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Love Meetings:

Analysing the Evolution of Love Relationships

Through the Prism of National Interest

A Comparison between Russia and Italy

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Introduction

Since the dawn of time, human beings had the need to establish ties and relations of any kind due to several reasons such as urge, dependence, interest, and so forth. In this regard, this piece of writing will focus on love relationships and their sociological – but also political- implications, analysing the effect of their transformation over time both on private and public life. Firstly, the private side will be addressed with reference to gender roles in relationships, subsequently noting the considerable degree to which they find correspondences with gender shaped narratives and gendered citizenship. Thus, we will then analyse the extent to which public authorities resort to State interference in people's private lives, shifting the discourse on the public face of the matter. In this regard, both the Russian and the Italian (and so, by extension, the so-called Western world) contexts will be taken as an example of the private and romantic life's great public importance, since it will be shown that their sociological implications are still at the forefront of public debate. In so doing, the crucial role played by political statements and official public stances will be brought to the readers' attention, since the official rhetoric will be presented as a means of gaining popular support and consolidating political consensus. Being the sociological aspect intertwined with the political discourse to such an extent, several examples of past and current political rhetoric will be featured below, showing the similarities between arguments brought both by Italian and Russian authorities; hence, the persistence of recurring patterns of rhetorical devices will be emphasized.

And so, this public-private dichotomy will be the *trait d'union* between Italy and Russia, which will be addressed first separately and then in parallel: as to this, the structure of this research is organised into three chapters. As will be shown below, both in Italy and Russia gender and sexuality issues are never addressed as mere personal grievances, since they are always part of a broader – and specifically political- scenario. While in Italy the political discourse on that is generally concerned with the domestic implications of readjusting society considering the new social challenges posed by liquid modernity, gender-related issues are used as a fully-fledged geopolitical instrument by Russian authorities to present a specific image of the country to the international community. The underlying assumption of this dissertation is that love relationships are far from being purely a private matter: they are massively used by nation-states as factors of construction of the national identity and aggregation on a domestic side, while being deployed as fully-fledged geopolitical weapons on the external front, instead. The contrast between Putin's Russia and the West is now retracing its own roots, being the economic and security battleground newly matched by heated ideological clashes. In fact, as far as the Italian conservative tendency is acknowledged, the Italian civil society still presents itself as particularly sensitive to traditional moral and religious values, being so not too dissimilar to Russia in this specific matter,

despite its undisputable alignment with Western institutions and so-called Western values¹.

Starting from an exquisitely sociological perspective, the evolution of love relationships over time will be briefly discussed in the first chapter, highlighting the features of both solid and liquid modernity, taking advantage of Bauman's landmark study on the subject. The purpose of this first section is to lay the foundations for the subsequent comparison between the extent to which solid modernity's fixed and expected patterns of behaviour still exert a strong influence on both Russian and Italian civil societies. Precisely, this introductory part is meant to be crucial to discuss the matter as far as the Western world (namely, Italy) is concerned since the specificity of the Russian framework will be dealt with extensively throughout Chapter 2. As to solid modernity, the intrinsic connection between love and procreation will be discussed as a part of the lifelong conception of love, whose aim was to ensure continuity through huge investments in terms of energy, time, and money. Referencing Giddens' works on the matter, it will so be introduced the fundamental concept of modern state interference in people's intimacy, adding strong moral implications to sexuality to extend its repressive power. Then, the passage from solid to liquid modernity will be presented as an inevitable consequence of the final liberation of sexuality from reproductive purposes: as Giddens puts it, reproduction can now occur in the absence of sex and vice versa, thanks to technological advancements. Indeed, the rise of "sex as its own right" could not but radically change gender roles not only in relationships but also in society. This is particularly true as far as overall Western countries are concerned since their official stance is strongly in favour of supporting and encouraging such an improvement on women and gender issues. Having said that, a couple of recent examples from the Italian public scene will be provocatively added as an anticipation of what will be broadly discussed in Chapter 3: despite their attempts to set themselves up as advocates of gender equality, Western countries still have to deal with the legacy of solid times' gender-shaped narratives.

Given the crucial importance of symbols and public representations as a means of enhancing narratives, Chapter 2 will feature an introduction to how symbols and allegories shape our vision of gender, prescribing us what to expect from a nation's male and female citizens. Then, Putin's official speech on Women's Day will be analysed and taken as an example to underline to what extent traditional patterns of gendered citizenship still pervade state rhetoric to the present day. Consequently, I will take advantage of Zdravomyslova and Temkina's work to recall the Soviet heritage regarding gendered citizenship. Hence, the exploitation of demographics as a means to condemn sexual conduct not aimed at reproduction will be discussed, data at hand. In this respect, the evolution of the right to abortion in Russia is faced, underlining the fragility of women's rights, always susceptible to policymaking and political balance. Given that, the focus

¹ For the sake of clarity, the terms "West" and "Western values" are directly borrowed from the official rhetoric of both counterparts and will be used throughout this dissertation with the intent to remain true to the usual rhetorical patterns.

will be then put on the LGBT community, whose private life is still supervised by the Russian state and is even more susceptible not only to policymaking but also to demonstrations of power on the international level. Specifically, the case of 2013 anti-propaganda laws and the subsequent 2014 “gay Olympics” will be addressed. Then, after a short overview of LGBT rights in post-Soviet states, the case of the 2006 Moscow Pride will be analysed to underline the peculiarity of the post-Soviet attitude regarding intimacy and sexuality.

Once outlined the sociological implications of the passage from solid to liquid modernity (Chapter 1) and the strong political impact of gender-based narratives and gender policies in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia (Chapter 2), in Chapter 3 a conclusive comparison between Russia and the West will be drawn. In this respect, Russia’s attitude towards the matter is inserted inside a complex structure of allegories aimed at harking back to its glorious past and reviving the grandeur of the nation. After a brief overview of the troubled path leading Italy to legally guarantee the right to divorce and most importantly abortion, similarities between the arguments given by past and present Russian and Italian public authorities on birth policies and traditional sexual relations will be presented. And so, such a striking resemblance of rhetorical devices will clearly demonstrate how gendered-shaped narratives and roles in relationships affect one another, being two sides of a coin, and still reflect State interference in the private lives of its citizens. The private and public implications of love relationships will so be presented as inherently interconnected and inevitably intertwined with matters of geopolitics and internal consensus-building from time immemorial.

*SHIFTING FROM SOLID TO LIQUID MODERN TIMES:**A NOT SO PRIVATE AFFAIR***Solid Ties in Solid Times**

As summarized by Bauman in “Liquid Love” (2014), love relationships have undergone many variations over time, going from “one of the palliative answers to the blessing/course of human individuality” to one of the various and easily reversible aspects of one’s life in liquid modern times. According to Bauman’s analysis (2014), love could be seen as the “desire to beget and procreate” and to participate in the creation of something that could outlive one’s limited lifetime. In this regard, it must be said that “love is about adding to the world” (Bauman, 2014); and so, on the basis of the conception of love portrayed in Plato’s Symposium, Bauman (2014) depicts love as a creative drive which achieves “self-survival through self-alterity”. Hence, this idea of love could not but be a true commitment, meaning the inherent urge to feed and protect the object of love and the relationship itself. This self-perpetuating idea of love should therefore be distinct from desire, which tends to be self-destructive, instead. (Bauman, 2014) A huge creative power is embedded in love, while passion and desire are generally embodied in seductive flames. Unlike love, amorous passion is rather an end in itself rather than a project or a serious commitment to ensuring continuity. This constructiveness of love relationships is often explained recurring to a parallel with economic investments, binding together sociology and market economy. Reference to this theory can be found also in Bauman’s Liquid Love (2014), according to which “A relationship [...] is an investment like all the others: you put in time, money, efforts that you could have turned to other aims but did not, hoping that you were doing the right thing and that you have lost or refrained from otherwise enjoying would be in due course repaid- with profit”. In this specific regard, Bauman (2014) considers security as one of the most straightforward profits in a relationship, especially when it comes to the awareness that someone will always have your back and support you when in need. Following this reasoning, when you decide to invest in something, you put a considerable amount of energy, time and money into it. And so, no matter what, once you have made your decision to invest, you will do whatever it takes to save your investment and maximise your profit, or at least to avoid making a loss. The greater the investment, the harder the surrender. Such a relationship involves the establishment of very strong ties between

contracting parties, bound together for decades more by a matter of security, assurance, and practice, than by the mere ephemeral sacred fire of passion, to the extent that the latter even started requiring containment from social authorities.

As to Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), passions encountered harsh repression during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their containment became authorities' firm intention. This so-called "repressive hypothesis", as reported by Giddens (1992) was required to ensure strict discipline and effective control over civil society. It so implied that a price – an increasing repressive control on people's passions and desires- is to be paid in order to receive benefits from society (Giddens, 1992): in fact, there is no more effective control of inner drives than self-restraint. This is how modern society exercised its "disciplinary power", acting as a fully-fledged Freudian super-ego (Giddens, 1992). Recalling Giddens' words on the matter, "disciplinary power supposedly produced 'docile bodies', controlled and regulated in their activities rather than able to spontaneously act on the promptings of desire". Hence, being power increasingly linked to sexuality, the latter started to be seen as a very private matter covered by a veil of modesty and secrecy². During the Victorian era, this phenomenon took on the peculiar appearance of an "open secret" (Foucault, 1976, cited by Giddens, 1992): respectability and reputation were closely linked to self-restraint and decorum. In so doing, every reference to sexuality was inevitably condemned as improper and obscene, to the extent that nudity –even in art- was frowned upon. (Spiazzi, Layton & Tavella, 2017). On the surface, every sexual connotation was kept hidden, since a certain sense of prudery was strictly required by the rules of that society (Spiazzi, Layton & Tavella, 2017). Having such a strong moral implication, sexuality was basically repressed and labelled as a taboo topic.

"Civilisation means discipline, and discipline, in turn, implies control of inner drives": being regarded as specifically disruptive, passionate love could not but be considered as threatening to social order and duty³. Besides, it "has nowhere been recognised as either a necessary or sufficient basis for marriage, and in most cultures has been seen as refractory to it"⁴. Prior to modern Europe, economic matters and calculations were the foundation of a marriage, which is especially epitomized in its primary objective: to produce heirs. On an abstract level, these children would first and foremost ensure the continuation of the hereditary lineage: recalling what was touched upon before, love takes shape in the creation of something that is a part of you and meanwhile will outlive you. Thus, children acted as "bridges between mortality and immortality, between the abominably short individual life and [...] an infinite duration of the kin"⁵. On the other hand, children were

² Giddens, A. (1992). *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Stanford University Press.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Bauman, Z. (2014), *Liquid Love*. Cambridge Polity Press

also a very practical matter since they were seen as a fully-fledged part of the workforce and beneficial for the survival of a family unit. Being expected to increase the prosperity of the household with their work potential, children tended to be welcomed as a profitable investment. Moreover, this logic of “the more, the better” was undoubtedly emphasized by the high infant mortality rates and the short life expectancy (Bauman, 2014).

Evaluations and marriages made out of mutual sexual attraction and romantic feelings would come only later. Then, the spread of ideas of romantic love contributed to the progressive weakening of love relationships and marriage, hitherto generally conceived in light of convenience and financial reasons (Giddens, 1992). In so doing, emotional ties even started prevailing over kinship obligations and parental duties over the offspring. Moreover, scientific and technological advancements gave a massive boost in overcoming the old idea of marriage, having society go through a tremendous amount of change. The introduction of effective contraceptive methods fundamentally changed people’s -and especially women’s- lives. Eventually, according to Giddens (1992), sex and sexuality could be considered regardless of reproductive exigencies, according to still-ongoing progress in reproduction techniques. “Now that conception can be artificially produced, rather than only artificially inhibited, sexuality is at last fully autonomous. Reproduction can occur in the absence of sexual activity”⁶. Women are the first beneficiaries of this “final liberation of sexuality”, being nowadays potentially freed from the fear of multiple pregnancies, miscarriage or even death which have always been inherently comprised in their sexual activity, so mitigating their sexual pleasure (Giddens, 1992).

Liquid Love in Liquid Times

With the advent of liquid modern times, everything changes: Bauman’s analysis of this fundamental paradigm shift clearly shows that our way of getting into relationships will never be the same as before. In fact, unlike the “solid” phase of modern times, in this liquid phase “social forms [...] can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them”⁷. It is then notable that we are now referring to social norms as “structures that limit individual choices, institutions that guard repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behaviour”⁸. We currently find ourselves living in a world where the well-being of the individual is expected to be put first, and personal liberties are more important than they have ever been before. And so, individuals are perceived as masters of

⁶ Giddens, A. (1992), *ivi*

⁷ Bauman, Z., (2007). *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Polity Press.

⁸ *ibid.*

their own destiny, free thinkers whose actions' consequences are only attributable to themselves. This worldview quintessentially derives from the triumph of liberal ideals in Western societies, which the main characteristics of liquid society are generally associated with. According to Bauman (2007), social norms and recurrent social patterns of behaviour "are unlikely to be given enough time to solidify and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies because of their short life expectation". It goes without saying that in a world where everybody tends to be considered a unique and irreplaceable snowflake, one's personal freedom and interest are regarded as the most valuable things: the couple dynamics also reflects this tendency.

Given the precariousness of our times, "the liquid modern world abhors everything that is solid and durable", according to the idea that "affinity is born of a choice which is restated daily in a daily struggle"⁹. Staying together is the result of an ongoing process based on similarities in interests, life choices and manners: getting into a relationship comes from the decision of someone who thinks that this union could somehow enrich their own life at that specific moment. Even the decision of staying or getting together is nowadays made no more in order to but because of something, instead (Bauman, 2007). Relations are generally no more as well defined as before, as emphasized by the refusal of defining with specific labels the relationship between two people. This goes along with a radical shift in values, as shown by Giddens' report (1992) of Lilian Rubin's analysis of adults' and young adults' love experiences in 1989: as one might expect, the two were quite different. In this regard, it must be noted that during the 1940s male and female respondents shared the same strict codes of conduct, whose compliance was carefully monitored. Besides, girls' social reputation derived from "their ability to resist, or contain, sexual advances, while boys' credit rested upon "the sexual conquest they could achieve" (Rubin, 1990, cited by Giddens, 1992). Even though the difference was already significant in 1989, in the meantime the gap between older and younger generations' values has remarkably increased.

Generally, the commitment required for getting into a relationship is now significantly downsized compared to before, losing the solemnity of making a significant step forward and seriously engaging. According to Bauman (2014), to the present day, it is common not to have great expectations when dating someone, since "you ask less, you settle for less". Still being a fitting metaphor, the huge investment of the "solid" modernity then becomes way less substantial than before: the lower the investment, the easier the surrender. In this regard, many couples tend to prefer 'part-time commitments', resizing their romantic life so that it is only one of the many important aspects of one's existence. They do so because "they abhor the idea of sharing home and household, preferring to keep their separate abodes, bank accounts and circles of friends,

⁹ Bauman, Z. (2007), *ivi*

and share time and space when they feel like it – but not when they do not”¹⁰. Previously, a serious relationship’s expected duration was basically indefinite, not to say infinite, since “marriage once was a natural condition, whose durability can be taken for granted short of certain extreme circumstances”¹¹. Now, being the couple only one of the numerous aspects contributing to defining someone as a person, relationships are more likely to be ended with more ease and at any given moment.

It must be said, though, that this is possible mainly because of the radical shift towards having children: the widespread unwillingness to have babies arises from the fact that this would force people to sacrifice the so-valued independence of liquid modern times. Far from being an investment, children are “among the most expensive purchases that average consumers are likely to make in the course of their entire lives”¹². And so, according to Bauman (2014), a child is seen nowadays more as “an object of emotional consumption” rather than as an asset. This reluctance to embark on such a life-long commitment goes along with the reliability and accessibility of various methods of contraception. Recalling what was stated before, this makes it possible for sex to “stand on its own feet and to be judged solely by the satisfaction it may bring on its own”¹³. In this respect, Bauman (2014) refers to it as “sex as such, in its own right”, quoting Erich Fromm’s explanation of sex, whose main purpose and meaning are now pleasure and joy. Consequently, he states that a sexuality which is basically detached from reproductive purposes opens the possibility to normalize homosexuality and non-traditional sexual relations: as we discussed before, as soon as sex and reproduction are no more perceived as synonyms, there is no reason for heterosexuality to be seen as the standard norm (Bauman, 2014).

Given that, problems arise when this call for freedom and self-determination collides with authorities’ desire to control the population. In fact, this liberal tendency inevitably leads to the attempt to get out of State interference in the private life of its citizens. Therefore, *The History of Sexuality* focuses on sexuality as “a social construct, operating within fields of power, not merely a set of biological promptings”. (Foucault, 1976, cited by Giddens, 1992). Thus, Giddens (1992) adds that “it is an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” and that state authorities simply need accurate control of the population for their own survival. And so, such control was achieved thanks to the development of the so-called “anatomy-politics”, which consists of “technologies of bodily management aimed at regulating, but also optimizing, the capabilities of the body”. (Giddens, 1992). This biopower will be broadly discussed in Chapter 2, thanks to the analysis of the Russian state’s interference in the private life of its citizen in the light of national interest and domestic propaganda. Given that, the state power is far from being the only organization willing to control the civil society and its

¹⁰ Bauman, Z. (2014), *op. cit.*, p. 7

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Bauman, Z. (2007), *op.cit.*, p. 8

patterns of behaviour: the unbelievable power of religious authorities, especially Catholic ones, must not go unmentioned. In this regard, the case of the Italian legislative regulation on divorce and abortion is emblematic, since they clearly represent an emblematic occasion for the clergy to strongly oppose these 20th-century reforms. For this purpose, it should firstly be highlighted how harshly the Christian doctrine has always blamed the weakness of the flesh as the symbol of the fragility of human nature: in this optic, passions and sexual desire are extremely dangerous and inherently prone to moral deviation. Given that, part of Chapter 3 will be dedicated to analysing the extent to which justifications of religious and moral character have been provided by the opponents of the aforementioned reforms. To this end, the pervasiveness of conservative moral and religious values in the Italian context will show to what degree liquid modern patterns of behaviour had to struggle before being accepted into such a traditional society. That being said, recent examples will prove how far the traditional Catholic heritage is eradicated into it and how much traditional patterns of “solid modernity” still have a powerful grip on contemporary Italian civil society.

The Importance of Representation: A Glance at Italian Modern Society

A recurring theme of this dissertation is the importance of symbols and representations when it comes to gender issues. As touched upon before, one of the most noticeable forms of representation of women’s role in society could not but be statues and monuments. The more a society presents women merely in relation to their traditional role as the “angel of the domestic hearth”, the fewer city monuments will be dedicated to female poets, politicians and scientists. Dedicating space is a vital matter in our times since successful and independent female role models are still more necessary than ever. In this context we find the lively debate which has been lately brought to the attention of the international public by Elisabetta Povoledo, journalist of the New York Times and author of “Put a Female Statue on a Vacant Pedestal? An Italian City Says Not So Fast” (2022). In that piece of writing, the case of Prato Della Valle, one of the main squares in Italy, has exposed a common issue in Italian public areas. In that specific case, not even one of the 78 statues located in the Paduan square is dedicated to a woman, yet. Looking at the bigger picture, in the entire nation only approximately 200 statues represent women: to give the idea, Povoledo (2022) recalls that as far as the only Roman Pincio Gardens are concerned, barely 3 busts out of 229 are devoted to women. In relation to the Paduan case, problems began after the proposal to put statues of women in the few spots left vacant following the 1797 French army invasion. Leaving all the subsequent criticism to this so-perceived expression of “cancel culture”, what we are mainly concerned with here are the justifications given by the city council when filing the motion. According to the two members who supported it, Simone Pillitteri and Margherita Colonnello, the

absence of statues of women clearly symbolises the extent of male domination over time (Povoledo, 2022). Moreover, it highlights the lack of representation of relevant female figures, whose achievements have always been poorly represented in the past. Given the ever-increasing awareness of such issues, these endeavours are more and more frequent, even though they hardly ever succeed. Another significant contribution to the debate was brought by Rosanna Carrieri, spokesperson for the organization “Mi conosci?”, responsible for the ongoing making of a list which includes all the statues present on the Italian soil. Her words, reported by Povoledo (2022), stress that, in spite of the increasing number of statues devoted to women, in their case, the imagery is still stereotypical, as happened with Saura Sermenghi’s Laundress of Bologna or Emanuele Stifano’s Gleaner of Sapri. First and foremost, statues representing women are generally conceived as sacred icons, allegories or anonymous representatives of a category, as pointed out by the journalist Enea Conti (2022). In general, what is most concerning is that the overwhelming majority of the women deemed worthy of being publicly celebrated by city monuments owe their fame to merits such as sacrifice and caregiving (Conti, 2022). Likewise, Conti (2022) offers the example of the Sailors’ Bride in Rimini, which pays tribute to all the women waiting for their husbands to come back home after work. The resemblance to the Russian gender-based national symbolism – which is about to be widely discussed in Chapter 2- is straightforward.

Furthermore, no analysis of the Italian social context could be devoid of consideration of the messages conveyed by Italian television, which still plays a huge role in defining and perpetuating the popular sentiment towards various socio-cultural matters. Even though less than before, when its pedagogical function was significantly higher than its entertainment purposes, television still plays a major role in spreading messages with strong social value; and so, anything that is told on television is subjected to critical examination by the public. This is particularly true when dealing with the most important tv program of the entire Italian tv schedule, the Sanremo Music Festival, a famous show where the competition between popular Italian singers meets the task to convey messages having strong social valence; in this regard, hosts and guests are asked to give speeches concerning social issues such as racism, inclusion and sexism. Given that, the words said by Amadeus, the host of the 70° edition, during the opening press conference of the event, still seem to confirm some hoary stereotypes regarding women’s roles both in their private and professional life. Aside from having repeatedly remarked on the beauty of his 11 co-hosts, when asked to introduce the model Francesca Maria Novello, at the time engaged to the professional motorcycle racer Valentino Rossi, the host stumbles into a considerable media storm. On this occasion, Amadeus claimed that he had chosen her not only because of her beauty but especially due to her ability to stand by a man of great significance by taking a step back¹⁴. In spite

¹⁴ Sanremo, polemica sulle donne ‘molto belle’ di Amadeus. Accusato di sessismo, il conduttore replica: ‘Volevo fare un complimento, lo rifarei’ (2020, January 16). *Repubblica*.

of the outrage among part of the public opinion, this inappropriate outburst emerged as the most striking example of the true thought of a sizeable majority of the Italian population. Being Sanremo the declared embodiment of the cultural spirit of the nation, the Italian character depicted by episodes of this kind appears as still attached to the idea of a woman stepping back and sacrificing her career for the sake of her couple and family life, just like happened to Giovanna Civitillo, a former showgirl and Amadeus' wife¹⁵. Despite the immediate public apology, later Amadeus found himself at the centre of a very similar controversy, this time grew out of an episode featured in the 72° edition of the festival itself. Ornella Muti, experienced actress and co-host of the opening night, has her largest on-screen moment entirely dedicated to a tribute to all her legendary former male co-stars. Being a famous actress herself, Muti spends approximately 6 minutes telling anecdotes about her colleagues, while her remarkable career is used as a pretext to celebrate other peoples' greatness. On that occasion, she is put under the spotlight only as the mere common thread bringing together all those illustrious personalities that she had the chance to share the stage with¹⁶. Once again, the most important Italian broadcaster spreads the message that women are welcome to step back. Going back to Civitillo and Novello, those statements are exemplifications of a still regrettable condition due to the implicit subtext that a woman is still the one who is generally asked to take a step back. Given that, it goes without saying that no one would ever label such a private decision as necessarily wrong: the true problem derives from the disproportion between men and women who freely opt to do so.

¹⁵ Rai. (2022, January 10). *Giovanna Civitillo: "la mia vita dedicata ad Amadeus e non me ne pento"* [Video]. Youtube.

¹⁶ Raiplay. (2022, February 2). *Ornella Muti brilla a Sanremo* [Video].

*STATE AND SEXUALITY IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA:
A MATTER OF TRADITIONS OR QUESTIONS OF GEOPOLITICS?*

Gender-shaped Narratives and State Rhetoric

We commonly refer to gender as the complex of roles and behaviours that we expect from male and female individuals, shaping the way we look at things through the prism of gender. Cultural peculiarities aside, patriarchal societies worldwide have shaped our attitude and perception of which characteristics should be attributed to femininity or masculinity, contributing to the creation of a huge apparatus of social norms. The symbolic importance of gender-shaped narratives is particularly evident when it comes to the nation-building process and nationalist rhetoric. As to Oleg Riabov's "Mother Russia" (2020), the way the Russian nation is commonly referred to (as a daring, motherly figure) is part of a wider trend of the gendered portrayal of nations that has been going on for a long time and still shows no signs of diminishing. Any time the state is symbolically embodied by a strong, solid, adamant man of strength, the nation is personified by a fragile (but still dignified), sacred though occasionally mistreated woman. She inspires an unconditioned feeling of love and devotion that pushes people to sacrifice themselves for her while she generates new devoted children. In this iconographic diarchy between the ruler and the motherland, men's rationality and ruling personalities are stressed, while women are mostly characterised by a need to be protected. State leading figures in the Soviet and pre-Soviet era are referred to as "little fathers" or "fathers of the homeland": theirs is the duty to lead the way and rule the country. On the other hand, the semantic field of femininity tends to always be closely related to motherhood and caregiving. The pervasiveness of this "new patriarchal order" under which "gender stereotypes are thriving" is reflected in the words of Oksana Pushkina, a member of the State Duma as a representative of the United Russia party from 2016. As reported by Foreign Policy in 2018, she labelled those social customs as "a massive impediment in the development of women's rights" and a concrete obstacle to the strengthening of their role in contemporary Russian society¹⁷.

Putin's official speech celebrating Women's Day on March 8, 2021, is a perfect example of State

¹⁷ Ferris-Rotman, A. (2018, April 9). *Putin's war on women*. Foreign Policy.

rhetoric including all typical references to womanhood. To begin with, it stands out that his opening “words of tender and heartfelt gratitude” are addressed first and foremost to mothers, then to “grandmothers, wives, sisters, daughters and friends”¹⁸. What catches the eye the most in this word choice is that the perspective chosen is male and collectivist: women are not regarded as individuals but as a well-defined category whose role is considered crucial for the well-being of society. Moreover, the use of the terms “mothers”, “grandmothers”, “daughters”, “sisters” and “friends” presents women as a man’s appendix rather than an autonomous human being. This theme, which is extensively delved into in contemporary Feminist theories, is still rooted in patriarchal societies, where respect must be paid to women in virtue of their relationship with a man. In this regard, women “devote themselves without reservation to their children, their development and upbringing”, carrying almost the entire weight of the progress of society and actually living for others, given their “strongest, purest, selfless feeling of unconditional motherly love”¹⁹. The semantic field of caregiving is even emphasized by a shoutout to female medical workers, whose commitment to facing the pandemic has provided “true womanly, heartfelt support” to all patients. President Putin also stresses the hope that women’s conventional role “will remain an inspiring moral guideline”, reflecting the conservative view of society as something that leads to advancement but is still firmly anchored to traditional values²⁰. And so, linking womanhood to the arrival of spring, bringing “harmony, tenderness and beauty” into the world, draws on the vast allegorical imaginary of fertility²¹.

“Gendered Citizenship”: Dealing with Soviet Heritage

The importance of a similar complex of allegories is even more evident in a strongly ideological structure such as the USSR, whose narratives were both elaborated and pervasive. In fact, as Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina accurately described in their homonymous paper, “gendered citizenship” in post-Soviet States is “a collection of structural conditions and everyday actions determining the relationship between the state and individuals categorized by sex” whose basis dates back to Soviet times²². Thanks to their work, we are now able to track how sex differentiation has been used to (unequally) establish people’s position and role in Soviet society through State-determined social policies. In Soviet societies, every citizen was formally granted the same rights and duties, but women formed a *sui generis* subcategory which could be

¹⁸ Boost your Russian. (2021, March 12). Putin’s Speech- International Women’s Day [Video]. YouTube.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Zdravomyslova, E., & Temkina, A. (2005). *Gendered Citizenship in Soviet and post-Soviet Societies*.

granted both positive (especially related to social policies supporting motherhood) and negative rights. So, Zdravomyslova and Temkina analysed gendered citizenship and sex differentiation as a means to unequally order civil status and females' position in society. Given that, rights were fully-fledged duties towards the State whose failure to observe resulted in sanctions imposed by public authorities. In this regard, they label Soviet citizenship as a "coercive" one and refer to the "fulfilment of political duties" as a way to reaffirm political loyalty²³. As they recall, even procreation was prescribed as part of the moral and symbolic order and had nothing to do with an individual choice, being a way of contributing to a greater national good, instead. As soon as they came to power, Bolsheviks always "prioritized ideology over sexuality", stressing the "wholesale subordination of sexuality to the proletariat's interest"²⁴. In this view, women's specific duty was to give birth to the bright future of the nation, while every sexual conduct not aimed at procreation was immoral, or at least formally inexistent and not covered by state-controlled media. Bolsheviks did not relegate women to the mere role of caregiving mothers, since one of their main scopes was to free these domestic angels from "the slavery of the kitchen". In fact, solving the so-called "woman question" (женский вопрос) through their emancipation was one of the main objectives of their social policies, since they wanted to remedy women's "backwardness" by political means. (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2005)

According to Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2005), between 1918 and 1930, women were not only granted the right to vote and stand for elections but also equal pay for equal work, not even mentioning the pioneering facilitations that permitted unilateral divorce in 1926. And so, marriage (whose religious legitimisation had also been abolished) was weakened and substantially converted into a "cohabitation of two economically independent subjects united by love, comradeship and parental obligations"²⁵. Women were fully-fledged workers just like men, and so were, at least theoretically, freed from economic dependence upon the family, a condition that still to the present day is likely to trigger gender violence mechanisms and abusive behaviour. But while marriage became a more personal matter, motherhood remained a fully-fledged social duty, especially after the 1930s. Medical abortion, outstandingly legalised in 1920 to overcome illegal and highly deadly methods, was in fact criminalised in 1936 (and later re-legalised in 1955). During Stalinism, the right to Soviet motherhood was even regarded as an obligatory civic duty, eased by social aids and benefits such as state nurseries and kindergartens. Moreover, the double burden of the "Soviet superwoman" emerged, and women were increasingly supposed to manage both their productive and reproductive roles in society, pursuing male professions but at the same time carrying the entire weight of caregiving and family functions. The rhetoric of the "Soviet superwoman" has been also re-proposed by President Putin in his above-mentioned

²³ *ivi*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Women's Day address to the nation, where he praises women for their ability to "always manage to cope with everything"²⁶. As recalled by Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2005), during the 3rd phase (the mid-1950s-1980s) of Soviet Gender Relations, the Soviet family was partially freed from state control when divorce practices have been re-simplified and legal medical abortion has been restored in 1955. Still, those policies were not even supported by sex education or eased access to safe and reliable birth control. Moreover, the rhetoric of "voluntary" motherhood as the only natural destiny of women and a sign of proper femininity persisted and even strengthened. (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2005)

After the fall of the USSR, intimacy was gradually removed from the constant public scrutiny: while in Soviet times it was not even contemplated due to the rigorous patterns of behaviour set by the state, now the latter was progressively giving ground in relation to its overall control on what could be done or said in public. Nonetheless, nowadays attempts of state interference in private life persist in post-Soviet States, leading to a certain narrative of women which takes them into consideration mostly in relation to their birth-giving functions. President Putin himself repeatedly encouraged women to give birth and stay home to take care of children as a response to demographic problems such as high male mortality and low birth rates. One of Putin's major public explanations for the promulgation of the anti-propaganda laws in 2013 was in fact that Russia had to "cleanse of all that which hinders Russia's demographic problem", as he stated when journalists interviewed him on January 19, 2014²⁷. According to statistics, Russia's fertility rate was 1.54 births per woman while 2.1 was needed in order to maintain a stable population. (Stone, 2016)

As recalled in "Masculinity in post-Soviet Ukraine", Putin's concerns were not imaginary nor Russian-related only, since the situation in Ukraine was similar: after the USSR collapsed, it was struck by a significant population decline leading to a precipitous drop from 52 to 49.3 billion people between 1989 and 2001²⁸. Moreover, this paper states that male deaths were six times higher than female ones due to a rise in episodes of violence, heart attacks and high blood pressure. (Janey, Plitin, Muse-Burke, Vovk, 2009). Given that, it is unquestionable that a serious problem had been encountered and had to be solved. On the other hand, Russian authorities deliberately decided to address it by drawing on traditional patriarchal rhetoric that had very little to do with the Bolsheviks' intent to free women from the slavery of the kitchen. Despite Stalinism having claimed the woman's question was over, a half-century later woman was still envisaged a life of economic dependence and unpaid housework, relegated to a specific citizenship condition where their rights were

²⁶ Boost your Russian, *op. cit.*, p.15

²⁷ Stone, D.R. (2014, March). Russia, Gay Rights and the Sochi Olympics. *ORIGINS, Current Events in Historical Perspective*, 7(6).

²⁸ Janey, B.A., Plitin, S., Muse-Burke, J.L., & Vovk, V.M. (2009). Masculinity in Post-Soviet Ukraine: An Exploratory Factor Analysis. *Culture, Society and Masculinities*, 1, 137-154.

“subordinated to the aims of national state-building”²⁹.

In a society where motherhood is still perceived as a civic duty while fatherhood is considered an economic one, there is no room for women’s self-determination. Nowadays, the right to abortion is backed by generally strong public support across post-Soviet States, although religious groups tend to undermine the legislation inherited by the USSR. As recalled by Kirey and Sitnikova, in 2003 Russia retained the right to abortion until 12 weeks, reducing “social indications” which permitted women to abort up to 22 weeks³⁰. In 2012, husband impediment (due to incarceration, death or disability), impairment and deprivation of parental rights were no more valid “social indications”: a woman could legally abort up to 22 weeks only as a result of rape. Consequently, Belarus followed the Russian example the following year, also allowing conscientious objection, while Armenia amended the Constitution in 2016 to include the “protection of a mother and of an unborn child”³¹. (Kirey & Kirey-Sitnikova, 2019). In their paper, it is also mentioned that, according to Russian Federal Law, in 2011 women willing to abort were required to present their husband’s (or father’s if not married) consent, while being forced to see the foetus and listen to its heartbeat. Although this was firmly rejected by the government, this attempt itself clearly shows the fragility of the woman condition, whose rights can be suddenly deprived. Apropos of that, Simone de Beauvoir said it best: “Should there be only one economic, political or religious crisis for women’s rights to be undermined”.

Anti-gay Propaganda Laws and Sochi Olympics: International Concerns

Women are not the only ones whose sexual life falls under state control, since the worst repercussions are experienced by LGBT people, indeed. Starting from Soviet times, homosexuality has been considered a perversion that could not result in children and was consequently not compatible with the public good (Mole, 2018). Nonetheless, Bolsheviks banned the 1832 tsarist laws that criminalized male homosexuality in Russia. Only in 1934, homosexuality was re-criminalized during Stalinism and legalized once again almost 60 years later (1993), to facilitate Russian accession into the Council of Europe³². However, Mole stresses that this measure intended to relegate same-sex relations “out of sight”, making them the only category affected by the public-private dichotomy of discretion, since heterosexuals did not have to hide in public.

The Federal Law for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values passed in State Duma in 2013 with only an abstention (from representative Ilya

²⁹ Mole, R. C. M. (2018). Introduction to “Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities.” *Slavic Review*, 77(1), 1–5.

³⁰ Kirey-Sitnikova, Y., & Kirey, A. (2019). Sexual Politics in Post-Soviet Societies: A Preliminary Cartography

³¹ abortion had been completely banned the previous year, exception made for the premature death of the foetus

³² *ibid.*

Ponomarev of the minority party “A Just Russia”) and no votes against³³. Being an amendment of the Law on Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development, the aim of the law was to ensure that no child could be reached by information that might present non-traditional sexual relations in a positive light, or at least place them on an equal footing with traditional ones. What the Ministry of Education responded to a letter signed by Human Rights Watch is illustrative of the official position of Russian authorities: being the right and access to education undisputable (as to the 2012 Federal Law on Education, Art.5), education is deeply rooted in acknowledging traditional values³⁴. Anyway, the law does not formally condemn unconventional sexual behaviour but specifically its expression, as always recalled by Vladimir Putin when pressed by detractors. Moreover, the nature itself of the provision is administrative and requires the payment of a fine ranging from 4.000 rubs for individuals to 1 million rubs for organizations when one breaks the law. (Human Rights Watch, 2018)

According to human rights organizations, administrative sanctions are nothing compared to the unbearable increase of violence experienced by LGBT people in their everyday lives. Recalling a 2018 survey conducted by a government-run agency, Human Rights Watch states that 63% of the respondents were convinced that gay propaganda was covertly aimed at destroying so-called Russian values. State laws generally reflect views, attitudes and points of reference of societies: if the State itself targets minorities, then people might consider themselves legitimated to discriminate them, especially when any vexatious behaviour tends to go unpunished. This is especially true when discrimination is backed by prominent members of the Russian Orthodox Church, whose role in Russian society is increasingly pervasive and recalls the one played by respectively the Catholic Church in Europe and mullahs in Islamic countries. On the other hand, the vast majority of the Western International Community expressed deep concern, especially human rights organizations. Further quoting Human Rights Watch’s 2018 report on the matter, this law not only goes against liberal civil rights movements but also constitutes an explicit violation of Russia’s obligations under international law. And so, the discrimination institutionalized by Russia attracted criticism from the European Court of Human Rights, which in 2017 has condemned the law for its “reinforcement of predisposed bias”³⁵. Human Rights Watch did not mince words, labelling Putin’s bill as fully-fledged “political homophobia” targeting minorities for political gain: unifying citizens against social deviance (a common enemy questioning identity axioms) on a domestic level while reinforcing Russia’s role as a conservative power on the international ground. Given that, when Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, all eyes were on it:

³³ Sputnik News. (2013, June 11). Russian “Anti-Gay” Bill Passes with Overwhelming Majority. *Sputnik International*.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch (2018, December 11). Russia’s “Gay Propaganda” Law Imperils LGBT Youth.

³⁵ *ibid.*

the timing was on the side of the Russian LGBT community, which managed to draw the attention of the entire international community.

Putin has invested an incredible amount of capital in the 2014 Olympics, both material (it was considered the costliest Olympics so far) and political (according to political analysts, the Olympics were meant to show the world the greatness and power of Russia and its leader)³⁶. Nonetheless, the event was put under the spotlight precisely because of the law adopted shortly before, to the extent that several options have been considered on the international ground. As recalled by *The Atlantic*, Putin's statements regarding gays attending the event (they should "feel at ease as long as they leave the children in peace") and Sochi's mayor's claims ("There are no gays in Sochi") did not help³⁷. In addition, Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak made things even worse when he linked homosexuality and paedophilia ("Please, do not touch kids") during a conference held on the day of the opening ceremony³⁸. Moving the Olympics six months before the opening ceremony was completely out of discussion for clear economic reasons (as happened with Tokyo 2020, which kept the original name), given the massive amount of money already provided by the host country and the huge organizational effort made³⁹. Moreover, as Ziegler recalls, the International Olympic Committee was aware of the civil-rights situation in Russia, but it seemed to have no relevance to them. He stated that the Olympics have always been a rather financial matter more than a mere sporting event, and no significant losses had previously occurred with China, Hitler's Germany and the Soviet Union itself as hosting countries (Ziegler, 2014).

And so, Ziegler concludes that civil rights are clearly no such a thing for the IOC and sponsoring corporations. Another proposed alternative was for the US to boycott the event or for Russia to not be allowed to participate in its own event: not even mentioning the irrelevant outcome of the reciprocal 1980-1984 boycotts (respectively in Moscow and Los Angeles), those options were set aside because they would "target the wrong people". Only bringing more tension in Russia's relations with the West, Ziegler admits that their mere significant outcome would have been to take away athletes' opportunities of a lifetime. At the end of the day, Obama refrained from attending the event, nominating 3 well-known LGBT American athletes such as Billie Jean King, Caitlin Cahow and Brian Boitano to represent US official delegation in Sochi. Meanwhile, US media were expressing their firm opposition to discrimination in front of an American (or at least Western) audience. But what should interest us the most in Ziegler's analysis is the fact that he refers to the 2014 "gay

³⁶ Gibson, O. (2013, October 9). Sochi 2014: the costliest Olympics yet but where has all the money gone? *The Guardian*.

³⁷ Friedman, U. (2014, January 28). How Sochi Became the Gay Olympics. *The Atlantic*.

³⁸ NBC News (2014, February 6). Russian Deputy P.M. on LGBT laws: "Please Do Not Touch Kids".

³⁹ Zeigler, C. (2014). How We Blew It in Sochi: The LGBT Community Took a Shot at Anti-Gay Laws in Russia and Missed the Olympic-Sized Target. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 1(3), 30–38.

Olympics” as a wasted opportunity and his critical observations regarding how the matter has been addressed internationally: when “the attention on anti-gay laws predictably disappeared” as soon as the event ended, it was clear that “there was never more than a Western-focused media campaign with no chance of changing Russian culture and Russian laws”. (Zeigler, 2014)

Addressing LGBT Issues: A Glance at Post-Soviet States

Torn between two increasingly self-excluding poles of attraction, these countries have used social policies in the past as a political means to get closer to the West and to demonstrate their independence from Russian influence, but nothing prevents them to do the reverse in the future. Either way, people’s rights are doomed to be instrumentalised if required and are intertwined with geopolitical interests. In this regard, Sitnikova and Kirey recall that many post-Soviet States felt “obliged” to adhere to certain values and to make concessions to obtain an economic and political benefits, such as the accession to the Council of Europe. And so, the list of countries progressively decriminalizing homosexuality (мужеложство) follows: Ukraine (1991), Russia (1993), Belarus (1994), Moldova (1995), Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan-Tajikistan (1998), Armenia-Azerbaijan-Georgia (2000)⁴⁰. In 2014 Ukraine blocked its own “anti-propaganda laws” draft to get closer to Western requirements and expectations. The same happened the following year in Kazakhstan, where legislative drafts on the matter were stopped in order to gain the chance to host the 2022 Olympics, even though the façade pretext was the unconstitutionality of the law on technical grounds. For its part, Georgia signed its first anti-discrimination law (in the workplace) in 2009, later extended in 2010 as an aggravating factor in crimes and in 2014 to all circumstances (Mole, 2018). Georgia had started a series of reforms to improve social rights, although only theoretically, given the well-known intolerance of Georgians regarding homosexuality. In fact, even though both Georgia and Ukraine (along with Baltic states) actively prohibit discrimination against LGBT people, public opinion is strongly conservative and homophobic. As shown by a study carried out by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSIP), 84% of Georgians perceive same-sex relations as always wrong and flawed, reaching the highest percentage in Europe⁴¹. These accomplishments could be presented as a demonstration that “a strong political will can be sufficient to make the first legal steps in protecting human rights, even though the implementation is lacking”⁴². On the other

⁴⁰ Kirey-Sitnikova, Y., & Kirey, A. (2019). Sexual Politics in Post-Soviet Societies: A Preliminary Cartography

⁴¹ ISSP Research Group (2020). International Social Survey Programme: Religion IV - ISSP 2018. *GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7570 Data file Version 2.1.0*

⁴² Gradska, Y., Kondakov, A., & Shevtsova, M. (2020). Post-socialist Revolutions of Intimacy: An Introduction. *Sexuality & culture*, 24(2), 359-370.

hand, all these countries did not adopt these laws after an internal political process, which is clearly shown by their lack of support from the public opinion, and this undermines the stability of vulnerable legislation that “might be easily reversed under external geopolitical pressure”⁴³. The strong role played by the West in this regard is undeniable, and so backlashes are likely to result from the perception of those policies as produced by foreign, neo-colonialist interferences.

Understanding 2006 Moscow Pride’s Controversies

To better understand the peculiarities of the post-Soviet context, a strong differentiation between Western and post-Soviet responses to social struggles regarding gender and sexuality can be emphasized. The post-Soviet states, where a strong cultural Soviet heritage still shapes the way people perceive intimacy and sexuality, never really adapted to Western models of activism, where a loud and flamboyant sexual revolution took place. The first Moscow Pride, which was meant to take place on 27th May 2006, celebrating the 13th anniversary of the repeal of Soviet legislation criminalizing same-sex relationships, clearly says so. As pointed out by Stella, it can be stated that the event failed in terms of domestic participation due to its deliberate aim to attract attention through media exposure. A plethora of queer associations even distanced themselves from the event, fearing that an increased exposure could result only in an increased backlash in terms of episodes of violence incurred by participants. In addition, the event was perceived as more targeted at gaining international praise than domestic support: in fact, Stella reports that a significant international media coverage resulted only in a little grassroots involvement. In Russia “non-traditional sexual relations” could be at best tolerated but were still far from being publicly celebrated, and public authorities’ general approach implied that “those deviations from normal principles should not be exhibited for all to see”⁴⁴. Moreover, when asked about his personal view of Pride Manifestations, Putin limited himself to recall that “one of the country’s greatest problems is the demographic crisis”⁴⁵: once again, national interest had been used as a pretext to oppose social rights, and state rhetoric had enhanced motherhood while devaluating non-reproductive sex. Western Pride manifestations, whose colourful and deliberately exaggerated aesthetic aims to create a joyful and welcoming environment for people facing daily discrimination, developed as a provocative way of making LGBT people’s voices heard by enhancing their visibility. (Stella, 2013).

This approach simply does not seem to work in post-Soviet communities, whose sense of discretion

⁴³ Kirey-Sitnikova, Y., & Kirey, A. (2019). Sexual Politics in Post-Soviet Societies: A Preliminary Cartography.

⁴⁴ Stella, S. (2013). Queer Space, Pride, and Shame in Moscow. *Slavic Review*, 72(3), 458–480.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

retains them from adapting to practices that are perceived as corrupting traditional moral values. Western and Russian public opinion could not be more different, as clearly shown by the case of Pussy Riot, the female Russian collective that has become an international sensation during the last decade. As soon as they were convicted on a trial, they were praised for their provocative modes of expression by Western artists such as Madonna and Bjork, but also publicly regarded by Hillary Clinton as “strong and brave”⁴⁶. Moreover, they won the LennonOno Award and figured among the nominees for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. Another indication of their appeal to the West was their cameo as themselves in the Netflix original production “House of Cards”. On the other hand, the scandal following their provocative performance in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour apparently did not meet the taste of the Russian public opinion, according to the surveys reported by Zabyelina and Ivashkiv in their article “Pussy Riot and the Politics of Resistance in Contemporary Russia”. Considering the results of the poll carried by the Levada Centre in 2013, they recalled that “56% of Russians considered a prison sentence appropriate” and “only 26% saw it as an unnecessary punishment”⁴⁷.

Once again, Russian civil society, even though divided, overall seemed to have a different view of reality and a strong attachment to common decency. And so, going back to Stella’s argument on Russian civil rights movements, it can be stated that “privileging global over local civil society as an interlocutor seemed to be quite a counterproductive strategy” since it only reinforced the rhetoric of Western ideas corrupting Russian traditional moral values⁴⁸. As soon as they had the chance to free themselves from Western orbit, many post-Soviet States felt no longer obliged to adhere to a façade of fictitious tolerance, and public discourse on the matter was even instrumentalised to back populist movements against Western influence. Leaving aside international players’ undeniably valuable assistance, little can be achieved on post-Soviet soil without domestic support: otherwise, civil movements will always lay themselves open for the opportunistic criticism of political detractors. And so, the fragility of “imported” legislation will always persist if not backed by a cultural shift and specific policies designed to promote tolerance and respect.

⁴⁶ Associated Press. (2014, April 8). Clinton praises Pussy Riot as “strong and brave”. *New York Post*.

⁴⁷ Zabyelina, Y., & Ivashkiv, R. (2017, January 25). Pussy Riot and the Politics of Resistance in Contemporary Russia. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology*.

⁴⁸ Stella, S. (2013), *ivi*

CAP.3

LOVE RELATIONSHIPS AS A MEANS OF RESTORING THE GREATNESS OF A NATION: RUSSIAN AND ITALIAN CONSERVATIVES COMPARED

One Last Look at Russian Conservatism and “Toxic Nostalgia”

Since we cannot claim to understand a society until we have analysed what it has been through in the past, this section will still be dedicated to the legacy of the Soviet time on the modern Russian society, until switching back to that of Italy. In this regard, it must be recalled that the Russian Federation has essentially taken over after the dismantlement of the USSR, whose international legal personality goes basically uninterrupted, even under a different name. Still, according to Sergei Lebedev (2022), modern Russia sees its past as a political issue, and we are now acknowledging that as never before. This attempt of taking advantage of its political legacy is so used as a means of consolidating the nation and creating a highly ideologized and indoctrinated population⁴⁹. Soviet authorities were extremely skilled in this, since they created one of the greatest symbolic apparatuses of all time, recurring to hymns, monuments, architectural works, and so much more⁵⁰. The common factor was always the idea of an undefeated nation, whose greatness must be celebrated by solemn works of art of all kinds. Those countless symbols were aimed at establishing a cultural enclosure made of complementary cults such as the cult of socialism and victory (победа) (Lebedev, 2022). In this regard, Victory Day (celebrated on May 9th) is way beyond that a mere celebration of the defeat of Nazi Fascism: it represents the toughness and hardships experienced by the Russian people and is a true gatherer of consensus around such a cohesive collective experience⁵¹.

As shown by Lebedev (2022), those symbols are nowadays experiencing an unprecedented awakening, after their deterioration that occurred almost thirty years ago. To the present day, this glorious revival of the past is accompanied by a certain sense of nostalgia: this is crucial in order to differentiate Putin’s Russia from the USSR. According to Lebedev (2022), the latter was in fact an ideological project whose legitimacy relied upon the future, whose greatness was to be reached thanks to the strong rejection of the past, who represented

⁴⁹ Lebedev, S. (2022, February 11). *Nostalgia del Futuro*. Internazionale n.1447, p.88. (Original work ‘*Fremtiden er nostalgisk*’ published on Weekendavisen)

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Baechum, L. (2022, April 12). *What Victory Day Means for Russian Identity*. The Washington Post.

the explanation to all the problems of the present. On the other hand, he affirms that Putin's Russia heavily relies on this sense of common nostalgia, presenting itself as a conservative project, unlike the revolutionary mission of the USSR. Today's Russia rejects the idea of progress and overcoming the present that the future inherently brings with it: being such a conservative nation, an opening to the future would inevitably mean embracing Western liberal ideals and so the defeat of the Russian traditional values. From this perspective, the future is a combination of things that should better be avoided, such as the "plague of liberalism" or the "virus of social rights" (Lebedev, 2022). Any criticism of this approach to public discourse is strongly discouraged since it could undermine the great power of conviction exercised by state propaganda.

The same sense of nostalgia is discussed with a critical undertone in Naomi Klein's "Toxic Nostalgia, From Putin to Trump to the Trucker Convoys" (2022), where it is portrayed as "an enraged and annihilating nostalgia that clings to false memories of past glories against all mitigating evidence". The gist of it is that Russia as a country is based on very conservative practices and customs, starting from its official stance on gender issues. Besides, the Russian Federation is a petrostate that "has defiantly refused to diversify its economic dependence on oil and gas [...] despite the reality of climate change" (Klein, 2022): in defiance of the latest international trends and the goals officially set by the international community, it keeps pursuing non-renewable based energy policies. According to Klein (2022), this attitude toward time and this strong refusal to overcome the ways of the past "clings to an idealized version of the past and steadfastly refuses to face difficult truths about the future". The same goes for the decision to heavily rely on sharp displays of power since Realism is the typical IR prism through which this country interfaces with the rest of the international community. This issue is particularly evident when it comes to events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which had Western society profoundly shaken in 2022. Far from being unrelated to each other, these aspects are put together thanks to Klein's reference to bell hooks' definition of an "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy": Russia's ostentatious muscular strength and a certain morbid attachment to old patterns often seem to be perilously hanging on a balance between classical conservatism and an obsolete reminiscence of a bygone age. Given that, presenting Russia alone as the epitome of a patriarchal society would be a dubious proposition, to say the least. In fact, it is undeniable that Western societies are still far from being impeccable and that facts often disprove their much-declared good intentions. Thus, the following section will go back to the Italian context, analysing how gender issues are commonly addressed in mainstream media and in the public discourse. And so, the examples featured below will show some affinities between the arguments put forward by both Russian and Italian authorities and public figures in relation to traditional gender roles and how they are perceived by the public opinion.

The Long Path to Legal Divorce and Abortion in Italy

As far as Italy is concerned, divorce was permitted only in 1970, after 11 previous attempts had failed over the previous 92 years, according to the journalistic reconstruction made by the New York Times (Friendly, 1970). Despite the strong opposition of the Catholic Church and the influential catholic party *Democrazia Cristiana*, the first Italian divorce law eventually passed (Friendly, 1970). According to Friendly (1970), the Catholic Church, marking the institution of divorce as “both morally and legally unacceptable”, even affirmed that this law was to be considered a unilateral abrogation of the 1929 Lateran Pact, which regulates the relations between Italy and the Holy See⁵². The campaign against the law was so fierce that led to the abrogative referendum of 1974, where citizens were asked to make divorce illegal again (“yes”) or to keep the 1970 law (“no”). Unlike what happened in 1978 with the referendum on abortion rights, the *Democrazia Cristiana*, along with the MSI (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*, an extreme right-wing and post-fascist party), strenuously opposed the 1970 divorce law. At the ballot box, although the South generally came out in favour of the abolition of the law, the vast majority of the Italian civil society rejected the proposal of abrogation: the referendum was so defeated with approximately 59% (“no”) to approximately 41% (“yes”)⁵³. After this brief summary, what concerns us the most here are the words and the ideological references provided by conservatives in order to justify their firm opposition to the 1970 law and to motivate people to vote “yes”. For instance, former senator Merlin said that she took an anti-divorce stance to protect women, preventing their husbands to throw them out of their house. These words give us another opportunity to underline one of the fundamental concepts behind the transformation of the life as a couple and the passage from solid to liquid love: being the self-determined individual at the centre of the current Western system of values, people tend to be way less dependent on their partner. Specifically, economic dependency on the partner is one of the things that impaired women the most through time, since they were the ones who had been historically relegated to (unpaid) domestic labour, being denied the chance to achieve economic independence. And so, there could have been no such a thing as liquid love without first having experienced this liberation of women, as this 50-year-old declaration clearly shows.

Italian feminists and activists achieved legal abortion only in May 1978, after a historical popular referendum. By then, both undergoing and carrying out the procedure could result in up to years of imprisonment, pursuant to 545 ff. of the Penal Code⁵⁴. After the referendum, Law 194 on abortion rights, which is still in force, passed, guaranteeing women the right to abort by the 12 weeks of pregnancy. Besides, abortion by the 20th week was legalized when necessitated by serious health problems of the fetus and the

⁵² First Divorce Under Italian Law is Granted to Separated Couple. (1970, December 31). *The New York Times*.

⁵³ All data gathered from the Italian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

⁵⁴ Those articles were then repealed by the 1978 abrogative referendum.

mother, whose risk of death must be avoided. The law guarantees both the right to abortion and to conscientious objection, which is generally grounded on religious beliefs. Given its intrinsic factor of preventing the development of a new life, abortion has never been welcomed by Catholicism, whose doctrine considers such a decision an intolerable affront to God. Being regarded as murder, abortion cannot but be condemned in the light of the 5th commandment (“Do not kill”): in this regard, not only the person undergoing the termination of pregnancy, but also those who carry out the procedure are to blame. Concerning the matter, steps have been taken so that in 2016 Pope Francis extended to all priests “the faculty to absolve those who have committed the sin of procured abortion” (Burke, Hume, & Moisescu, 2016). Nonetheless, the Church’s official position has not changed at all, being the procedure still marked as a “moral evil” that “puts an end to an innocent life”. Problems arise since Italian society is imbued with Catholic culture to such an extent that the right to abortion is now almost entirely compromised by the right to objection. According to 2018 official data, in Italy objector gynaecologists range from 7.7% (the virtuous case of Valle d’Aosta) to Molise’s 92.3%, which represents a case of extremely high concern. These worrying statistics have the access to abortion basically precluded, or at least discouraged, which means that, in spite of its formal legal guarantees, abortion in Italy is still an incomplete right, since its enjoyment is not guaranteed to all those who might need it.

Having said that, what concerns us the most here are the pro-life public statements made by key opinion leaders, since focusing on their declarations means analysing a clear indicator of the politics and society of the time. Furthermore, these words will praise not only the sacred “miracle of life”, but also the wonder of a life-long kinship, highlighting the main features of pre-liquid societies. In this regard, Paul VI’s official statement is emblematic: the Pope’s 1968 encyclical goes straight to the point and condemns in no uncertain terms pro-choice activists’ requests. Typical of its time, Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae* introduces the subject with an immediate and essential connection between procreation and married life. Moreover, the word choice is typical and emblematic: the “transmission of life” is a “collaboration” between people and God, whose fulfilment is considered a fully-fledged duty (a keyword repeatedly coming up in the text). As to parenthood, this is considered “the supreme responsibility [...] to which man is called”: more than a free choice, it is presented as the natural aim of one’s existence, both spiritually and naturally speaking. Having said that, the difference between such a thought and the above-mentioned paradigms of “liquid love” could hardly appear more evident and straightforward than that. Clearly, there is no room for the downsized responsibility of liquid modern times in a culture whose primary purpose is the preservation of strong and long-lasting ties between the two contracting parties of that supposedly life-long kinship.

Marriage, then, is far from being the effect of chance or the result of the blind evolution of natural forces. It is in reality the wise and provident institution of God the Creator, whose purpose was to effect in man His loving design. As a consequence, husband and wife, through that mutual gift of themselves, which is specific and exclusive to them

alone, develop that union of two persons in which they perfect one another, cooperating with God in the generation and rearing of new lives. (Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*, 1968)

According to Catholic culture, the mutual commitment before God derives from a carefully pondered choice that requires the largest investment, recalling the metaphor mentioned above. And so, such reasoning perfectly fits into the value and behavioural frameworks peculiar to Bauman's "solid modernity". This is particularly evident when it comes to the definition of love as a "compound of sense and spirit", far from being "merely a question of natural instinct or emotional drive". According to that, the couple is a whole consisting of two parts that find their completeness only through the encounter and the union with the other. Nonetheless, the encyclical explicitly acknowledges the "new understanding of the dignity of woman and her place in society": while maintaining its natural conservative orientation, the clergy itself cannot but admit that women were the ones whose role in couple relationships has been the most detrimental to.

"I am a Woman, I am a Mother, I am Christian"

Unlike divorce, gender issues, parenthood and abortion are still a highly divisive constant in the Italian public debate. Leaving out here progressive activists and politicians, public speeches and declarations given by conservative opinion leaders will now be analysed, showing the mutual similarities of their rhetorical and stylistic choices. Most importantly, it will be noted the extent to which popular figures such as Giorgia Meloni (leader of the far-right party *Fratelli d'Italia*) and Matteo Salvini (leader of the *Lega* party) reference traditional patterns of behaviour and glorify the core values of the past. Particularly, Giorgia Meloni presents herself as "the defender of God, the nation, and the family", as she explicitly remarked while attending the much-disputed Congress of Families in Verona in 2019⁵⁵. On this occasion, she also reiterated in front of the cheering crowd that her strenuous defence of such values and ideals is her "mission". Besides, she never holds back from standing up for the traditional family and the linear correspondence between maternity and traditional sexual relations. In this regard, she relies not only on the moral or religious discourse, but she also makes use of the demographic one, as she did in her interview with the journalist Myrta Merlino in 2018⁵⁶. In that case, she starts by saying that her party is actively involved in assisting people in having children since she believes that the biggest economic problem and emergency that we are facing nowadays is the population

⁵⁵ La Repubblica. (2019, March 31). *Congresso famiglie, Meloni dal palco: "Difenderemo Dio, patria e famiglia"* [Video]. YouTube

⁵⁶ La7 Attualità. (2018, February 3). *Meloni: "Sostengo la famiglia tradizionale per sostenere la natalità. Sennò siamo spacciati"* [Video]. YouTube

decline. In this regard, she addresses the pension problem, linking the need to stop the population decline to the need to support the so-called “natural family”. Doing so, she brings the theme of the family, criticizing the progressive cultural drift, accused of blaming and labelling as “old-fashioned” those who still get married and have children. Then, the difficulties faced by working women, especially mothers and mothers-to-be, are mentioned likewise.

Given that, Meloni has reached peak popularity in 2019 thanks to her famous speech “I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Christian”, which perfectly embodies her signature rhetorical style⁵⁷. In the first part of the video, Meloni greets the adoring crowd complaining about the so-perceived widespread feeling of condemnation of the family and especially national and gender identity. By saying “everything that defines us is an enemy to them”, Meloni leverages a strong sense of awareness and defence of one’s identity, relying on the always effective partition between “us” (tightening internal ties) and “them” (exacerbating the pre-existing contrast). The threat presented by Meloni is that so doing her people’s identity and roots are likely to be taken away from them, due to the so-perceived “dictatorship of uniform thought”. Moving forward, reaffirming that they are complex and unique human beings, Meloni pronounces the famous slogan: “I am Giorgia, I am a Mother, I am Italian, I am Christian, and you will never take that away from me”⁵⁸. And so, in her public declarations, recurring references to her motherhood come along with a combative attitude by riding the stereotype of the woman (and, on top of it, mother) who wholeheartedly fights to protect the people she loves. In this regard, her tone of voice and attitude are perfectly functional to that, showing once more that in political communication nothing is left to chance. Leaving aside Meloni, this is equally evident when analysing the similar system of values embodied by her right-wing colleague Matteo Salvini, whose public appearances always feature explicit references to his strong Catholic faith and his fatherhood. In this respect, Salvini seeks to present himself as a caring father who loves dedicating time to his children just like anybody else, extensively sharing scenes from his daily life on social media. As we are about to discuss in the following chapter, such continual references to traditional families and gender-shaped narratives are by no means an exclusive prerogative of the Italian public scene, as clearly shown by the Russian case.

⁵⁷ La Repubblica. (2019, October 20), *Centrodestra in piazza, Meloni contro gay e lgbt: “Sono una donna, sono cristiana”* [Video]. YouTube.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

Analysing Love Relationships Through the Lenses of Political Grandeur

As far as the Italian context is concerned, the demographic issue, which is still a sensitive matter both in Italy and in Russia, has risen to the attention of the masses in conjunction with the incentive policies implemented during Fascism. After analyzing Mussolini's words on the matter, their similarity with the above-mentioned arguments brought forward on gender and parenting issues by both Russian and Italian politicians will manifest itself. "Our number must be our first strength since empty cots lead to the ageing and decay of the Nation", Mussolini affirmed in his address to the people of Cuneo on August 25th, 1933. In addition to this, the same concept is reiterated and expounded at length in many other pieces of rhetoric such as the Speech of Ascension (May 26, 1927), being regarded as one of the pillars of the Fascist domestic agenda.

The unintelligent man says: "We are too many". Intelligent men reply: "We are too few!". I affirm that the most fundamental if not essential element in the political power and therefore economic and moral power of Nations, is their demographic strength. [...] All nations and all empires have felt the bite of their decadence when they have seen their birth rates decline.

As Meloni recalled a century later, Mussolini explicitly labels population decline as one of a nation's greatest catastrophes. In addition to that, the demographic issue gains with him a strong sense of solemnity: raising strong and healthy children so represents for the ordinary people the chance to make their own contribution to the greatness of the entire nation. In addition, according to the racist mindset of the time, the matter was even extremely heartfelt since it represented the resistance against the slow but still incumbent disappearance of their Western race, which would have been submerged by other races of colour (Mussolini, 1928). Leaving the race-related content aside, the link between this discourse and Putin's attempts to incentivize natality is straightforward, since they both leverage the idea according to people should be actively involved in ensuring the greatness and well-being of their nation. In so doing, people have children not only because of reasons of a private character but first and foremost because of their duty towards their country (and God, as we saw). This doctrine has been discussed by Mussolini in his preface to the Italian edition of *Decline of Births: Death of Peoples* (Korherr, R., 1928), as to the following passage:

In this case, more than formal laws, it is in the hands of the moral custom and, above all, the religious conscience of the individual. If a man does not feel the joy and pride of being "perpetuated" as an individual, as a family and as a people; if a man does not feel sadness and shame at the prospect of dying as an individual, a family, and a people, then laws in and of themselves can do nothing, even – I would say especially- if they are draconian. Laws must be spur to morals. [...] The birth rate is not simply an index of the progressive power of the nation; it is not simply as Spengler suggests, 'Italy's only weapon'; it is also that which will distinguish the Fascist people from the other peoples of Europe

as an index of vitality and the will to pass on this vitality over the centuries. [...] Now a Nation exists not only as history or territory but as human masses that reproduce themselves from generation to generation. To do otherwise means servitude or extinction. Italian Fascists: Hegel, the philosopher of the State, said: “He who is not a father is not a man!”. In a reclaimed, cultivated, irrigated, disciplined and therefore Fascist Italy, there are places and bread for another ten million men. Sixty million Italians will make the weight of their mass and their strength felt in world history. (Mussolini, 1928).

Recalling what has been said at the beginning of Chapter 2, the Fascist rhetoric on love relationships perfectly embodies the main features of gendered citizenship, as pointed out by Chiara Saraceno and Luisa Passerini in their contributions to the 1995 book “*Il regime fascista*”. According to them, as far as men were concerned, masculinity was emphasized during Fascist times, consequently stigmatizing homosexuality as well as any form of deviation from such a model of virility. Hence, women were first and foremost described as mothers, being that of childbearing their key role in society (as well as in their homes). And so, whatever took them away from such a commitment -namely, work and independence- was not frowned upon. Besides, their virtuousness hinged on qualities such as humbleness and a spirit of self-sacrifice, with the approval of Catholic religious authorities. In this regard, similarities to Putin’s 2020 Women’s Day speech are self-evident here, even in relation to the call to action that equates procreation and traditional sexual relations to a moral and civilian duty towards the entire nation.

Drawing Conclusions

As we have repeatedly pointed out throughout this paper, the evolution of love relationships throughout time cannot but be strictly connected to the concept of power. On the private side, such a social model as solid modernity cannot but be built on the oppression of women, relegating them to a condition of social and economic dependence, as evidenced both by the Russian *женский вопрос* (Chapter 2) and the 2020s Sanremo controversies (Chapter 1). And so, Chapter 1 featured the passage from the passion-driven relations of ancient times to the interest-driven kinship of solid modernity, and then the subsequent comeback to impulse-driven liquid partnerships. Furthermore, the close interconnection between gendered roles in relationships and gendered-shaped narratives has been shown, pointing out the huge influence played by mainstream media and symbols in representing people's -namely, women's- roles in society. Thanks to the analysis of the Russian context, Chapter 2 so focused on the institutionalization of the mechanism of power consubstantial to love relationships, leading to the gendered citizenship researched by Zdravomyslova and Temkina. Having the demographic problem so been introduced, the control exercised by authorities on their citizens' bodies is embodied by the words used by Putin when addressing the declining birth rate. Indeed, any attempt to interfere in people's private sphere should not be surprising, since Giddens himself approaches the topic in relation to the Nineteenth century "repressive hypothesis", which he describes as a means to ensure effective control on a disciplined population. This is particularly true when people's self-restraint is achieved, especially thanks to the perpetuation and representation of the desired patterns of behaviour.

Despite Italy's undisputable alignment with Western institutions and so-called Western values, a plethora of similarities with the Russian context has been stressed in this piece of writing. First and foremost, both Russian and Italian civil societies find themselves particularly sensitive to a certain adherence to traditional moral and religious values. Namely, Chapter 3 emphasised the strong influence exerted by religious authorities on opposing the passage from solid to liquid love in Italy, recalling what had been discussed in Chapter 2 referring to Russia and the other post-Soviet states. By definition, conservatives want to maintain the stability of the present system, even as far as the moral and cultural spheres are concerned. Tending to distrust sudden changes, their aim is to keep the status quo by adopting an uncompromising attitude towards upheavals of all kinds, especially in reference to traditions and lawfulness. Most importantly, they cling to their values as their main landmark, lying still on their positions as the world changes in the meantime. As far as Italy is concerned, for instance, any sexuality-related issue has been veiled for a long time by a mix of ignorance, fear, and hypocrisy endorsed by the clergy and conservative politicians. These themes have long been at the heart of the works of one of the all-time Italian leading intellectuals Pierpaolo Pasolini, whose profound interest in the interweaving of power, sexuality and repression materialize in the form of Love

Meetings (*“Comizi d’amore”*), a 1965 documentary still having great sociological and historical value. So assuming the repressive power exerted by authorities in both countries, still, their own peculiarities must be stressed. As regards Italy, conservatives oppose the advent of liquid relationships by invoking the symbolic imagery of idealized patterns of behaviour, while amicably labelling themselves as “old-fashioned”, trying to leverage mechanisms of identification and cunningly self-pity. Thus, Salvini’s shared moments of daily life on social media and Meloni’s fiery rhetoric could not but be the embodiment of aimed strategies of political communication, whose desired effect is to speak to individuals in order to make them feel understood and included in a community of like-minded people, in response to the needs and dynamics of contemporary paradigms of communication, as to Castells’ mass self-communication and Van Dijck’s platform society.

Nonetheless, Putin’s attitude towards the matter is more reminiscent, at times, of a rather reactionary genre. Not only does he oppose the passage from solid to liquid love relationships, but he actively tries to reestablish the previous system of traditional sexual relations. Such an exasperated conservatism so leads to an effort to retrace history backwards by overturning civil rights and freedoms whose legal guarantees go back to Soviet times. Unlike Italian conservatives, Russian authorities’ aim is to deliberately reject all the progressive views embodied by much-discussed Western liberal ideals: in so doing, the principal source of legitimacy could not but be the strong reliance on what Lebedev refers to as “common nostalgia”. Furthermore, Putin’s leverage on the celebration of traditional love relationships is admittedly part of the creation of a rhetorical pattern that is meant to be applied to the Russian community as a whole. In this case, the us-versus-them dynamics is a classic national -rather than purely personal- issue: as to Russia, the Russian people as a whole are concerned, instead of a target audience made of individuals. In any of his speeches, Putin never addresses conservatives worldwide, since his public stances are specifically designed for a Russian audience⁵⁹.

Given that, one last major difference must not go unmentioned; namely, Russia’s strong collectivist approach in opposition to Western countries’ tendency to individualism. Starting from the latter, a strong belief in human rationality and capacity for self-determination so justifies reduced State interference. This brief explanation of methodological individualism however is far from finding precise and rigorous evidence of reality, since -each with its own peculiarities- every country (the USA included, not even mentioning Italy itself) features various derogations from this principle. Still, a plethora of substantial differences between this paradigm and that of Russia may be highlighted here. Thus, state collectivism tends to rely on matters such as closer links to collective belonging and dynamics of group membership, assuming that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. Justifications given to the arguments brought by Russian authorities against non-

⁵⁹ Meloni, for instance, has attempted a Spanish transposition of one of her famous speeches, instead. Thus, she addressed a crowd of Spanish conservatives in Madrid to the cry of “Yo soy Giorgia, soy una mujer, soy una madre, soy italiana, soy cristiana”.

traditional sexual relations are the exact consequence of this logical reasoning, and so does the renewed attempt to relegate women to childbearing: the Nation's requirements are privileged over one's personal choice. Despite all, such reasoning has no place in today's Italy, unlike in the past, as shown by Chapter 3's final paragraph; namely, a similar commitment to society can be found in Fascist times, where love relationships were fully-fledged themes of national interest since the very existence and prosperity of the Nation depended on them.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that love relationships have always played a significant role in a Nation's public discourse, often being instrumentalized as a means of gaining or consolidating power. In so doing, it has been shown the considerable extent to which citizens' private lives are intertwined with political considerations and reasons of national interest. In this regard, today's Russia's refusal of the passage from solid to liquid modernity's dynamics has been addressed not only as a geopolitical argument but also as a matter of incompatible methodological approach. And so, despite all the mentioned similarities with the Italian scene, the Russian context has specific characteristics which should not go underestimated.

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LOVE MEETINGS:
ANALYSING THE EVOLUTION OF LOVE RELATIONSHIPS
THROUGH THE PRISM OF NATIONAL INTEREST

A comparison between Russia and Italy

Diletta Biferari

ABSTRACT

Terrazza di via Eufrate

PASOLINI: Senti, ma tu riesci ad immaginare, a concepire, a raffigurare dentro di te il fenomeno dello scandalizzarsi?

MORAVIA: La persona che si scandalizza, il personaggio che si scandalizza è il personaggio che vede qualche cosa di diverso da se stesso e al tempo stesso di minaccioso per se stesso; cioè non soltanto è una cosa diversa, ma minaccia la propria persona, sia fisicamente, sia nel senso dell'immagine che questa persona si fa di se stesso. Lo scandalo, in fondo, è una paura di perdere la propria personalità, è una paura primitiva.

PPP: In conclusione, chi si scandalizza è psicologicamente incerto, cioè praticamente un conformista.

M: Effettivamente è vero. La persona che si scandalizza è una persona profondamente incerta.

MUSATTI: Le opinioni relative alla vita sessuale hanno una determinata funzione difensiva, per la gente, e cioè il ritenere che le cose debbano essere in una determinata maniera conformemente a certe convenzioni, a certe istituzioni, ha una sua funzione psicologica; difende, per esempio, da quello che è l'aggressione... dei propri impulsi istintivi. Ora noi abbiamo paura della nostra istintività e ce ne difendiamo precisamente con... con queste forme di conformismo...

PPP: Lo scandalo come elemento dell'istinto di conservazione, dunque. Tu cosa diresti, Moravia, per concludere?

M: Ecco, io direi questo, che una credenza che sia stata conquistata con la ragione e con un esatto esame della realtà è abbastanza elastica per non scandalizzarsi mai... Se invece è una credenza ricevuta senza una analisi seria delle ragioni per cui è stata ricevuta, accettata, sì, per tradizione, per pigrizia, per educazione passiva è... un conformismo...

PPP: Il conformismo, insomma, come testarda certezza degli incerti.

(Comizi d'amore, 1963)

Per loro stessa natura, gli esseri umani sono comunemente portati a instaurare relazioni interpersonali di ogni genere, sulla base di motivazioni disparate quali ad esempio necessità, interesse, dipendenza. Partendo da tale presupposto, in questa sede analizzeremo l'evoluzione delle relazioni amorose nel corso del tempo, con particolare riguardo alle implicazioni sociologiche e politiche che ne derivano. Assunto di base di questa dissertazione sarà perciò l'indissolubile corrispondenza tra l'aspetto privato e quello pubblico della vita di coppia, specie in riferimento alle aspettative sociali inerenti ai ruoli di genere; a tal proposito, si parlerà dunque sia di *gendered roles in relationships* (in riferimento alla sfera privata) che di *gendered citizenship* (ovvero la trasposizione dei ruoli di genere nel discorso politico), passando per i vari espedienti retorici e simbolici che compongono *gendered shaped narratives* (ossia l'insieme delle rappresentazioni pubbliche e mediatiche dei ruoli di genere). Ciò che si vuole sottolineare in questa sede è perciò proprio la portata dell'ingerenza statale nella sfera privata dei propri cittadini, nello specifico in relazione alla loro vita amorosa, ma soprattutto il ruolo fondamentale che quest'ultima continua a ricoprire nel discorso pubblico. In particolare, grazie all'analisi di pattern ed espedienti retorici ricorrenti, verrà ripetutamente sottolineata la frequenza con cui le autorità politiche si avvalgono di tale tematica, strumentalizzandola con fini elettorali o di consensus building.

A tal proposito verranno esaminati, prima singolarmente e poi in parallelo, sia il contesto russo che quello italiano (e quindi, per estensione, quello occidentale), le cui affinità e specificità verranno evidenziate nel corso della dissertazione. In entrambi i casi, la portata dell'ingerenza statale su questioni attinenti alla sfera personale degli individui ci porterà ad affermare che la forte rilevanza delle relazioni amorose all'interno del dibattito e delle politiche pubbliche le porta a essere molto più che una mera questione privata. Nel caso russo, la strumentalizzazione di tale tematica all'interno del discorso pubblico fa sì che questa venga persino impiegata dalle autorità statali alla stregua di una vera e propria arma geopolitica, funzionale al consolidamento dell'identità russa e al deciso rifiuto dei valori occidentali. Questi ultimi, secondo la propaganda di stato, sarebbero infatti responsabili del tentativo di minare la stabilità e l'integrità del sistema valoriale tradizionale russo. Non a caso, all'interno della dinamica geopolitica che vede la Russia e l'Occidente su schieramenti storicamente contrapposti, l'aspetto ideologico sta tornando ad assumere rilevanza primaria e fondamentale. Detto questo, una volta riconosciuta la storica tendenza conservatrice dell'Italia, non sarà però affatto difficile trovare numerosi punti di contatto tra le due nazioni riguardo al modo in cui le relazioni amorose vengono inserite e affrontate nel dibattito pubblico, nonostante l'indiscutibile allineamento dell'Italia con i valori e le istituzioni occidentali.

Grazie al contributo degli studi di Bauman e Giddens in materia, il Capitolo 1 introduce l'aspetto privato delle relazioni amorose, delineando il loro percorso evolutivo e i radicali cambiamenti valoriali che questi stravolgimenti hanno inevitabilmente portato con sé nel passaggio dalla modernità solida alla modernità liquida. Proprio in quest'ultimo frangente si inserisce allora una riflessione in merito al retaggio lasciato sulla società contemporanea russa e italiana della cosiddetta *solid modernity*, ovvero della tendenza a costruire relazioni stabili e durature, fondate su rigidi codici di condotta che rispondono ad aspettative sociali relative al giusto comportamento da seguire nella vita di coppia. A tal proposito, grazie allo studio condotto da Lilian Rubin, appare evidente come la reputazione sociale delle ragazze negli anni '40 dipendesse dalla loro capacità di resistenza alle proposte sessuali che venivano loro rivolte, mentre la virilità dei ragazzi si misurasse sulla base delle conquiste ottenute. In altre parole, il fallimento dell'una iniziava dove finiva il

fallimento dell'altro. La reiterazione mediatica e simbolica di tali aspettative sociali, ben lungi dall'essere relegate alle sole mura domestiche, costituisce il punto d'incontro tra l'aspetto squisitamente privato delle relazioni amorose e la loro strumentalizzazione ad opera delle autorità statali. Come affermato da Foucault e riproposto da Giddens, a partire dal XIX secolo gli stati hanno infatti deliberatamente cercato di reprimere gli istinti e le passioni dei propri cittadini al fine di stabilire un controllo capillare sulla società civile. Esemplificativa in tal senso è la questione demografica, la cui strumentalizzazione porta le autorità statali alla demonizzazione di condotte sessuali che non abbiano come diretta conseguenza lo scopo procreativo. Ad esempio, in Russia questo si traduce nella condanna istituzionalizzata della comunità LGBT, secondo un paradigma che vede l'eteronormatività come modello indiscusso e indiscutibile.

Nella modernità liquida ciascuno è artefice del proprio destino, un libero pensatore che è perfettamente in grado di prendere decisioni in autonomia e di assumersi la piena responsabilità delle proprie azioni. Per di più, stando a Bauman, la precarietà dei nostri tempi porta le persone a evitare tutto ciò che è "solido" e permanente, il che nelle relazioni si traduce nello stabilire legami che si possano sciogliere con relativa facilità. In altre parole, Bauman sostiene che, dal momento che la dipendenza (sia economica che sociale) dal partner tende a essere sempre più esigua, la relazione viene messa in discussione costantemente, persino su base quotidiana. Attribuendo una tale importanza al singolo individuo a discapito della sua partecipazione a un progetto comune, per sua stessa definizione la modernità liquida si discosta da qualsivoglia approccio collettivista, risultando per questo così invisibile a Paesi come la Russia di Putin. Come ampiamente trattato nel Capitolo 2, questo retaggio accompagna la Russia già dall'ascesa dei Bolscevichi, che enfatizzarono con forza la completa subordinazione della sessualità agli interessi del proletariato e dunque, per estensione, alla società tutta. In quest'ottica, il ruolo sociale primario delle donne è la loro capacità di generare figli e dunque di garantire il futuro e la prosperità della nazione; parimenti, condotte sessuali per loro stessa natura non finalizzate alla procreazione, come quelle omosessuali, vengono rigettate non tanto perché considerate immorali, ma soprattutto perché praticarle significa venir meno al sacro dovere che si ha verso la patria. Secondo questa teoria, il controllo statale deve essere esercitato in modo più che pervasivo, estendendolo a qualunque aspetto, persino il più intimo, della vita privata del cittadino.

Eppure, le donne non sono le sole a subire il controllo statale sul proprio corpo e sulla propria sessualità, come dimostrato dalle numerose ripercussioni sperimentate dai membri della comunità LGBT. In questo modo, infatti, Paesi come la Russia colpiscono anche la comunità LGBT, rea di minare la stabilità sociale e il consolidato apparato valoriale della tradizione russa, causando di seguito un notevole aumento della violenza perpetrata nei suoi confronti: se lo Stato stesso prende di mira le minoranze in maniera istituzionalizzata, gli stessi cittadini si sentono implicitamente legittimati a discriminarle, forti anche della diffusa impunità di tali azioni. Parafrasando quanto scritto da Human Rights Watch nel 2018, una legge come le celebri anti-propaganda laws del 2013 vanno ben oltre il rafforzamento di un bias preesistente. Emanando una simile legge, il Parlamento russo istituisce infatti un vero e proprio regime di omofobia politica nel quale le minoranze vengono colpite per scopi politici quale il consolidamento dei cittadini contro una forma di devianza sociale sul piano domestico (un autentico assioma della costruzione del nemico che minaccia l'identità comune), al contempo rafforzando il ruolo di potenza conservatrice della Russia sul piano internazionale. A differenza di quest'ultimo aspetto, peculiarità del contesto russo, il consolidamento sul piano interno è un obiettivo condiviso anche da politici conservatori

italiani come la leader di FDI Giorgia Meloni, che nelle sue invettive retoriche tralascia raramente la questione della minaccia identitaria percepita dal proprio elettorato quando si parla di relazioni sessuali non tradizionali. Come dimostrato dalla reazione dei Paesi occidentali alla Legge federale finalizzata a proteggere i bambini da qualsivoglia forma di informazione promuova messaggi ritenuti antitetici ai valori della famiglia tradizionale, le forme assunte da questo controllo producono una lunga serie di effetti non solo in patria, ma anche sul piano internazionale. È questo il caso delle Olimpiadi invernali di Sochi 2014, concepite inizialmente come una preziosa occasione per mostrare al mondo la gloria e la grandezza della Russia di Putin, e poi invece passate alla storia come “*Gay Olympics*” in seguito ai numerosi problemi politici relativi alla recente adozione della discussa legge contro la propaganda e la promozione delle relazioni sessuali non tradizionali.

Al termine della dissertazione, viene dunque nuovamente ribadita la centralità delle dinamiche di potere connaturate nelle relazioni amorose e nella reiterazione di ruoli di genere sia sul piano pubblico che su quello privato. Per quanto riguarda quest'ultimo, ciò non può che risultare nella persistente oppressione delle donne, relegate a una condizione di dipendenza economica e sociale, come illustrato nel Capitolo 1 in relazione al contesto mediatico dell'Italia di oggi e nel Capitolo 2 in riferimento al contesto russo (женский вопрос). Sempre riguardo a quest'ultimo, nel Capitolo 2 viene affrontata in maniera estensiva la questione dell'istituzionalizzazione degli squilibri di potere legati a questioni di genere, riprendendo il lavoro svolto da Zdravomyslova e Temkina sulle dinamiche di *gendered citizenship* nella Russia sovietica e post-sovietica. A tal proposito, il controllo esercitato dalle autorità sul corpo dei propri cittadini -nello specifico, delle proprie cittadine- è esemplificato dalle parole con cui queste affrontano la questione del calo demografico, una grave problematica che affligge da tempo sia l'Italia che la Russia. Esattamente come riecheggiato da Meloni un secolo dopo, Mussolini associa esplicitamente il fenomeno del calo demografico a una delle peggiori catastrofi che possano abbattersi su una nazione. Nella sua retorica, così come in quella di Putin, la questione demografica assume una connotazione di grande solennità: crescere una prole forte e in salute rappresenta così una possibilità per i comuni cittadini di contribuire attivamente alla costruzione e al mantenimento di una nazione gloriosa e potente, sulla base di una concezione collettivista della società per cui l'interesse della comunità va anteposto all'interesse individuale del singolo. Secondo questo modello, non a caso spesso accompagnato da vocazioni imperialiste, dunque persino la decisione di avere dei figli non scaturisce soltanto da motivazioni di carattere personale, ma anche e soprattutto da un forte senso del dovere nei confronti del proprio Paese (oltre che di Dio). Come rievocato anche da Putin stesso, la procreazione -intesa come risultato di *traditional sexual relations*- non è altro che un dovere morale e civile che il cittadino ha verso l'intera nazione. Ecco allora che tutto diventa funzionale a tale scopo, facendo leva sull'esaltazione dei diversi ruoli di genere ricoperti da uomini e donne sia tra le mura domestiche che nella società tutta: mentre di un uomo viene esaltata la mascolinità (e l'omosessualità viene ulteriormente stigmatizzata), delle donne vengono poste in risalto virtù come l'umiltà, l'abnegazione e lo spirito di sacrificio, sancendo così un evidente punto d'incontro *tra gendered roles in relationships, gendered shaped narratives e gendered citizenship*.

In conclusione, è evidente che le relazioni amorose abbiano da sempre ricoperto un ruolo cruciale nel discorso pubblico, venendo spesso strumentalizzate come una vera e propria arma geopolitica in nome dell'interesse nazionale. Nel corso di questa tesi viene pertanto mostrata la portata della corrispondenza tra la ragion di Stato e la vita privata dei

cittadini stessi; a tal proposito, il rifiuto della Russia di Putin di riconoscere il passaggio alle dinamiche della società liquida viene presentato non solo dal punto di vista geopolitico, ma anche e soprattutto come una questione di incompatibilità di approccio metodologico. Ecco dunque perché, nonostante tutte le somiglianze con la scena italiana, il contesto russo va considerato nella sua singolarità, tenendo conto di specifiche caratteristiche che ne riflettono l'unicità.