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## Sexuality at the Time of Coronavirus in Italy: A (Technological) Retreat in Itself?

COSTANTINO CIPOLLA

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### **1. Affiliazione Autore / Authors' information**

AMS University of Bologna, Italy

### **2. Contatti / Authors' contact**

Costantino Cipolla: [costantino.cipolla\[at\]unibo.it](mailto:costantino.cipolla[at]unibo.it)

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### **Note of Editor-in-Chief**

This is the first Special issue of the journal *Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc*. The idea behind the special issue comes from this consideration: around the world, individuals are facing a critical moment, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences require some reflections on many topics, often forgotten by scholars. This is the reason why many Italian and foreign scholars have been invited to give their contribution. Furthermore, now more than ever, it is crucial to share knowledge coming from multiple disciplines and that's why it was decided to write an entire issue in English.

For scientific and intellectual correctness, the contents of single articles refer to the situation as in mid-May 2020. It is necessary to clarify that because this Special issue was published when many countries were starting to reduce their emergency measures to cope with the pandemic.

# *Sexuality at the Time of Coronavirus in Italy: A (Technological) Retreat in Itself?*

Costantino Cipolla<sup>1</sup>

AMS University of Bologna, Italy  
E-mail: costantino.cipolla[at]unibo.it

## **Abstract**

Our contribution aims at unravelling the knot between sexuality and the web in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic. Sex-related online practices intensified, due to health concerns and lockdown measures, and access to pornographic websites skyrocketed. What is the cultural, relational, and psychological impact of this? We identify two main outcomes: *widespread solipsism* and *dissolution by excess*. It is, to the best of our knowledge, an unexplored territory. Sociologists did not address previous pandemics, nor have they provided extensive and methodologically satisfying work on sexuality in Italy. Given the delicate nature of the topic, and the unreliability of traditional sociological research methods, we chose to fully carry out our research online. We will examine online prostitution, webcam girls, user-produced pornography and dating sites, in addition to touching upon other topics such as sexting. We will, to the best of our abilities, try to mark a path in the wilderness of human sexuality in the digital era and in these unprecedented circumstances. We believe that the link between online and offline sexuality will be consolidated and define this relationship as *differentiated integration*: a reciprocal adaptation covering the most diverse places and ways. To study this web-integrated society, we propose the *eclectic approach*.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Web, Italy, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Digital.

## **Introduction**

To address *coronavirus* – or, rather, the effects of this unprecedented pandemic on human sexuality – in a scientific (non-journalistic) way is a complex sociological task. The idea of embarking in this adventure hails from this journal editor-in-chief who decided to devote an entire issue to coronavirus<sup>2</sup>, interpreted in a sociological perspective. We will scrupulously stick to hypothetical logics, without any pretence of going further and hoping for future theoretical and research contributions from others. After all, also the virologic and epidemiological field now see about twenty groups around the world that are experimentally trying to understand what this virus is, what can be its moves and what our countermoves. It is a preventive and competitive eclectic approach (Cipolla, 2013; 2019) which we hope will soon come to some socially useful re-compositional or selective results.

As far as we are concerned, there are no precedents whatsoever. The 1347/48 plague which caused (more or less) 30 million deaths out of 100 million infected people in Europe could not have affected us for obvious age reasons, while the much more recent Spanish Flu of 1918, which infected around 1 billion people with about 20 million estimated deaths (around 2%), has not been studied by any sociologist, or no records of such research remain today (Chiaberge, 2016; Collier,

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the author, see the website: <https://www.costantinocipolla.it/>

<sup>2</sup> The acronym *cv* will henceforth stand for *coronavirus*.

2005; Tognotti, 2015<sup>3</sup>). It was a strain of flu which caused in Italy between 300 and 600 thousand deaths (mainly young males), and which found the “noble art” powerless in the face of this pandemic, which has remained in history as a sudden and fulminating pneumonia (Fava, 2018). So, to the best of our knowledge (Cipolla & Ardisson, 2015), sociologists did not address this infectious disease that, together with the Great War, contributed to change the world (Spinney, 2017). Yet, the calamity was evident, as can be seen in the data on illness-related deaths in the Italian army during 1918/19 and even 1920 (Fornasin, 2018, pp. 267 *et seq.*).

Alongside the lack of social research on pandemics, a further absence can be found on the theme of sexuality, understood as a social fact *par excellence* or as an obligation to otherness (Cipolla, 2005). Due to cultural conditioning, sociology has started to address this topic quite late and rather problematically, if we see the issue through today’s sensibility (see Adorni, Migliozi & Suzzi, 1996, p. 35 *et seq.*). In Italy, some relevant research on the issue was recently carried out without underpinning theoretical reflections and with rather condescending methodologies (Furlotti, 1996), focused mainly on homosexuality (both male and female)<sup>4</sup> and youth<sup>5</sup>. A more general and very broad-spectrum survey of 2010 followed highly extrinsic, predictable, and even mannerist canons, without accounting for technology and the web society. Its outcomes were, therefore, easily foreseeable and, for our purposes, rather useless. It is within this barren national panorama that we advance in writing this short essay. It is too easy to grasp how this makes our line of interpretation even more cautious, as our field observations are almost all online analyses. Sex must be captured indirectly and with adequate and honest methodological cleanliness especially as regards minorities, the “perverse”, women, understood in a general sense<sup>6</sup>, and men, especially regarding specific issues<sup>7</sup>. Privacy in the field of sexuality is a border which is very difficult to cross: its intimacy is only its.

### 1. Sexuality almost dissolved into the web: *pro tempore*?

This *cv* pandemic, treacherous and invisible, obviously changes the life *of* and *in* society. Being forced to stay at home, except in special cases, for months (but hopefully less) undoubtedly affects many aspects of our relationships. How could such a constraint not change them, whatsoever they may be? If we reflect and look around us, we cannot help but consider that the *cv* impact depends on one’s work and family relationships. In the first case, we range from those (like ourselves and colleagues) who keep studying and writing almost like before to those doomed to tediousness, being unable to perform any kind of task from home. As far as the affective sphere is concerned, we can distinguish between couples not living together; people carrying on clandestine relationships, now entrusted to mobile phones and almost impossible to sustain; happy couples whose good relationship is reinvigorated; unhappy couples whose bad relationship is now overflowing; those who are victims of their spouse (usually women) and suffer abuse and violence

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<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps the most comprehensive and penetrating text on this topic.

<sup>4</sup> Technology (obviously) does not appear in the studies by Barbagli & Colombo (2001) and Saraceno (2003). All their representativeness appears to be “convenience” and their interpretation (open to transgender people) is cultural rather than sexual-technical.

<sup>5</sup> See Garelli (2000), keeping in mind the above remarks. There is no methodological note.

<sup>6</sup> Let us consider as an example a direct question on masturbation. How reliable are the answers – assuming that the questionnaire or interview is not promptly abandoned or interrupted?

<sup>7</sup> As above, regarding, for example, frequenting prostitutes.

(even in its lighter forms, if there is such a thing as a lesser form of violence). The list could go on because family conditions are the most diverse (*e.g.* singles living alone) and involve very different individual emotions. However, a common psychological status tends perhaps to link these segregation statuses together: boredom.

This emotion was masterfully highlighted by Heidegger (Cipolla, 2018, p. 276), who always manages to surprise us with his eclectic ductility, which leads him to philosophise about a jug as about God (*ibid.*, p. 85). According to his thought, boredom is a filling of time, a situation that does not let it pass, does not allow it to go away, and that never makes it disappear from the mind. Boredom, for him, is a value in emptiness, living in the nothing that works for us, the boredom of one's being. It is destitution, dismay, astonishment. To leave it is to open oneself to the world, to see it in a more immediate, direct, pertinacious way.

If this is, in broad terms, the context in which we find ourselves (as we will for a while longer), how does it change eroticism<sup>8</sup>? The theme is extremely complex, and it affects couple and gender relationships, as well as the bonds and transitions of finding oneself between off- and on-line. This is the real social innovation brought on by the web society (Cipolla, 2015a). In other words, how do relationship and connection reposition themselves with respect to – and into – sexuality in these calamitous times? The bond of exchange between man and woman is very complex and its ritualistic manifestations change in time and space (Goffman, 1977). Small exhibitions, within a framework, a structure, a schematic synopsis, can be adaptations to the context, affirmations and negations, expressions of an identifying style, multiple and optional demonstrations, referrals to something else (wider) shown in a more or less conscious way. But if we reverse the course of our intimacy (Greco, 2014), deciding no longer what we can make public, as opposed to private, but choosing, online and then offline, what we think is right and we want to keep private, what happens to all the above? In all this, in this constant interconnection, where does intimacy (also sexual) find its boundaries? (*ibid.*, p. 242).

If we move from abstract hypotheses to concrete sexual behaviours, we can get a general idea on the topic, even if riddled with restrictions and gaps. Concrete sexual behaviours will not be derived from sample interviews, which suffer major biases (as seen in the previous paragraph) and, therefore, do not enlighten us on reality (indeed, they rather distort it) but from “objective” indicators, not addled by expressive respectability. Given that researches carried out online do not in themselves lead to credible and different results from offline ones (Scarcelli, 2015), we will start from some basic premises concerning sexuality in or through the web, which is not (nor can it be) similar to face to face relationships or to the sexuality that has been historically handed down to us.

There are very few studies on sexuality in the past and they certainly fall outside sociological research. We would like to point out one we co-authored (Cipolla & Malacarne, 2006) on love and sex at the time of the Gonzaga, based on official and unpublished documents. During the Renaissance, the themes most frequently addressed are: the sexual adventures of priests, friars, nuns and pilgrims, whose chastity, therefore, was rather problematic (Ottaviani *et al.*, 2006, p. 152); the “whores” in all their manifestations both as troublemakers and victims; the behaviour of husbands both as “cuckolds” and adulterers and, finally, sexual violence, harshly punished in an ostentatious and exemplary manner. But it is from the con-

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<sup>8</sup> Eroticism is a constitutive part of sex, together with the procreative one.

fessors' manuals<sup>9</sup> (Cipolla & Malacarne, 2006, pp. 27 and 30) that one understands which were considered the gravest sins and the repressive spirit enveloping sex. Basically, except for the "missionary", almost everything was forbidden<sup>10</sup>, with sodomy (especially for women and more seriously at an older age), bestiality, incest with close relatives (save for the case of a mother laying with a pre-pubescent child, considered less serious) and relationships with nuns<sup>11</sup> at the top of the blame. Therefore, a world which, even though it is at the beginning of modernity, appears morally extremely far from us, although, in some respects, such as recurrent behaviour, it appears at the same time rather close.

Over time, sexual practices have become secularised and evolved in favour of women. They led, in Italy, to the closure of brothels in 1958, although certainly not to the disappearance of prostitution. And then along came the digital revolution<sup>12</sup>, which significantly affected human sexuality. It assumed two parallel faces, placed between real and communicational, between online and offline (Molinari, 2015), in an increasingly fluid perspective of sexuality (Ruspini, 2015) and, in their way, increasingly transsexual (Agnoletti & Scanu, 2015). So why and in what way does the connective approach<sup>13</sup> today makes available to us online sexual practices that were unpredictable and even unthinkable in the past and are now within everyone's reach? How has the web made it possible in our current digital society to enjoy sex in a direct or indirect, relational, or personal, pornographic, or simply erotic way? We will now try to synthetically outline these aspects, taking advantage of the few (serious) sociological contributions available on the subject<sup>14</sup>.

Human sexuality in the web society can be characterized and qualified as follows, taking for granted that we are dealing with the innumerable forms of eroticism that can be enjoyed (in the broadest sense) online:

- a) *accessible*: thanks to our smartphones, except for particular cases, we are always erotically connected to the world and this connection can always be activated, especially from home or even in wild or remote contexts (if they still do exist);
- b) *free of charge*: almost all online eroticism is free of charge, as it pays for itself with advertising or with personal data that we, more or less consciously, provide;
- c) *prosthetic*: since our "mobile" moves around with us, it is a body appendix that, like glasses, always accompanies us and can be enjoyed in any social context;
- d) *free from time and space*: what has been mentioned, implies the observation that sex, in these aspects, is always condescending to our desires without geographical or hourly obligations;

<sup>9</sup> One can deduce the gravity of the action from the severity of the corresponding penances. Sexual pleasure was essentially denied. Sexual acts with animals, which involved up to perpetual penances, were assimilated to those with Jews or infidels. The rape of prostitutes or commoners found alone was not punished. There were, however, many other punishments.

<sup>10</sup> The "cowgirl" position, with the woman on top, was the most condemned because it was deemed to hinder conception and it made the woman independent during the act. Fellatio was punished with 7 years of fasting (but who confessed it?).

<sup>11</sup> This was always considered an aggravating circumstance. Even kissing, wearing skimpy clothes, or conducting sensual dances was a sin, but in this case, the penance was limited to 20 days of fasting. The same as for priests who had spontaneous seminal pollutions. A veritable social obsession...

<sup>12</sup> The book edited by Cipolla (2015b), particularly the introduction, conclusions and the chapter written by him, takes up again many phenomena that are completely emerging and proper to the web society.

<sup>13</sup> On the comparison-difference between relationship and connection, see Cipolla (2015a, p. 156). Today, one should always argue about *relational connectivity* or, vice versa, about *connective relationality*.

<sup>14</sup> In a psychological-clinical key see Cooper's pioneering work (2002).

- e) *anonymous*: the use of (and exposure to) any kind of erotic communication can be made without our name being public. Secrecy is always possible and guaranteed (except fraud);
- f) *available*: one of the most relevant features of the erotic web is that it knows no thematic boundaries, covering all types of sexuality that can be hypothesized and all forms of sexual perversions existing in this world, and gambling – and, we suppose, even those that exist only in its (and our) imagination;
- g) *satisfying*: given the above, it seems to me that sexuality in *the online towards the offline* becomes filled, satiated by physical exhaustion and pleasure, in the opposite way to what happens to (almost all) drug users who self-destruct by overdose, not because they are satiated;
- h) *safe*: sex practised through digital excitement is the safest there can be, even (and perhaps most importantly) during cv. This includes its complements (e.g. dildos) if properly treated;
- i) *pleasurable*: it is quite clear that sex, so understood and practised, lives on its pleasure and has nothing to do with its consequences (possible and excluded here) of a generative nature, which follows other digital paths;
- l) *do-it-yourself*: the eroticism intrinsic in digital processes is very self-directed and mostly exempt from third parties and even from the web itself, which, in this case, appears powerless due to an excess of very different offers obsessively competing between them. Subjective autonomy? (Illouz, 2014);
- m) *(personal) sovereignty*: through the web, desire reverses its identity. Unlike love (*ibid.*), it does not imply a loss of sovereignty towards the other. Being able to choose everywhere and for every propensity on the web, it ultimately depends on nothing and no one. Desire can be satisfied every time, without paying any duty.

This kind of digitally based eroticism advances in the web society under the looming of the *cv* pandemic. The fear, the various ordinances, are unlikely to prompt young people to have more children, but they can encourage the population to overcome boredom, to fill the void (as already mentioned). And this can only concern the erotic sphere with its old (mentioned) rituals and new opportunities.

Let us start by noting that the digital revolution brings male and female practices closer, in this field as in many others. Perhaps, compared to the past, the male hetero-direction that led women to “racier” sexual practices prompted (or forced) by the existence of objective ties with their partner is decreasing and it mingles with the above-mentioned anonymous autonomy. The latter, however, is sunk in that historically deep-rooted feminine “expressive respectability” still latent among us.

With “stay at home” orders in place, there can only be a reduction in crimes of all kinds. Indeed, in Italy during the last month, crimes have fallen by 60% on average, and those related to sexual violence almost disappeared (-70%). The social desert seems to hinder deviance. Conversely, as documented by the postal police, it favours people’s permanence in front of the screen and, therefore, more intense and continuous use of the net. With the pandemic, the web society becomes even more so. In our need and desire of the other, we dive into the digital world and we direct it according to our status and desires. Where do we lead it in this increasingly unbridled fruition? Here we will suggest a few brief flashes that we have caught here and there.

In sites where pornography reigns undisturbed, *i.e.* explicit sexuality aimed at perpetrating and increasing itself, the demand for free accounts has skyrocketed. It is an indicator that speaks for itself, but we will return to that later. Furthermore, all

kinds of dating sites are more active, particularly those aimed at sexual minorities (or “perverse”, or according to our way of understanding). Besides, we cannot ignore the fact that the sale of sex toys has soared, and it is women who use them the most<sup>15</sup>. It should be noted, however, that this behaviour can lead, on the one hand, to private and personal masturbation, limited to one’s pleasure, while, on the other hand, it can be a couple’s erotic game which pleases one and excites the other, therefore turning into a double pleasure. If we add to this the security inherent in these erotic practices, it is hardly surprising that they are on the increase (even if not studied or explicitly admitted)<sup>16</sup>.

Besides these, we have other contextual data that can help us delve deep into the bedrock of what is happening as we write these simple notes. I am referring above all to sex crimes, essentially regarding child pornography<sup>17</sup>, and to other related crimes and scams. This erotic life, more and more online, manifests itself in its inexorability, in its everyday life, in its willingness to go in any direction it is led. On my own, I have all the sex in my mind and hand when and how I want. I am almost omnipotent, and I am that always and everywhere. But what cultural and psychological path does all this take? We identify here two, in our opinion the main ones. The first can be defined as *widespread solipsism*. In it, the individualistic, but reserved, component is associated in online sexual practice with its opposite, which is represented by the extension, by the diffusion on every behaviour, by an effusion without constraints of any kind, by diffusion without limits and boundaries however detailed and meticulous within all the different forms of sexual orientation. What are then the consequences on sexuality in general and on its various expressions within and from online?

Based on various previous reflections (Cipolla & Canestrini, 2018), we think that in this communicational context sexuality is losing much of its value. It overturns the historical repression on itself. It becomes a kind of liberation by excess, a rebellion by disinhibition, an insurrection derived from technological availability. We can do everything (apart from violence and exploitation of minors) without having to account to anyone and without paying any price. But does not this freedom, this constant availability, this possibility of drawing on every erotic behaviour contribute to cheapening these practices? And does not this depreciation become a galloping devaluation, social devaluation, debasing of the complete orientation of all that is involved? But, given that, where does it end up, how does it transform human sexuality? Our hypothesis, and also the second path we have identified, is that it dissolves in its exterminated and analytically punctuated excess (*dissolution by excess*), that applies to every type of sexual desire one want to act or imagine. Therefore, we will find ourselves in a historical evolution that disintegrates sexuality out of unbridledness, out of an excess of possibilities to manifest itself, which dissolves it in its social explosion.

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<sup>15</sup> For a well-documented essay see Canestrini (2018, pp. 302 *et seq.*). We will not go into the substance here, being too complex and long. We merely observe that in this field digital reality can also be said to be “virtual”, in the sense that it can immerse a subject in a world that does not exist. The digital, its type of communication-action is anything but virtual (normally) and we personally never use this term.

<sup>16</sup> According to newspapers and data provided by the manufacturers, their sales would have increased between 50% and 100%. A doubling that we think needs no further comment and is worth much more than many “respectable” interviews, mentioned above, which, although unfathomable, should always be treated with methodological shrewdness.

<sup>17</sup> For behaviours not so widespread and known see (Mondaini, 2015, p. 377 *et seq.*). But we could mention many more. We will just point out the changes that have occurred in BDSM practices (Porro, 2018, p. 173; Rota, 2015, p. 179 *et seq.*).

Our suppositions clash with (and go far beyond) all the research we have mentioned about human sexuality and will need further findings to be corroborated. Moreover, this position pays for the omnipresence of the web: it has no deterministic claim (which would be impossible), it does not deal with the moral aspects of the problem, which we have mentioned, but which in any case in our western societies are in a phase of clear containment. Having thus added to our arguments both the *widespread solipsism* and the *dissolution by excess*<sup>18</sup> of sexuality in the web society, we will now briefly analyse some areas of extrinsic eroticism in the current *cv* pandemic<sup>19</sup>, always in conceptual agreement with the prospects outlined.

## 2. Which erotic areas are affected by the pandemic and how?

What an erotic area is and how it is defined is neither simple nor obvious. And the question is likely to become even more complicated in our digital society, where sexuality and pornography no longer know limits (Witt, 2018) and visually manifest the enormous variety of human inclinations. In comparison, the classifying hypotheses of old psychoanalysis or psychiatry seem laughable at the very least. We will skip the former, overwhelmed by the speed of the digital world and with uncertain scientific status, and dwell instead on the latter which, coming from the medical world, makes clear claims of procedural scientificity. Its bible is the Manual of the American Psychiatrists Association, now in its fifth edition (APA, 2013)<sup>20</sup>. In this text of international reference, homosexuality was classified as paraphilia until 1974, then transformed into suffering and discomfort and, finally, eliminated in 1997. In our opinion, this sheds a light on the psychiatrists' historical-social conditioning on scientific-sexual thought. What is not "normal" sexual activity, is called paraphilia. Strictly speaking, it is an anomaly, deviance, a perversion, a disturbance in one's search for sexual pleasure. It is a sexuality that goes beyond normal coitus<sup>21</sup> and investing in a companion for pleasure. In any case, it takes sexual violence and paedophilia (both ascribed to sickness) for granted. These erotic paraphilias are eight, namely exhibitionism, fetishism, frotteurism<sup>22</sup>, paedophilia, masochism, sadism, voyeurism, as well as many other forms such as bestiality (Agnoletti, 2005; Francolini, 2015).

Let us now switch to the digital world and try another path to understand the hidden sexual inclinations of mankind. We are referring to user-produced pornography posted, that is, visible, on a pornographic site (Cappoia and Forti, 2018) according to self-defined categories. Since pornography is intended to stimulate the eroticism of others by affinity with one's own, *i.e.* by sharing, we maintain that it provides a good likeness of the sexual orientation of a given population. This analysis, here addressed with great approximation due to *force majeure*, shows that the categories that can be deduced from the site (*Slutporn*), obtained by crossing gender (hetero – homo – trans) with six other defining variables (*ibid.*, pp. 234-

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<sup>18</sup> We believe that this oxymoronic logic, based on apparently incompatible contradictions that yet exist together at a societal level, is characterizing the digital society that is breaking free (or already has) from modernity, be it the first or the fourth (as theorized by some, with our disagreement).

<sup>19</sup> In its diversity and our ignorance lies its radical sociological otherness, which we have kept and still keep well in mind, working almost in methodological suspension.

<sup>20</sup> Already outdated? Pre-digital?.

<sup>21</sup> What is not normal is perverse. What about anal sex, for example? (Benvenuto, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Achieving sexual stimulation or orgasm by rubbing against a person without their consent.

235), can be estimated around one hundred, of which the vast majority can be considered deviant, if not perverse or paraphiliac. If we associate all these behaviours with their structural component (living together or not and so on), psychological attitude (couple relationship), relational attitude (partner), communicational (online, in physical co-presence), connected to age, gender, procreation (Cremonini, 1996), as well as any political implications, we well understand that sexuality in its being simultaneously the maximum of intimacy and the maximum of sociality is also, and intrinsically, the maximum of complexity. And, otherwise, it turns out to be a hyper-sociality denied to itself in its intimacy, which cannot be crossed. Not by chance, its radical and blatant alternative can only be pornography.

Before embarking on a necessary shortcut, we will consider the number of users who have browsed the website's categories<sup>23</sup>, obtaining the following results for erotic areas (aggregated for obvious needs). Considering that the visits to gay clips are much lower than those for heterosexual ones, even if they far exceed those dedicated to "lesbians" and, even more so, to transsexuals (Masullo & Gianola, 2018), we can see a rather consistent and articulated scale of fruition. In a context in which hardcore rules undisputed, the most popular films seem to be those oriented to sexuality practised by teenagers (*teen*) in all their various forms of expression, even the most extreme. These brunettes, almost babies, clearly surpass milfs or mature women, which nevertheless represent a recent turning point in the affective, sexual, and aesthetic field (Atzori, 2015; Morolli, 2015). A second substantial block of pornographic users watches mainly oral sexual practices (*blowjob*), particularly ejaculation on the woman's face. Then there is the anal sex category, endured or desired by women (and more generally the sexual value of the backside), in all its possible and imaginable aspects. Immediately afterwards, the undisputed realm of big cocks, ginormous members usually belonging to young black men<sup>24</sup>. Outdistanced we find group sex or women possessed by many men (gang bang), as well as hand games<sup>25</sup>. We will now stop and, within this endless world, mingled with digital and palpable, we will try to extrapolate some areas that seem to be more affected by the *cv* pandemic in our web society.

One of these areas, a clear sign of the times, is prostitution, which falls within the erotic practices autonomously assumed by citizens. It is a long-standing behaviour that changes significantly over time, from one edict to the other (Lolli, 2005). Today, the situation is much changed and prostitution has extended to the exchange between women (Fasano, 2012), men for women (Rossi & Ruspini, 2012), homosexuals (Rinaldi, 2012) and transsexuals (Obert, 2012), with criminal organizations exploiting and trafficking women (Lolli & Lombi, 2012) and minors (Cifaldi, 2012). In an era of sexual facilitation and devaluation, prostitution has become increasingly invisible in various ways (Cipolla & Ruspini, 2012), ranging between erotic vocations and the latent trade in erotic practices (Canestrini, 2012). Above all, prostitution has moved, it has changed location and place. It has become cyberprostitution or online prostitution (Strizzolo, 2012), where it lives on (paid) ads posted on dedicated sites and is practised in apartments, far surpassing street prostitution (in the present but even more so in the future). A robust indicator of a flourishing prostitution activity (at least until yesterday) (Di Tommaso, 2012), are

<sup>23</sup> It is an estimate based on data from 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Maybe as a counterbalance, there are the tits – the bigger they are, the more they seem to attract men.

<sup>25</sup> Including fisting (anal or vaginal penetration with one's hand, up to the wrist), or the vast world of fetishism, which finds its most frequent and widespread online manifestation in feet, although it is difficult to circumscribe it adequately. For example, where to place ephebophilia? (Bonomo, 2018).

online ads, which could involve many of the existing sociological theories on the subject and give us interesting profiles of the identities and drives of customers, almost always kept in the shadows (Bertolazzi, 2012; Danna, 2012). Unable to pursue these goals, we will merely look at their most recent evolution. As far as we are concerned, our reference website is the most relevant, at least numerically speaking<sup>26</sup>. We have followed its evolution for a month. It is for women who offer very detailed sexual performances to men, with a minority (although not completely marginal) of transsexuals. I checked and followed the site in five cities: Bologna, Mantua, La Spezia, Trento and Syracuse. In each of these provinces, there were hundreds of ads. Today they are practically zeroed out. Some remain for video-chats<sup>27</sup>, massages (real?), serious and lasting relationships and that's it. The pandemic has reset the phenomenon to zero. Prostitution seems to have disappeared due to the parallel disappearance of its customers. Given the current impossibility for street prostitution, it becomes technologically mediated, turns into sex-online or takes one of the many other possible ways (autoeroticism?), since human erotic drives can be influenced by pandemics but they certainly do not depend on them, nor are by them cancelled. In real life, therefore, fear and the pandemic dampen or diverts paid-for human sexuality along other paths. The online world takes on the guise of social prevention for increasingly protected sex. Condoms evolve in a preventive defence, in a guaranteed safeguard that, however, does not give up its goal, which is to reach orgasm.

This social shift can take different structural and relational paths. For example, it can rekindle a couple's love, if there are no latent conflicts. It can bring partners to move in together. It can encourage a retreat, even a radical retreat in oneself, for a sexual autarchy independent from everything, not finding adequate functional substitutes – or, in any case, none that are considered feasible. However, the more diffuse and pursued reaction seems to be another, especially in the younger generations. This reaction differs between men and women<sup>28</sup>: the alternative or complementary paths that intersect the online in a boundless horizon.

Let us now briefly review some of the paths hypothesized, starting from pornography. In its digital version, it has invaded the world (Bennato, 2014) and has become normal for almost everyone, from teenagers to the elderly, to the point of reading it as a potential widespread “addiction”. Quarantine, as all the available indicators show, accentuates the consumption of erotic material, at all hours of the day and night. We can thus assume, as mentioned, a specific and more generalized internet addiction, further favoured by discounts, free or premium subscriptions offered by the same porn sites. Boredom looms and digital is the closest and easiest solution, as well as cheap and pleasant. Moreover, before the cv pandemic, Italy was already the European nation with the longest stay on porn sites – with an average of 11 minutes per day – and with Lombardy in the lead (bitter irony) for the number of accesses<sup>29</sup>. Porn was at the top of internet use, competing with Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia. It seems to be confirmed what we mentioned earlier, even if the big data show a slightly unpredictable nationalisation of tastes. Italian users prefer Italian women (including porn actresses), in the same way as in India or Germany, China or the USA, with some greater inclination towards teen or

<sup>26</sup> It is the website *Bakecaincontri*, active in almost all Italian provinces and specialized in the search for escorts.

<sup>27</sup> The banner is immediately visible: “News! Many girls are now waiting for you in video chat”.

<sup>28</sup> This information is derived from telephone interviews, online analysis, friends' references, various readings. Nothing more.

<sup>29</sup> With 2.54% of the world's traffic, Italy holds seventh place in this special ranking.

*novinha* (Brazil) and without ever forgetting the milfs. But at this point, the usual chasm opens up, without sides or walls, and we must stop here<sup>30</sup>. In short, more intense use of pornographic sites does not seem to change its orientation, except perhaps to make it more extensive and meticulous for obvious reasons of time and analytical personal inclinations. What remains in the background without showing its new face is the user of these images. What does the *cv* pandemic change in this perspective? What and who does quarantine-induced boredom lead to the shameless expression of any kind of sexuality? Do people indulge in their desires? Do they learn new things? Do they let their imagination run wild? Do they aim for undifferentiated excitement for masturbatory or copulation purposes? Are they dragged by simple, available, almost self-propelled technology to directly satisfy their sexual “obsessions”? Do they stun themselves falling prey of internet sex addiction (almost impossible)? (Prati, 2015). Lacking verified knowledge, we can suppose that several or all of these and others are the driving causes, even more so at this moment. But who are those who, especially in these times, follow this path in search of physical or even psychological pleasure? Since the phenomenon is enormous (as mentioned) the social influx can only be rather variegated and with wide and dispersed origins in terms of gender, age, economic and cultural status. We can, with no heuristic pretension, advance some hypothetical lines. We believe young men to be the most likely target. It may be that young and jaded women also follow this trend, obviously denying it and making it almost indemonstrable. We will also place middle-aged males, especially if carrying some specific “deviance”, along this line. For what concerns more mature women, we consider them likely to be in this field, especially if dragged here by their partners. At an older age (if healthy) we deem it likely that pornography replaces the disappeared external sexual attractions for a return to masturbation, in this way solicited and sustained even at a late age and among women. It is evident, however, that having very targeted and “anomalous” vocations can, in these calamitous times, only lead to the sexual autarchy (Rossetti, 2005) which we shall now deal with.

Masturbation, in past centuries subject to sharp moral condemnation, is individual behaviour that leads to orgasm through physical self-stimulation. In it, the other appears sublimated as both stimulus and outcome. Masturbation transcends gender differences and shared social representations and goes where it deems most appropriate without binding itself to any relationship and without taking on the perennial guise of the pathology. As mentioned, during the lockdown, onanism tends to grow among both men and women (the sale of dildos has soared), and among couples as an erotic game. What we described above gives a good account of this and justifies it amply. No longer sinful, reduced to everyday action, open to every fantasy, cleared for couples’ erotic games, providing full (re)assurance as far as health is concerned (Gurioli, Mosconi & Perino, 2005), available for every fantasized relationality, independent from structural constraints, masturbation seems to have become the erotic queen of web sex. It is of no consequence if masturbation stems from ex-prostitution, normal couple social relationships (long-term or not), minority or sexually deviant behaviours, a fearful withdrawal in oneself, or any other source. Everything leads to advance the hypothesis of this return in oneself, even in the technologically mediated constant openness to the other, always reachable in all

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<sup>30</sup> Some examples: in Morocco, they prefer Moroccan (after Arabs), in Sweden, anal and milf; in Russia, anal and teen; in Great Britain, the Indians; in Israel, skinny and lesbian; in Ireland, gang bang and drunk; in Iceland, oral sex and BDSM; in South Africa, emo. We go no further and do not comment.

directions. And without this leading to the disappearance of the search for new hypothetical relationships projected towards the future, as we are now going to see.

Online dating (Bertolazzi and Esposito, 2015) has developed exponentially in recent years in all the most advanced nations. It has covered all forms of love and sex imaginable: from classic<sup>31</sup> to homosexual, from swinging (couple swapping, Esposito, 2015; Petrillo, 2018) to women finding a man online (Moroni Grandini, 2015). The list could go on and on, along a path of specialization and continuous differentiation over time. The websites in question erroneously expand the audience of the “searchees” according to personal inclinations, even if at the same time people still tend to follow offline-inspired affinity criteria<sup>32</sup>. As almost always happens in the sexual field, innovative experimentation tends to prevail over iterative experimentation, with a greater impetus (but not numerical) on the female side (more privacy?). Some empirical research (Laporta, 2018) show the collective tendency to “neutralize” gender relations or to understand them in an “impersonal” way (Bertolazzi & Esposito, 2015), breaking many social conventions. During this pandemic, there is little doubt that these digital practices are being increased, even if they remain at a theoretical and prospective level. Therefore, we can think of reaching the paradox that freezing, on the one hand, concrete eroticism within traditional canons corresponds, on the other, to transgressive sexuality, virtual for now, suspended in its hypothetical implementation over time. It is easy to understand how we are on a bridge connecting a possible agreement with what could turn into a burning disappointment.

This situation cannot but concern two other expressions of web sexuality, namely erotic WhatsApp groups and sex-aimed video chats. In both cases, we are dealing with variously hidden groups that orient themselves within them, self-selecting and being accepted by their peers on specific issues, such as exhibitionism (Prodi, 2018), but it is obvious that, even in this case, we are facing the most absolute diversification. On the side of erotic chats, instead, it is possible to find with extreme ease and extension various types of video chat, public and friendly, that compete with each other, for a fee, or more often for free, ranging from fetish to BDSM, from those for swingers to those for single women, from those for love to those for sex, from those for dating to those for cheating, from those for mature women to those for married women. And the list could go much further. What the reader has already understood is that in this case we have physiologically slipped into the world of erotic-based webcams where a subject can interact in a pornographic way with real girls who indulge his desires, even the most perverse.

One beautiful and unique research on Italian webcam girls (Esposito, 2015b) based on specific video chat platforms (showcase sites), shows that the prices charged per minute vary from 1 euro for vaginal or anal masturbation without dildo to 5 euro for playing the slave. In between, we can find obscene language, domination/humiliation, fetishism, pissing, and much more. In short, you can ask for anything, even if it is not always satisfied by the girls. These are between 16 and 50 years old, with a concentration around 24/28 and belong to the lower social classes. Mostly they do not consider themselves as prostitutes, because their role lacks physical contact, there is no health risk of any kind, there are no forms of violence. In short, the web-escort activity cannot be superimposed to real-life prostitution – although we are not fully convinced of that. The clients are almost all males (if not

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<sup>31</sup> Where does “addiction” appear today? (Molteni, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> This also during processes of identity mutation (Di Cesare, 2015).

exclusively) middle-aged, married or cohabiting, educated, who prefer to connect during the evening hours.

If we reflect and try to reconnect these websex worlds, despite their differences (for example where to place whatsapp?), we see, once again, how real sex enters into the communicational one and then exits it, after the appropriate and targeted excitement, having enjoyed physical satisfaction. Men and women, in this case, play profoundly, though not exclusively, different roles that reproduce, with the usual differences, some concrete or, in any case, imagined social relationships. What all these practices have in common is health-related safety which, in these areas, is never questioned for obvious physical reasons. Apart from overcoming boredom and having more free time, believe that this health guarantee is, with other aspects not to be forgotten<sup>33</sup>, the most important element that has led in the last period (general feeling and objective feedback) to a considerable increase in these online activities with an erotic background and this concerns all the actors on stage on the crowded stage of adjective-free sexuality<sup>34</sup>. In the context of the digital society, the theme of online safety concerning eroticism has many other components, as we are going to mention presently.

We will mention just sexting or revenge porn. The first is a very common practice, particularly (but not exclusively) among young people, consisting of sending sexually explicit images via the web. The aim may be to stimulate pleasure in the partner, to stimulate their attention in a broad sense, to produce a simple entertainment or to express one's way of being (Marino, 2018). In this case, women send more images than men, perhaps out of exhibitionism or narcissism. What we want to emphasize about this practice is its dangerousness or the risks that are inherent in it. These can converge in non-consensual pornography (Marastoni, 2018) or in the narrower category of revenge porn that involves the disclosure of sexually manifest images of one or more people without their consent. Although those who practice such modes of communication do not see such links, the two modes of expression are in the online or network rather close and intersected. In these specific contexts<sup>35</sup> emerge various processes of victimization, which take the form of digital harassment, cyberstalking, abuse of various kinds, defamation and solicitation, and the usual inexhaustible child pornography, with all its ambiguities, also in other areas that we must and can consider similar, such as the sexuality of people with disabilities and their relationship with the digital network. The risks are therefore neither few nor easily surmountable, as demonstrated by the many suicides (attempted or successful) by victims of these traps – ploys that are generally helped, apart from imprudence or love-inspired excess of confidence, by what can be defined a sort of “partial computer illiteracy”, where men are normally more experienced and prepared and tend to victimise women. It is the domestic violence that, in its way, moves into the net. The world, as we well know, is not full of roses and, in any case, these have thorns. The web society does not shirk this rule, nor can it expunge it from its sexual sphere, as amply demonstrated by the latter modes of expression of online sexuality. It must be said, however, that even in a context in which sexting and consensual private pornography are increasing, there is no parallel increase in the above-mentioned criminal deviance. This frankly surprised me, be-

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<sup>33</sup> Like the various functional substitutes mentioned, the weight of friendly relationships and so on.

<sup>34</sup> We include in these “protagonists” also the customers of the various services or erotic opportunities offered that remain, especially on the female side, a black hole difficult to shed light on.

<sup>35</sup> We have not addressed online forums because they are collateral to our main purpose and of difficult interpret.

cause usually and logically the two tendencies should proceed together. But why is this happening during a pandemic? We will try, as usual with a great deal of circumspection, to come up with some minimal answers. One reason can be that the greater flow of sexual material is due above all to those who, already experienced, today amp up their web presence. A second reason can be that in the face of so many erotic opportunities only the safer ones are pursued. A third cause can perhaps be found in the hypothesis that the enormous increase in digital flows confuses things a bit, distracts us, and complaints are left to their own devices. Finally, one could also imagine that, with a monster behind us and the increasingly pliable sexuality around us<sup>36</sup>, more tolerance emerges inbound (misbehaviour) and outbound (lawsuits and various notifications) than in the communicational behaviour in question.

To close this paragraph, we can argue that the arrival of this pandemic in Italy has significantly affected sexuality<sup>37</sup> in both quantity and quality, greatly increasing its digital component. Websex seems to have usurped the scene, almost cancelling out an indestructible phenomenon such as prostitution. The transfer of entire blocks of social practices from one world to another, from offline to online, changes the configuration of a given society. It shifts and swings morality. Pleasure takes other variously tortuous and understandable paths. The increasingly consistent and necessary (for the time being) affirmation of websex only confirms the increasingly marked propensity towards the already resumed *widespread solipsism* accompanied by a latent *dissolution* of sexuality due to the surplus of opportunities. Web eroticism proposes everything and more according to a path of invention and differentiation that never seems to end. Driven by the pandemic process, it takes a path that is an infinity of paths, lost in our lives without ever presenting us with an insurmountable limit to our needs and without ever giving us the ineluctable sense of the epilogue for our, more or less greedy, research.

### 3. What next?

On the rather trivial observation for a sociologist that, after this pandemic, nothing or almost nothing in the social sphere will remain as before, we believe there can be little doubt. The real question is how and where our world will change, that is, in what direction and how quickly. We shrink from beating this too ambitious road, yet we cannot exempt ourselves from hinting, as a simple and hesitant supposition, at some evolutionary trace in this historical moment. In short, what will become of eroticism at the end of this pandemic? Let us try to wade the quicksand of ignorance, hoping at least to keep it in check. We pursue, so to speak, a regulatory ideal (Cipolla, 1997, vol. 3) of epistemological nature, well-aware that we are quite far away from it.

Let us begin by assuming that there is no going back. Many practices and tendencies of sexuality during the pandemic will be almost completely abandoned, but many areas will not see a return to previous reality. Some styles will leave the door, others will enter through the window even though the house has been on lockdown for a long time. Let us try to hazard a perspective interpretation.

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<sup>36</sup> One of the few sociological texts on these topics is Giddens' book (1992) which, in its way, was overwhelmed by the web society which is something different from globalization.

<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, it is much more than the dramatic deaths and the collapse of the economy and invades many other aspects of life, sometimes light, but sometimes profound.

In our opinion, the *dissolution by excess* of sexuality will be more contained as time goes on, but it will remain significantly within our social relations. This will imply, not so much a return to continence, unthinkable and impossible, but the obsolescence of current sexual morality, circumscribed and bound, on the one hand, to the denial of all violence (no means no and yes means yes)<sup>38</sup> and, on the other, to the condemnation of all erotic relationships with children, not yet aware and responsible for such behaviour.

From this first hypothetical evaluation, it follows almost mechanically that the link, enormously consolidated during this phase, between online and offline (in the flesh) sexuality, will remain changed over time. We believe that this relationship can be defined as *differentiated integration*, where the first term leads to a reciprocal adaptation, a reunification by relative autonomies, while the second makes us understand how the places and ways of this reciprocal completion are and remain the most diverse<sup>39</sup>. We are fully aware that all this can also mean confusion, chaos, impossibility of visible and verifiable causal implications, given the nuance of eroticism and the disappearance of the “two” (Žižek, 2008). Given that we are in the consolidated field of socio-cultural explanatory keys<sup>40</sup> and acquired Bauman’s idea (2001) that the consumerist commodification of life has “unglued”, or detached, love and eroticism (only today?), how to respond methodologically to such a situation of overwhelming opportunities and ever-changing behavioural practices around us in their unceasing diversity? This is the challenge of the web society for all scholars, to which we can react in many ways. We will limit ourselves to pointing out two of them, which we have already drawn on: the big data (Deriu, 2020) and the eclectic approach (Solieri, 2018).

We will not dwell on the former, that has invaded our lives in every way and that is very technical-operational, but still within our sociological world. We will instead allude, as a cognitive sketch, to the latter. We previously argued that there must be some kind of relationship between the object of study and the eye of the scholar, proposing the methodological theory of the “Cardan joint” (Cipolla, 2013; 2018). If we transpose these considerations into our current topic, what is the result at the heuristic level? We have already argued about the many paths (with what outlets?) that eroticism undertakes in our historical period in the web society, its dissolution by superabundance, its isolation by dispersion, its withdrawal in itself by explicit outside of itself. The “two” is missing. The *n* rules unchallenged. The change makes up for permanence. So, which theories do we chase? Which do we advance? What empirical evidence do we draw our interpretive sap from? Given all this, we can perhaps resort to the eclectic perspective. Eclectically-based sociology does not accept any kind of qualification. It shirks eclecticism. It embraces, in its cognitive style, the integrating perspective, based on procedural re-compositions, relative autonomies, new and surprising openings, mutualistic pluralism respectful of otherness, the overcoming of prejudices, a final theoretical over-determination, limited, temporarily, in time and space which represent the defined boundaries of its validity (Cipolla, 2013, p. 61 et seq.). And this with a further cognitive aggravating factor.

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<sup>38</sup> This applies in a broad sense but also to visual confidentiality about to erotic gestures.

<sup>39</sup> We have already seen that the digital society often experiences social facts based on contrasting phenomena or characteristics, at least according to old established logical criteria. Logic is many things, but the one that owns or connotes the web society can be considered contradictory, if not antithetical, or incongruous or, at least, ambiguous.

<sup>40</sup> In this sense Foucault (1984) is always interesting, but where do the “subject acting” views end up in this reading?

We have already mentioned that one of the distinctive characteristics of sexual behaviour during the *cv* pandemic is represented by what we have synthetically defined *diffuse solipsism*. This image is immediately transformed into a sort of individualism that is dispersed throughout the world. It chases itself in the net. It chases any kind of horizon while remaining itself in its immense drives, satisfied in an even more unlimited and immeasurable way<sup>41</sup>. As is quite evident, one withdraws from public eroticism, in need of physical otherness, into the anonymity and privacy of the net, of the digital universe. This, then, is the configuration of a *deflagrant refuge* (or an explicit retreat) that only the web society makes possible and practicable.

Sexuality, on this basis, would crouch on itself, expanding explosively beyond itself, thanks to the presence of digital technologies (Cipolla, 2018) and the incredible and contemporary invasion of the bio-social pandemic by COVID-19.

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<sup>41</sup> Barnao (2015), means the impersonal web sex, a non-place (à la Augé) for a fluid identity that is removed from all judgment. I agree in principle, as we have seen, but personal and impersonal do not split up, but are co-founded in sex, even when this does not refer to any name or face.

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