binarism, are not just a mass of passive recipients of rights (or denial of rights), of strategies of inclusion (or exclusion), of concessions (or subtractions) by states and capitalism. The subjectivities encompassed by the word “queer” can well theorise about society, politics, law, public services, economics, and even science, art, literature, music, cinema, architecture. Yes, queer people can theorise about how the world works and imagine in what ways it could work differently, or even better.

The theoretical tools developed over time by queer subjectivities allow us first and foremost to analyse and understand what are the structural assumptions of widely known social phenomena which, far from declining, are in fact steadily increasing: phenomena such as homophobia, transphobia, sexism, gender and sexual based violence. And understanding what the structural assumptions of certain social phenomena are is very different from simply focusing on the fact that certain phenomena simply happen, of course deploring them, seeing them as contrary to the rule of law and ethical pluralism, or generally labelling them as “violent”, without ever asking how and why such phenomena happen, or how they can be subverted. Rather, it is important to analyse and understand the structural assumptions of certain social phenomena in order to understand the mechanisms that contribute to their determination, and above all to understand that these mechanisms are right in front of us, we often reproduce them ourselves, and yet they are largely invisible. Indirectly, such an analysis also allows us to indicate how these mechanisms could be defused, even without believing that the only way to do this should be through securitarianism.

One of my deepest convictions - one of the cornerstones of my thought - is that without a serious, critical and scientific examination of heterosexuality, we can hardly understand a plurality of social phenomena such as homophobia, transphobia, sexism, male domination and many, many others, including the high rates of unemployment, exploitation, occupational segregation and homelessness among gender and sexual minorities, as well as the intensification of anti-democratic rhetoric and processes, and the rise of neoconservative and neo-fascist movements and parties. And yet, although all these phenomena are more or less frequently mentioned, even in various university courses, it is much rarer to speak of heterosexuality instead, or even to link them to the heteronormativity. And the category of heteronormativity is one of the most valuable theoretical elaborations that have arisen within queer theory.

“Heteronormativity” is a category developed by the social theorist Michael Warner (1991), and constitutes only the most recent inheritance of a long feminist, lesbian and homosexual reflection on power and society, such as that of Adrienne Rich (1980), Monique Wittig (1991), the French FHAR movement and the Italian FUORI! movement - which was born right here in Turin in 1971 -, of which Mariasilvia Spolato (the first woman to come out as a lesbian in Italy, which led to her losing her job as a teacher and falling into extreme poverty and destitution) and Mario Mieli were part.

I myself am in the wake of this reflection and have proposed to rethink the category of heteronormativity in the more materialist terms of “heterosexual mode of production” (Zappino 2019, 2024). What unites all these reflections, including my own, is the consideration of heterosexuality not just as one sexual orientation among others, but rather as a “social norm”, a “rationality”, a “mode of production” of bodies and genders according to a hierarchical



rationality, a form of “normativity” in and of itself. According to this theorization heterosexuality ceases to be a mere practice and becomes a practice of a normative nature, more or less explicitly prescriptive, which as such precedes and exceeds positive law. We could call it a kind of concurrent normativity. By constantly establishing and reproducing a conception of heterosexuality as the norm, heteronormativity shapes both individual lives and the set of social relations that make up society as a whole. Such a reflection shows the extent to which heterosexuality more or less explicitly dictates the rules of our everyday lives, producing the socially shared meaning of male and female bodies, creating “normal” behaviours and identities, and instead framing in terms of “deviance” all those situations that escape its basic logic. According to queer theory, heteronormativity does not limit itself to structuring and conditioning individual acts and behaviours, but rather pervasively structures things that are decidedly more influential for the whole of society, including common sense, the entire social organisation, the spirit and content of laws, public policies, and even things like science and medicine. Moreover, as decolonial feminist and queer theorists such as María Lugones or Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí have long told us, heteronormativity has constituted a European colonial imposition for all the civilisations that have undergone it<sup>8</sup>, which is why not only queer but also gender theories today must be anti-heteronormative: because this also means being anti-racist and decolonial.

If society is infused and constituted by a normativity that more or less implicitly prescribes that the only worthy and legitimate way to live is cisgender and heterosexual, to organise one’s relationships in deference to these principles, and to be a citizen in deference to these principles, it goes without saying that any manifestation of self or relationship that deviates from this norm is vulnerable to either “inclusion” (where more democratic and liberal orientations prevail) or “exclusion”, even violent exclusion (where more authoritarian, illiberal or anti-democratic orientations prevail). This is where phenomena such as homophobia or transphobia come from: from the heterosexual structure of society. But this is also where sexism or gender violence comes from, because first and foremost the heterosexual structure of society is based on and reproduces a hierarchy: that between men and women, between male and female. This is why queer theories must go hand in hand with gender theories. And this is why Jack Halberstam (2017) argues for the need to “address the normalisation of gender violence in the specific context of heterosexuality”, to “talk about the violence of the norm” and, above all, to “address the random violence it masks in a structural way”. Addressing heterosexuality in a systemic and structural way, attacking heterosexuality at its roots, conceiving heterosexuality not as the opposite of homosexuality but as social justice, as Halberstam argues, does not mean relativising the individual responsibility of perpetrators of homophobic, transphobic or

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent reconstruction of this debate, see Bottici 2021.

gender-based violence. Rather, it means inscribing this individual responsibility within the framework of a systemic critique that insists that heterosexuality is a hierarchical order, and that anyone who occupies the lowest rung of the hierarchy, anyone who is not fully legible in terms of the “masculine”, who can only be read in terms of the “feminine”, or the “feminised”, who does not conform to the mode of subjectivation and relationship that corresponds to this masculine and feminine, is differentially - but regularly - exposed to the risks that this dissimilarity entails. That is: harassment, rape, pathologisation, criminalisation, silence, poverty, destitution, slander, defamation, public pillories, threats, conditional inclusion, radical exclusion, suicide, early death.

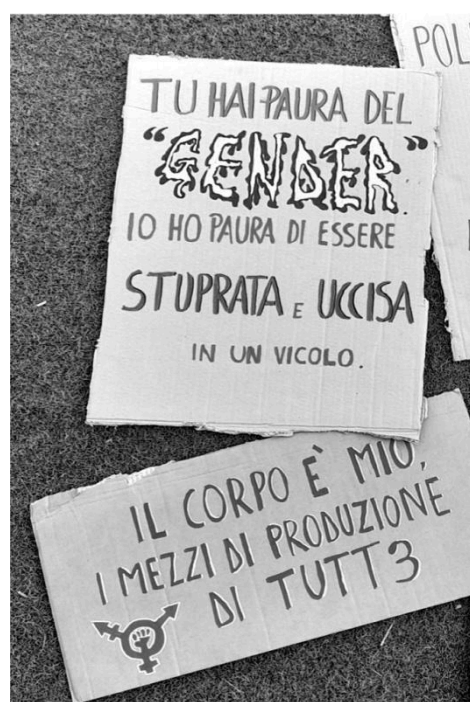


Fig. 4 - Concluding seminar series of the Gender and Queer Theories course at the University of Sassari, "Who's afraid of gender?", from 25 to 29 November 2024.

Fig. 5 - "You are afraid of gender. I am afraid of being raped and murdered in an alley"; "The body is mine, the means of production are everyone's" (slogans).

In the two years that I have been teaching the course on Gender and Queer Theories at the University of Sassari, I have had the opportunity to realise the extent to which people entering the university today have a pre-theoretical and pre-critical understanding of heteronormativity and its effects that was unthinkable until a few years ago, as unthinkable as Gender and Queer Theories courses were. It was certainly unthinkable when I began producing my own work in the field of queer theory fifteen years ago, long before I wrote books such as *Comunismo queer*

(2019) but first and foremost translating cornerstones of queer thought, including, famously, the works of Judith Butler or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Translations that, according to translation theorist Michela Baldo (2015, 2017), have even rekindled or breathed new life into queer thought and activism in Italy.

Today's university students are often very familiar with the meaning of words like "patriarchy", "cisgender", "non-binary", "intersectionality", and even the word "heteronormativity" itself. They show an awareness of gender and sexual inequality and violence that is often remarkable, as well as consent in sexual relationships. Female students have clear awareness of harassment and structural inequality between men and women. Trans students talk about their own paths to gender affirmation by giving important lessons to their university colleagues about transphobia. Gay students ask to attend classes together with their boyfriends and male cisgender students are keen to engage with Monique Wittig's theories (1991) about men as a dominant "sex class" to be overcome, because "there could be no slaves without masters in the first place". Those who are heterosexual or cisgender have learned to position themselves as such, as a partiality, rather than as those who occupy the space of "normality". I find that frankly encouraging. And I am not referring to those students who are part of collectives or social movements in large or more central cities, but to those who enrol in university in a town that is decidedly peripheral and marginal (decidedly penalised by a combination of factors ranging from lack of transport to and from the peninsula and Europe, unemployment, economic crisis, especially after the pandemic), just like Sassari. This, together with the large number of movements and collectives fighting for gender and sexual issues from an intersectional perspective, is certainly proof of how worthwhile our efforts have been in the field of gender and queer theories and activism.

The fact that students arrive at university with a pre-critical and pre-theoretical knowledge of gender and queer issues should be a stimulus for the public university, as well as an imperative mandate to give this knowledge historical, analytical and critical depth. Those who think that gender and queer theories only reflect particular situations which, however interesting, do not concern the whole of society, and therefore should not concern the public university and should not involve the expenditure of public money, where they are not in bad faith, are at least mistaken. Gender and queer theories certainly take their cue from the margin, since they take their cue from feminist, homosexual, lesbian and trans movements. But if there is one thing Judith Butler (2004) insisted on, it is the equal dignity of political activism and academic research whenever queer is mentioned, since there would be no queer theories and studies without queer activism and movements, and since activism in turn derives impulses and resources from theoretical research. At the same time, despite the fact that the university - and the Italian university in particular - has so far shown reticence towards the whole field of gender and queer

studies, it should in any case be remembered that gender and queer theories aspire to speak to everyone and to rethink everyone's space, that is, the whole of society. In fact, one of my strongest convictions is that what I call the heterosexual mode of production presides not only over inequality between men and women, or inequality between normative and minority forms of gender and sexuality. The heterosexual mode of production, in a much broader sense, presides over social inequality itself. Society would not exist if subjects did not have some kind of relationship with each other; each subject, however, participates in social relations that already carry a gender within and with itself. And if this gender has been produced by a hierarchical rationality, this means that it is the fulcrum through which all social inequality is produced and reproduced. This is why the aim of my theorizing consists in the subversion of the heterosexual mode of production.

In the face of attacks such as those I have suffered, one can claim for oneself an inclusion in the field of truth, respectability and dignity. Of course, all this is important. But one can also realise that one is constituting, and perhaps embodying, the very thing that risks destabilising the hierarchies that structure this given field of power, because if its boundaries are protected in such a police-like way, it means that no inclusivity is really possible without a subversion of the power and epistemological differentials that structure it as exclusionary. In this sense, protecting the boundaries of the public space from queer and gender theories (or even, "gender ideology") is more telling than ever.

Yet queer theories make a valuable contribution to the fight against social inequalities, which I believe should - and already does - constitute one of the major research macro-fields of public universities. Gender and queer theories offer a valuable opportunity to rethink the meaning of "public space", exposing its inherently exclusionary assumptions and rethinking new constellations for what counts "as" public space. This is why there is a strong interest in ensuring that gender and queer theories do not become an integral part of public spaces such as the public universities: because there is a risk that they will circulate scandalous and subversive desires for equality and justice that would openly collide with strategies for preserving, protecting and enlarging things like the so-called "natural family", "the homeland" or "the (white, of course) nation", all terms that function as more intelligible substitutes for "heterosexuality", with all its racist and colonial corollary. These political discourses clearly pass for "public", since they emanate from public institutions or political representatives. But today, more than ever, they reflect the partiality of those who wish to impose their ideology. And the fact that this inherently heteronormative, patriarchal, racist, authoritarian, and anti-democratic worldview is imposed using tools such as propaganda, defamation, misinformation, mystification, stalking, attacks on the Constitution and, ultimately, violence, is symptomatic of how weak and odious this worldview is, and how much the values of freedom, equality and critical spirit that gender and queer

theories promote and convey represent a threat that must be contained, and, with these values, those who need them most to live (Butler 2024).

As is well-known, one of the most widespread and shared ways of defining queer is that of the “floating signifier”. On this matter, I think its current significance should serve to highlight the following: we have to ally ourselves against interpretations of queer that are more or less frequently presented as compatible with the idea that the aim of our theories and struggles should be inclusivity in cis-heteronormative society, rather than the subversion of the assumptions of exclusion, and with capitalism, in all its versions, including those looming on the horizon and advancing hand in hand with resurgent forms of authoritarianism under the blows of environmental and climate destruction. Capitalism is the social, political and economic order grafted onto a relationality densely structured by cis-heteronormativity, and thus by its long history of collusion with patriarchy, colonialism and racism. This means that it is on the assumption of our specific oppression that the order on which the oppression currently experienced by most people in the world depends is grafted. Not the other way round (Zappino 2025).

At the same time, I know that nothing is more exhausting, tedious and anything but safe than the practice of alliances. And this happens because nothing is more anti-identitarian and anti-individualistic than the practice of alliances. Large corporations often choose to form alliances or even mergers in order to accumulate and share ever greater proportions of capital. But, lo and behold, alliances between minorities on the margins of society can hardly be the result of such a choice. And yet, if we understood that alliances are necessary to oppose - and to subvert - the violence with which relations of power, in their plurality and intersection, all too often push us to the margins, we would understand that we have to form alliances precisely because we have no choice. Until we understand that the best alliance between us should not be a perfect sharing of ways of living or thinking, or a perfect fusion of intentions, but rather the need to accumulate and share a much greater share of survival and a life worth living, we will continue to play into the hands of our common and allied oppressors, who have long known that in order for oppression to continue undisturbed, as the feminist theorist Ti-Grace Atkinson (1980) argued, it is necessary for oppressed groups not to unite.

The reason for a common struggle lies first and foremost in the fact of the oppressors’ alliance with each other and in the synergy with which they make our lives impossible. It is this fact that must be countered with an alliance in which the diversity of the cultural and material forms of oppression is not exaggerated, minimised or instrumentalised in order to establish which of these forms is more recurrent and oppressive than the others, but is precisely what indicates the form that a common subversive vision must take. The possibility of continuing to see the specificity of

one's own oppression, and to litigate with those who devalue or deny it, depends on the need to see the common assumptions of oppression.

I say this because, whether we like it or not, gender and queer theories and movements today have the difficult task of defending and rethinking public space and, consequently, democracy. This is a difficult task for those of us who have always criticized the “universal” values of public space, of democracy, of equality and justice as intrinsically exclusionary and heteronormative, and always with very good arguments. But it is a task that falls to us, precisely because we all know the limits of democracy, well demonstrated by the fact that right in the middle of “democratic life” anti-democratic and authoritarian government strategies are targeting us. Gender and queer theories today are a reservoir of invaluable resources for rethinking new radical democratic constellations, in which the *demos* is not the heterosexual or cisgender *demos*, nor is it just that which organizes its life around the “natural family” or the heterosexuality, nor even that which has documents or citizenship rights. The *demos* to rethink is queer. It is only by keeping the bar straight that queer can contrast the fact of constituting a “free-floating signifier” something more precious: the possibility of floating significantly.



Fig. 6 - People take to the streets of Sassari in solidarity (25 November 2024).

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