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When Queer Studies Meet Intersectional Theory. Conceptual Innovations in Sociological Research on Anti-Lgbtq Violence and Discrimination

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Abstract

The concepts of homonormativity and homonationalism have been introduced in social research on anti-LGBTQ violence and discrimination since the early 2000s, facilitating significant transformations of the field. Primarily, they have promoted critical examinations of the ambivalent effects produced by mobilisations and politics addressing the so-called homophobia. Empirical research has, in fact, elucidated that the defence of LGBTQ rights may engender the normalisation of white, affluent and gender confirmative non-heterosexual subjects, whilst reinforcing the devaluation of non-Western cultures and queers who experience subordination in axes of social stratification such as race, ethnicity, gender and class.

The paper discusses the aforementioned innovations as they represent the most fruitful outcomes of the dialogue between queer studies and intersectionality, which has emerged to overcome their respective limitations. This dialogue has encouraged the formulation of an intersectional model of queer studies and the practice of queering intersectionality, both of which investigate how heteronormative patriarchy, racism and cisnormativity are mutually constitutive of each other in the foundation of social order.

The aim of the paper is twofold. Firstly, it synthesises the main elements that have solicited and fostered the reciprocal dialogue between queer studies and intersectional theory. Secondly, it traces the origins of the concepts of homonormativity and homonationalism and provides examples of their application and empirical achievements in social research on anti-LGBTQ violence and discrimination. The conclusive section of the paper illustrates how the investigation of so-called homophobia in Italian research has integrated the transformation of the field.

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1. Introduction

This article examines how queer social studies have benefited from intersectional theory in research on anti-LGBTQ discrimination and violence. Hostility against sexual minorities has constituted a crucial domain for the integration of queer theory into social investigation, and the subsequent expansion of queer studies beyond the realm of humanities (Stein & Plummer, 1994). Throughout the 1990s, queer scholars prompted significant conceptual innovations aimed at reinforcing structural interpretations of such hostility, whilst exposing the ambivalent effects of anti-discrimination politics (Seidman, 1993). The queer articulation of the concept of heteronormativity (Berlant & Warner, 1998) and the elaboration of that of homonormativity (Duggan, 2003) are widely referenced in current sociological research.

Nevertheless, the progressive institutionalisation of queer studies within academic contexts triggered sentiments of disaffection related to the perceived divergence from their theoretical and political premises (Halperin, 2003). Queer scholars engaged with transgender studies, postcolonial studies and critical race theory started questioning the development of a difference-blind stance in queer studies, including those focused on anti-LGBTQ discrimination and violence (Bilge, 2012). Their critiques targeted the risk that queer studies foster cisgender and ethnocentric biases in the production of knowledge and the pursuit of social justice (Erel et al., 2008). The integration of intersectional theory into queer studies was subsequently advocated to elucidate how different axes of domination – gender, sexuality, race, class – reinforce each other in the construction of social order, even when challenged by the mobilisation of sexual minorities. The concept of homonationalism, which is further advancing the social investigation of anti-LGBTQ hostility (Puar, 2007; Haritaworn et al., 2008; Haritaworn, 2015), represents an important innovation brought about by the engagement between queer social studies and intersectionality.

However, the dialogue between queer studies, sociology and intersectional theory is "far from simple" (Shepard, 2016, p. 38), notwithstanding their theoretical and political affinities. The following sections provide a general contextualisation of the principal tenets of queer theory, its relationship with sociological research, and its engagement with intersectionality. Subsequently, the analysis will address the transformations in research on anti-LGBTQ hostility resulting from the incorporation of a queer perspective and its dialogue with intersectional theory.

The concluding section will summarise the main points of the analysis and illustrate how Italian research has been influenced by these innovations in the field.

2. Queer theory and sociology

Queer theory emerged in the United States in the early 1990s within the domain of humanities, owing to the seminal work of feminist, lesbian and gay scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant. Imbued with critical deconstructionism and postmodernism, queer theorists translated into academic enquiry the rise of dissonant voices among feminist and homosexual communities and organisations. Starting from the late 1970s, lesbians, black and Chicano feminists, racialised gays and transgender activists, expressed a strong disaffection with univocal representations of gender and sexual subjectivities that underpinned liberal assimilationist politics of that time (Seidman, 1993; Turner, 2000; Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Gambino, 2020). They argued that the social consequences of being a woman and/or identifying as homosexual are not independent from one's position in other axes of stratification and identity. Neither are the frameworks and languages through which individuals mobilise to contest gender and sexual subordination.

In this regard, queer theory and the subsequent field of queer studies developed as an oppositional mode of critical analysis focused on the "seemingly indisputable concepts" of sexuality and gender (Turner, 2000, p. 3). Its goal is to unravel how the construction of categories of sexual/gender identities – primarily the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality – is central to producing whole systems of knowledge and the correspondent structures of social order[1]. To recall the renowned statement by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990, p. 1):

> An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central

[1] The interpretation of the relationship between gender and sexuality offered by queer scholarship is far from univocal. Whilst the primacy accorded to the domain of sexuality is acknowledged, some critiques have problematised the purported gender blindness of queer theory – a stance that, according to black queer scholars Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, "undergenders difference" (2006, p. 5) – or its prevalent tendency to consider gender asymmetries as a product of the regime of sexuality (McIntosh, 1993; Jackson, 2006).

substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition.

A crucial pillar of queer theory and studies – which distinguishes them from gender studies and gay and lesbian studies – is to be found in the adoption of an epistemological approach of radical scepticism towards the foundational role of the subject and the identities through which the subject speaks. As William Turner observed (2000, p. 8), queer theorists were fully immerged in the "characteristic intellectual and political impulse of the late twentieth century [...] to complain – not to say whine – about the inadequacy of categories, especially identity categories". This impulse influenced numerous scholarly debates on identity, including sociological analysis that, anticipating the elaboration of intersectional theory, problematised the "biological foundationalism" of womanhood in mainstream feminist politics and research (Nicholson, 1994; see also Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983). Nevertheless, the scepticism of queer scholars was not limited to the arbitrariness of social categories of identity; it encompassed the very notion of the knowing subject, whose agency was purported to have the potential to subvert normative assumptions about what is considered normal and what is deemed deviant (Gamson & Moon, 2004). Accordingly, sexual identities are interpreted as mere artefacts of the master regime of the hetero/homosexual binary, possessing no reference point outside the dimension of textuality.

An applied articulation of this approach may be illuminating here. Illustrating his notion of "queer world making" in relation to mobilisations on sexuality, political scientist Kevin Duong (2012, p. 378) advocated for analysing social action as having "no necessary or intrinsic relation to the existing demographic character or shared history" of the activists.

The radicalness of the anti-identitarian approach of queer theory relies upon the post-structuralist philosophy of Michael Foucault (see Bernini, 2016). According to Foucault, sexual minorities are themselves a product of the same structure of power/knowledge that organises desires and bodies into a binary categorisation, maintaining the domination of one category (heterosexuality) over the other (homosexuality). Consequently, queer theorists not only critiqued "the failure [of individuals] to fit precisely within a category" (Turner, 2000, p. 8); they also questioned political mobilisations and research aimed at transforming the social meaning of stigmatised identities through counter-representations of their positive value. Queer scholars argued that accepting the notion of the existence of sexual minorities reinforces the hegemony of what has been socially constructed as heterosexuality, which would invariably operate as a criterion for evaluating all alternative configurations of sexuality. The Foucauldian legacy is evident, inter alia, in the conceptual framework provided

by Michael Warner in his introductory chapter of the seminal 1993 queer text *Fear of a queer planet*. Positing that "a wide field of normalization, rather than simply intolerance, [is] the site of violence", he described the stance of queer studies toward political and cultural action as follows (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi):

> [Queer] rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest representation in favour of a more throughout resistance to regimes of the normal.

Within a few years, the queer approach transcended the boundaries of the humanities and exerted a profound influence on sociologists and social scientists engaged in the study of homosexuality, particularly those already involved in problematising scholarly and political concepts of unified gender and sexual identities. The aforementioned Steven Seidman was one of the first sociologists to engage with queer studies. Recognising that "it is impossible to separate one's sexuality from one's class, one's gender, and so forth" (Stein & Plummer, 1994, p. 137), Seidman turned to queer theory to advocate a shift in the sociological investigation of homosexuality, which had hitherto constructed homosexuals as a new – and internally homogeneous – ethnic minority. In his own words (Seidman, 1996, p. 13):

> Study of homosexuality should not be a study of a minority – the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual subject – but a study of those knowledges and social practices that organize society as a whole by sexualizing – heterosexualizing or homosexualizing – bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture, and social institutions. Queer theory aspires to transform homosexual theory into a general social theory or one standpoint from which to analyze social dynamics.

The encounter between queer theory and sociological research on homosexuality, however, has not been without its challenges. Whilst acknowledging the hetero/homosexual binary the status of a master category in the critical analysis of Western societies, sociologists did not embrace the queer textualism that promotes a disarticulation of the self from the social or – in its most extreme form – a radical rejection of the self. Instead, queer sociologists articulated their critical analysis following pragmatist and symbolic interactionist approaches to the subject that had developed "a kind of queer theory long before the first queer theorists set pen to paper" (Green, 2007, p. 26-27). Notwithstanding its anchoring in linguistic games, identity is thus interpreted as a configuration of interests from which social agents can contest

their subordination (Eng et al., 2005; Shepard, 2016). As a site for individual agency and collective mobilisation, identity represents a strategic tool to challenge the systems of knowledge that render identities intelligible and hierarchically organised.

The integration between queer theory's critical deconstructionism and the valorisation of the agency of flesh-and-blood individuals – which Adam Green termed the "post-queer study of sexuality" (Green, 2002, p. 523) – is also evident in sociological research fields beyond homosexuality. One interesting example comes from transgender studies, an interdisciplinary site of investigation that emerged towards the end of the 1990s (Stryker & Whittle, 2006), and that sociologist Susan Stryker (2004) characterised as "queer theory's evil twin". It can be maintained that, to counter the perceived invisibility of the lived experience of transgender subjects (Namaste, 2000), sociologists engaged in this field have drawn upon their affinity with feminism and, more specifically, with Black feminist thought. In this regard, their framework offers a distinctive articulation of the idea of epistemic vantage that feminist standpoint theory attributes to women. The notion of "outsider within" – that the African-American feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins developed in 1986 – is crucial here. It elucidates the position of individuals who are incorporated into social and cultural domains that do not anticipate their presence. As outsiders within, transgender activists and scholars "may reveal aspects of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches" (Collins, 1986, p. S15), and contribute to enriching the political and scientific deconstruction of heteronormative and binary systems of power/knowledge.

In summary, the dialogue between queer theory and sociology has positioned the deconstructive challenge of the former in productive tension with the tradition of the latter. The anti-identitarian stance of queer theory cautions sociological studies that the under-problematisation of identities may lead research to inadvertently adopt essentialist assumptions that reflect the experience of the most affluent and visible members of sexual and gender communities. Concurrently, the sociological interpretation of identity circumvents the queer paradoxes that emerge from the fact that the very subjects who challenge heteronormative discourses on sexuality are themselves a product of the same systems.

3. Interrogating difference-blindness in queer studies: the dialogue with intersectional theory

Notwithstanding their theoretical tensions, the convergence of queer theory and sociological research on homosexuality has been facilitated by their

shared commitment to problematising unified categories of identity, such as that of "homosexual". Nevertheless, the capacity and willingness of queer studies to incorporate racial and gender differences into the deconstructive analysis of the regime of sexuality became the target of severe critique within its own domain. Despite its purported aim to "offer a possible escape from the hegemony of white, male, middle-class models of analysis" (Halperin, 2003, p. 340), the field of queer studies has been accused of reproducing both the cisgender bias and the whiteness of mainstream movements and systems of interpretation.

On the one hand, transgender scholars contended that queer theory has progressively contravened one of its central principles, namely the rejection of the binary logic that underpins Western culture and social conventions (see Stryker, 2004, 2006). Indeed, the excessive deployment of queer as a synonym for gay or lesbian reflects a tendency to consider sexual orientation and sexual identity – which are predicated on a binary interpretation of gender – as the sole elements capable of destabilising heteronormativity. Notably, Stryker critiques this "privileging of homosexual ways of differing from heterosocial norms" as "homonormativity" (Stryker, 2006, p. 7). On the other hand, queer theorists aligned with the fields of critical race studies and postcolonial studies questioned the blindness to racial and ethnic differences in queer studies. As Umut Erel, Jin Haritaworn, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Christian Klesse (2008, p. 271) have strikingly pointed out:

> Queer theory offers itself as a radical epistemology to uncover pervasive forms of power, not only around sexuality but also around 'race' and transgender. Queer of colour theorists and some trans theorists have remained sceptical about these grand claims, and pointed out the notorious silence about racism and transphobia in the mainstream of queer theorising.

During the same period, Adi Kuntsman and Esperanza Miyake (2008, p. 7) edited a volume to address the global proliferation of a "sense of dissatisfaction surrounding the ways in which 'raciality' is theorised and politicised within queer discourse and practice". Some years later, scholars such as Jennifer Petzen observed that the apparent inability to "successfully engage with anti-racist and queer and trans of colour critiques" (2012, p. 291) was leading queer studies to adopt a nominalistic anti-racist stance which lacks substantive performative consequences[2].

[2] For similar critiques emerged within the domain of humanities, see Johnson and Henderson (2006).

It is noteworthy that the purported divergence from its intellectual and political premises has been attributed to queer theory due to its institutionalisation within academia. The incorporation of queer studies into formal knowledge has allegedly failed to alter the epistemological frameworks of established disciplines, which remain rigidly structured around specific gender, sexual and racial premises. These discussions can be conceptualised as a continuation of post-structural analyses that problematise the inability of Western academic disciplines, including sociology, to "take difference seriously". According to Steven Seidman, the expression "taking difference seriously" is associated with the theoretical and political challenges represented by the notion of "bringing differences of (say) nationality, race, ableness, gender, and sexuality into social analysis and political practices without defining them as inferior, subordinate, retrograde, or primitive" (Seidman, 1997, p. ix). These challenges are particularly salient in a neoliberal era characterised by what Selma Bilge terms the "political myths of the posts" (post-identity, post-raciality, post-feminism), wherein counter-hegemonic knowledges produced from the margins are no longer excluded from academic contexts. To quote her own words (2014, p. 195):

> One of the ways in which Eurocentric knowledge maintains its authority is by assigning non-white bodies to particular, less theoretical, less universalisable forms of knowledge. In the new order, non-whites are no longer reduced to a mere object of knowledge produced by white scholars. Their knowledge production is now recognized, if regulated by the principles of white science, though of lesser value and severely limited to their own kind.

The dialogue with intersectional theory has progressively emerged as a productive strategy for preventing queer studies from reproducing perceived ethnocentric and assimilationist sexual politics and interpretations. For the purpose of this article, an exhaustive engagement with the conceptual features of intersectional theory is not requisite. It may suffice to recall a comprehensive definition by renowned intersectional theorists Patricia Hill Collins and Selma Bilge. According to them (2016, p. 2), intersectionality is an analytic tool to investigate social inequality based on the following premise:

> People's lives and the organisation of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.

Considering its socio-political trajectory and conceptual codification, many scholars have identified significant affinities between intersectional theory and queer studies. Some of them, such as Christian Chan and Lionel Howard (2020, p. 347), even maintain that queer theory and intersectionality possess an "interrelated nature". Similarly, queer political scientist Elena Gambino (2020, p. 219) asserts that "queer theorists' emphasis on antinormativity […] is a response to and a reflection of the analytic and political contributions of intersectional theorists, broadly conceived" (see also Shepard, 2016). This argument is bolstered by the inclusion of "relationality" in the seminal definition of the "six core ideas" that "provide guideposts for thinking through intersectionality" (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 25). Relational thinking represents a rejection of binary thinking, a shift towards the critical interrogation of discursive and factual interconnections among categories, which evokes the same anti-binary framework characteristic of queer theory.

The concept of sexuality as a powerful principle of stratification – one that shapes its own inequalities and supports the social definition of others – had progressively entered the domain of intersectional research[3]. This facilitated queer scholars' promotion of engagement with intersectionality to better understand how "different axes of social division […] are mutually constitutive of each other" in the production of "discourses and oppressive practices" (Erel et al., 2008, p. 274). Furthermore, intersectional theory has been acknowledged by queer scholars from Black and postcolonial studies as having the potential to reinforce the rehabilitation of individual/collective agency in deconstructing normative regimes of sexuality, a stance already advocated by early queer sociologists. As Selma Bilge articulates (2012, p. 23):

> Intersectionality can help ground queer theory into lived experiences and struggles where categories such as sexuality, class or race are contested as well as redress the evacuation of the social.

Notwithstanding this development, numerous scholars have observed that the relationship between intersectional theory and queer studies might be problematic. For instance, Kevin Duong (2012) and Notisha Massaquoi (2015) concur that intersectionality and queer studies conceptualise the nature of the

[3] The inclusion of sexuality within intersectional research, however, remains contentious. For instance, it has been observed that certain intersectionality scholarship has conceptualised sexuality merely as a matter of individual choice of sexual orientation, thereby failing to interpret it as a structural power implicitly implicated in the construction of gender, race and class (Bilge, 2012; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Shepard, 2016).

problems they address in distinct ways, and consequently pose different questions or approach similar questions from divergent perspectives. Intersectionality is primarily concerned with investigating the social exclusion experienced by intersectional subjects and the manner in which their positionality challenges unidimensional representations of minorities. Queer studies, conversely, are more oriented towards a radical critique of the disciplinary power inherent in all systems of knowledge that construct the subject as such (see also Chan et al., 2019; Chan & Howard, 2020).

However, together with the investigation of identity trajectories of migrant and racialised queer subjects (see Masullo & Ferrara, 2021), the research field on anti-LGBTQ hostility proved to be fertile ground for the innovation of queer social studies through dialogue with intersectionality. Such innovation facilitates grasping the complexity associated with the segmentation of queer local and global communities along axes of gender, race and ethnicity. Notisha Massaquoi (2015, p. 768) articulated that intersectional queer approach enhances the capacity to "interrogate the complex system of sexual norms within all cultures, where the normal racialized subject is not queer and the normal queer is not racialized".

The following section elucidates how the notion that "raciality and queerness should always be interrogated together as queerness/raciality" (Kuntsman & Miyake, 2008, p. 7) helps investigating how mobilisations and politics against anti-LGBTQ hostility might promote the normalisation of certain queer subjects at the expense of the further marginalisation of others.

4. Queer and intersectional innovations in sociological research on anti-LGBTQ violence and discrimination

The topics of violence and discrimination against sexual/gender minorities constitute the primary domain that has fostered the development of both queer studies and intersectional studies (Warner, 1993; Berlant & Warner, 1995; Collins, 2019). With regard to LGBTQ issues, the dialogue between queer studies and intersectionality has significantly contributed to a conceptual and empirical redefinition of social research on so-called homophobia and transphobia. Following a brief overview on the major debates that have influenced the critical reception of the psycho-social concept of homophobia, the subsequent discussion will be devoted to the renewal brought about by the introduction of various iterations of the concept of homonormativity, and that of homonationalism.

4.1 From homophobia to heteronormativity

From the early 1970s, the concept of homophobia marked a significant shift in scientific research on homosexuality, transitioning from the examination of deviance in homosexual individuals to the problematization of hostility towards them. Its proliferation is linked to the work of George Weinberg (1972), who effectively synthesised the emergence of a new sensibility in the psychological discourse of his time (Herek, 2004). Weinberg defined the concept of homophobia quite broadly, connecting it to both psychodynamic dimensions (such as phobia) and structural aspects. This facilitated its immediate success in contexts beyond the realm of research. In a short period, homophobia became a keyword (Wickberg, 2000) in the field of mobilisations and political conflicts surrounding the transformations of normative definitions of gender and sexuality.

The conceptual ambiguity and widespread adoption of homophobia initially prompted the field of psychology to scrutinise the heuristic value of a construct employed across diverse interests (Trappolin & Gusmeroli, 2019). The ensuing discourse centred primarily on the existence of a dimension of anti-homosexual hostility that could be accurately characterised as homophobia. Whilst the presence of a phobic matrix in the expression of such hostility was acknowledged, the scientific application of the concept was subsequently confined to this aspect. However, psychologists sought to extend their research beyond intra-psychic conflicts and irrational impulses. To elucidate the existence of a nexus between the individual phobic dimension and the organisation of social structures, they proposed various conceptual frameworks. For instance, Walter Hudson and Wendell Ricketts (1980) elaborated the seminal concept of homonegativism to encompass the broader, multidimensional domain of which homophobia is a part.

The work of Gregory Herek, one of the most authoritative scholars in the field, provides another example of conceptual categories that achieved significant consensus. Herek published two works with the same title, *Beyond homophobia*, twenty years apart. In the first one (Herek, 1985), he posited that attitudes against homosexuality are far from dysfunctional; rather, they perform specific functions aimed at integrating (male) individuals into the social system. In the second (Herek, 2004), Herek conceptualised anti-homosexual behaviours and attitudes as expressions and reinforcements of a social structure termed heterosexism, which also supports systems of shared knowledge defined as sexual stigma.

Progressively, the discourse challenging individualistic and intra-psychic interpretations of homophobia extended to sociological research on violence and discrimination against homosexual and queer subjects. To emphasise the

structural foundations of such phenomena, some sociologists employed categories elaborated by psychologists, such as homonegativism or its translation into homonegativity (Trappolin & Gusmeroli, 2019). Others elaborated their own conceptual frameworks, such as Gail Mason's homosexed violence (1997), or Eric Anderson's homohysteria (2009). Irrespective of the terminology employed, including homophobia itself, sociologists sought to elucidate the nexus between social hostility towards homosexuality and the reproduction of the structural asymmetries between men and women, as well as among different masculinities. Their efforts to engender homophobia (Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2025) have challenged the implicit hegemony of the male gaze in research on homophobia, yielding diverse understandings and empirical evidence of the intersection between sexuality and gender in the victimisation of lesbian women (Mason, 1997) and in the construction of heterosexual masculinities (Kimmel, 1994).

Within these interdisciplinary and multifaceted debates, queer theory made a significant contribution. Stemming from their anti-normative stance, queer studies popularised the adoption of the concept of heteronormativity to elucidate the structural organisation of anti-homosexual hostility and its productive power. Queer theorists interpreted heteronormativity as a core matrix for the arrangement of social life, which extends beyond mere hostility towards gay and lesbian individuals. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner notably articulated (1998, pp. 548):

> By heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged (...). It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than of a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations – often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions. Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense.

The analytical concept of heteronormativity emerged as a master category across numerous domains of critical thought. In social research on homophobia, it facilitates understandings of how hostility towards homosexual and queer people is embedded in the construction of social order. Concurrently, it elucidates the foundation of (sexual) domination in the very establishment of the hetero/homosexual binary, which legitimises the intelligibility of homosexuality as a minority status.

4.2 From heteronormativity to homonormativity

The queer conceptualisation of homophobia as heteronormativity contributed to the emergence of a field of critical inquiry examining the productive effects of mobilisations and politics aimed at contrasting such hostility. This field provided a relevant empirical basis for the dialogue between queer studies and intersectionality.

The point of departure – which anticipates the dialogue with intersectionality – is the characteristic queer orientation towards critical interpretations of lesbian and gay identity politics (Seidman, 1993). These critiques focus on the normalisation of docile definitions of homosexuality, which are promoted by claims for assimilation within the perimeter of (heteronormative) rights. Broadly speaking, the aim – as Karl Bryant and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz have articulated (2008, p. 391) – is to "reveal unintended and sometimes less than liberatory consequences that taken-for-granted understandings and uses of homophobia may engender".

The development of this analytical trajectory in queer social studies resonates with similar sensibilities that characterise other fields of inquiry, such as the feminist problematisation of the epistemological foundations of criminology and repressive policies aimed at addressing gender violence (Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1990). However, the strategic concept that queer studies have adopted to develop their analysis – homonormativity – emerges from a different discourse: that concerning the ambivalence of neoliberal advancements in citizenship rights[4]. A substantial reference in this context is the 2003 book – *The twilight of equality?* – written by Lisa Duggan. Here, the representation of a "silent majority" of American gay and lesbian individuals opposed to radical "left queerthink" is examined as exemplar of the illusory inclusion of depoliticised social minorities, ostensibly achieved through access to commodification and domesticity. The concept of homonormativity is thus employed to critique mobilisations and politics – included those aimed at contrasting homophobia – that "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them" (Duggan, 2003, p. 50)[5].

[4] On the necessary conceptual distinctions between "homonormativity" and "heteronormativity", see Berlant and Warner (1998).

[5] Duggan's analysis resonates with earlier scholarship on related themes, wherein the phenomenon she subsequently termed "homonormativity" was previously examined in relation to the concept of "heteronormative homosexuals" (Spade & Willse, 2000, p. 42).

Queer sociological studies adopted the concept of homonormativity to unveil how politics against homophobia may engender "its own forms of violence (discursive and material)" (Bryant & Vidal-Ortiz, 2008, p. 391). Empirical research has illuminated diverse mechanisms through which anti-homophobic politics and mobilisations normalise homosexuality and consequently stratify queer communities. One such mechanism is the portrayal of a homogenous queer community devoid of internal differentiations. The deconstruction of this mechanism is central to the work of researchers such as Doug Meyer (2014), who explicitly draw upon a dialogue between queer studies and intersectionality. Focusing on interventions and claims of protection against homophobic hate crimes, Meyer has identified a hierarchy in the importance accorded to diverse forms of violence, with the physical aggressions from unknown individuals at the apex. This conceptualisation of hate crimes as a "stranger danger" is posited as a shared experience among all member of queer communities, irrespective of their intersection with other axes of exclusion. The consequence is the construction of a quasi-ethnic model of queer community, within which experiences of violence produced by the intersection of sexuality with other forms of oppression are devalued. The corresponding ideal-type of deserving victims – male, white, cisgender, middle-class subjects – underpins a significant differentiation between those who receive support and protection, and those who are further marginalised.

Another mechanism of normalisation is examined in studies on the practices of national and supranational Courts and Commissions. As research such as that of Michele Grigolo has elucidated (Grigolo, 2003), the juridical protection of lesbian and gay subjects from violence tends to privilege the defence of the privacy of same-sex relationships, whilst neglecting claims related to the discriminatory regulation of the public sphere. This is interpreted as an effect of a discursive framework that minoritises "issues related to sexuality along the axis of sexual orientation" through the promotion of essentialist conceptions of homosexuality (p. 1027). A significant differentiation thus emerges. On one end of the spectrum are subjects who occupy privileged positions within systems of social stratification, and consequently are afforded the opportunity to experience their sexual orientation as a private matter. On the other end are those who perceive their lives as a result of intersecting regimes of domination (heterosexism, sexism, classism, racism…), against which they cannot receive institutional protection.

The articulation of an intersectional queer approach in this field of research is further informed by the conceptualisation of homonormativity that emerges from transgender studies. As previously noted, transgender scholars such as Susan Stryker (2006) employ homonormativity to critique the focus on homosexuality by queer studies, and the overshadowing of the distinct

experiences of trans people. A consequence of this tendency is the interpretation of anti-trans violence and discrimination as an epiphenomenon of homosexuality, as if hostility and aggression against trans individuals were rooted solely in homophobic biases.

From this perspective, the discourse on homonormativity in transgender studies seeks to unmask and challenge cisnormative biases that influence queer research on violence and discrimination. On the one hand, transgender studies have facilitated methodological innovations aimed at generating data on the pervasive level of discrimination and violence experienced by trans and non-binary individuals (see Masullo & Ferrara, 2021). On the other hand, they have fostered the conceptualisation of appropriate categories and frameworks for elucidating "the mechanisms of the sex/gender regime that gender-binary feminism and the definition of heteronormativity are unable to grasp" (Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2025, p. 572). For instance, Talia Bettcher (2014) has elaborated the seminal notion of "reality enforcement" to link the recurrent threats in the daily lives of trans individuals to the normative power of shared understandings of sex. According to this concept, "natural" genitalia reveal a moral truth that cannot be contravened, and individuals who are perceived as deceivers are subjected to violent scrutiny of their bodies.

4.3 From homonormativity to homonationalism

In their analysis of the racialised nature of heteropatriarchy in neoliberal Western societies, intersectional queer scholars David Eng, Judith Halberstam and Esteban Muñoz (2005) addressed the inevitable production of "perverse others" as a consequence of homonormativity. In their articulation, the category of "perverse others" identifies those subjects who bear the costs of the assimilation of affluent lesbian and gay individuals into mainstream society.

Elucidating the mutual constitution of heteronormativity, sexism, racism and classism represents a key objective towards which the dialogue between queer studies and intersectionality is oriented. This aim is specifically achieved through the deployment of the concept of homonationalism.

The origins of this concept are situated in debates on homonormativity, wherein neoliberal drifts of mainstream lesbian and gay organisations have been associated to the adhesion to nationalistic views (Duggan, 2003). One of the driving factors for the codification of homonationalism was the post-9/11 climate supporting the "war on terror". Additional factors include the attribution to Islamic migrants of a purported cultural incapacity to accommodate homosexual rights granted in Western societies, and the

consequent paternalistic approach towards the "salvation" of homosexual subjects with non-Western cultural backgrounds.

The concept of homonationalism is primarily attributed to intersectional queer scholars Jasbin Puar (2007) and Jin Haritaworn (Haritaworn et al., 2008), with Puar deriving it from her earlier conceptualisation of "homonormative nationalism" (Puar, 2006). In their work, homonationalism serves as an analytical tool for critically examining how Western discourses and practices on lesbian and gay rights "produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to citizenship [...] at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations" (Puar, 2013, p. 337). Representatives of "other populations" suffering from delimitation and expulsion are, firstly, those who embody the figure of the "hateful Other" (Haritaworn, 2015). This label refers to the purportedly criminal and criminally homophobic migrant who embodies the primary threat to the safety of lesbian and gay Western citizens and, consequently, represents the principal target of anti-homophobic interventions. Another figure experiencing homonormative exclusion is the orientalised Muslim queer/queer of colour, whose participation in Western lesbian and gay communities is marginalised, whose specific voice is excluded from debate, and whose integration into ethnic networks is impeded by the interpretation of homophobia as a "white, even racist, phenomenon" (Haritaworn et al., 2008, p. 83).

The symbolic ramifications of homonationalism include the reinforcement of the notion of Western cultural primacy and the consolidation of prejudices regarding the purported backwardness of Muslim and non-Western cultures. The integration of the concept of homonationalism elucidates how mobilisations and politics reproduce the divide between "the West and the rest" in terms of the mutual constitution of racism and heterosexism. On the one hand, empirical research has examined the appropriation of pro-LGBTQ narratives by public institutions – especially right-wing political parties – to compel the inclusion of Muslim migrants and to challenge immigration from their countries of origin (Puar, 2007, 2013). In this context, scholars from the Netherlands have notably observed that this appropriation is associated to processes of "culturalization" and "sexualization" of citizenship, according to which "increasing importance [is] attached to culture and morality – and in particular sexuality and gender – in shaping citizenship and integration policy" (Buijs et al., 2011, p. 634). On the other hand, studies have critiqued mainstream LGBTQ activism for adhering to orientalising representations of non-Western cultures, devaluing the homophobic attitudes of natives, and employing racialised conceptualisations of queerness (Haritaworn et al., 2008; Bilge, 2012; Haritaworn, 2015).

5. Concluding remarks, with a glance at Italy

The dialogue between queer studies and intersectionality has been evolving since the early 2000s, aiming to enhance the analytical potential of queer studies. The outcomes of this dialogue indicate a more nuanced understanding of how sexuality intersects with other axes of domination in the production of social order. The development of intersectional queer studies facilitates a deconstruction of heteronormative patriarchy that integrates an analysis of its racialised and cisnormative foundations.

The domain of social hostility towards homosexuality and queer subjects has emerged as a fertile ground for the development of the dialogue between queer studies and intersectionality. The corresponding shift from a homophobia framework to that of homonormativity and homonationalism represents a significant advancement in critical social research on the subject. The introduction of the concept of homonormativity has redirected the focus of research towards the ambivalent effects of anti-homophobic interventions. Its articulation in queer studies – also through transgender sensibilities – has illuminated the alignment of white and "normal" homosexual subjects with the (cis)heteronormative system. The conceptual advancement offered by homonationalism has enabled researchers to elucidate the mechanisms through which the ostensible protection of lesbian and gay rights reproduces racial privileges and stereotyped representations of non-Western cultures, thereby reinforcing the social exclusion of migrants, non-Western queers and queers of colour.

Italian social research on homophobia is considerably less developed than its international counterpart, and studies on so-called transphobia are even more limited (Masullo & Ferrara, 2021; Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2025). Notwithstanding this, it is possible to identify some evidence of a queer sensibility towards the homonormative ambivalence of anti-homophobia mobilisations and politics. Conversely, the application of the concept of homonationalism in the analysis of the Italian context is constrained by the limited institutionalisation of lesbian and gay rights.

A critical analysis inspired by the concept of homonormativity can be found in Marco Pustianaz's deconstruction of the first national campaign against homophobia launched by the Italian Government in 2009 (Pustianaz, 2012). Pustianaz elucidated how the campaign was predicated on the privatisation of homosexuality, which was deemed to "make no difference" in the evaluation of individual capacity. In his interpretation, the campaign promoted a de-sexualisation of homosexuality which is "consistent with the requirements of the closet" and thus "as homophobic as the homophobia it claims to prevent" (pp. 93-94).

The role of Italian institutions in addressing social hostility towards lesbian and gay people has also been critically examined by Chiara Bertone and Beatrice Gusmano (2013). Their analysis demonstrated how collaboration with local authorities constrains the "speakability" of lesbian and gay organisations, which are compelled to frame their claims in ways that do not challenge the heteronormative structure of society. This theme was further explored by Paolo Gusmeroli and Luca Trappolin (2020). In their study on political debates on homophobia in Italian newspapers, they observed that institutional advocacy for personal security of lesbian and gay citizens fails to interrogate heteronormative ideals of social institutions, particularly the family.

Further scholarship has examined the homonormative implications of initiatives undertaken by Italian lesbian and gay organisations. Antonia Ferrante (2014) critiqued the "patriotic" claim to be recognised as builders of the national community performed through a campaign against homophobia launched in 2011 on the occasion of the Roma Euro Pride and the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Italian unification. Similarly, in her ethnographic study of Italian Pride Parades, Francesca Ammaturo (2016, p. 29) detected "dynamics of incorporation of queer identities into the fabric of the nation", as well as the participation of activists in spreading imaginaries of an advanced West opposed to backward and homophobe Middle Eastern countries.

The aforementioned examples demonstrate that Italian social research on hostility towards non-heteronormative subjects has already incorporated anti-normative queer sensibilities. Consequently, Italian pro-LGBTQ politics are not only examined as the outcomes of political conflicts opposing internal progressive and conservative social groups; rather, they are also analysed as mechanisms for the normalisation of sexual identities. However, the mutually constitutive relationship of sexuality with other axes of domination – such as race, ethnicity, class – for the stratification of queer subjects remains to be adequately addressed. This could be achieved through the contextual articulation of the concept of homonationalism, which represents one of the most valuable products of the dialogue between queer studies and intersectionality.

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