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Sexuality and capitalism: The Italian Renaissance

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Revolutionary struggles against capitalism have raised, time and again, the issue of sexual liberation. Right at the start of capitalism, the English revolution of the 1640s and 1650s involved what historian Christopher Hill has called a "sexual revolution" against the old order. The more radical forces included "ranters" such as Lawrence Clarkson, who argued that "What act soever is done by thee in light and love is light and lovely, though it be that act called adultery." [[1]1 The "utopian socialists" of the early nineteenth century also challenged accepted ideas about sexuality.

In 1808 Charles Fourier argued for a "better arrangement for the union of the sexes": in the new world of "amorous freedom" which he describes in considerable detail, a woman is allowed to have, simultaneously, a husband with whom she has two children, a co-parent with whom she has one, a socially recognised "favourite," and as many lovers as she chooses. [3] Robert Owen began a lecture on marriage in 1830 with a forthright statement: "Of all the sources of evils in human life, under existing arrangements, marriage, according to popular notions and as now solemnised, is one of the most considerable, if not the chief." [4]

Socialism, then, was from the beginning not just about economic justice, but about human liberation. This was part of the tradition which Marx and Engels developed. They too condemned existing ideas around sexuality, referring repeatedly to the hypocrisy of those bourgeois men who praised the family in public, yet committed adultery or had sex with prostitutes. But they sought to do more than morally condemn capitalist practices around sexuality, or to dream up detailed plans for a better future. They aimed to develop an overall account of human society and history which could both explain the world and act as a guide to changing it.

Marx and Engels' writing reflects, of course, the ideas of their time in various ways. But these limitations did not prevent genuine sexual liberation from becoming a recurrent theme in Marxism. The German Social Democrats, for example, defended Oscar Wilde when he was witch hunted and imprisoned in 1895 for having sex with other men, when few others defended him. Social Democrat leader Eduard Bernstein called for laws against sex between men to be abolished, while Clara Zetkin, also a leader of the Social Democrat Party, called on male trade unionists to recruit women workers to the unions rather than viewing them as prospective partners or sexually harassing them. [5]

The most inspiring example of sexual liberation as part of Marxist politics is that of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. The revolution established, for a few short years, a radically democratic society controlled by workers. Not only were laws against sex between men abolished, Russia was acknowledged by campaigners internationally as the most enlightened country in the world when it came to same-sex relations. Government agencies produced hundreds of thousands of leaflets and posters providing objective information about the whole range of sexual topics. They were inventive in their work to reduce levels of sexually transmitted disease in a semi-literate population, providing information through such means as verse, plays, and even a snakes-and-ladders-style board game. [6]

The last century saw other examples of how militant struggle by workers could open the way to increased sexual liberation. The important role played by labor strikes in the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa meant that when the new constitution was adopted in 1997, sexual liberation was the topic of widespread, participatory public debate. Lesbian and gay campaigners intervened in those debates, and won the argument that a new South Africa must mean justice around sexuality as well as around race: the new constitution was the first in the world to guarantee equality for lesbians and gay men.

The last fifty years have seen enormous changes in attitudes to sexuality in countries like the US and those of

western Europe. Sex between men was illegal in England, for example, until 1967: today, British LGBT people have something approaching legal equality with straight and cisgender people, as well as protection from discrimination. In the US, where such changes are much more contested, a majority now approve of same-sex marriage in polls. [7] The availability of reliable contraception has also transformed sexuality for straight people. Sex is now primarily for pleasureâ€"including women's sexual pleasure â€"not for reproduction. Of course, oppression continues. Rape, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse of children are disturbingly widespread, while sex is increasingly sold as a commodity through pornography. But at least it's possible to discuss these issues today, in a way that was impossible in the 1950s.

These changes began in the 1960s, a period of huge radicalization around the world that also included anti-racist struggles and the movement against the Vietnam War. In many countries that radicalisation involved workers' strugglesâ€"1968 in France saw what was at that time the biggest general strike in history, while in Britain in 1974 a strike by miners brought down a Conservative government. But in the USâ€"where the new Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements originatedâ€"workers' struggles were much less significant. And in any case, throughout the world the links between the struggles of workers and those for sexual liberation had been mostly forgottenâ€"the tradition of a century ago had been destroyed by Hitler and Stalin. The politics that have dominated sexual liberation movements since the 1960s have been those not of Marxism, which see liberating sexuality as part of a general struggle for human liberation with workers at its center, but those of "identity politics", which assume that each oppressed group must take the lead in separate fights against their particular oppression.

In the last few decades the limitations of such politics have become clearer. Separatists have tended to assume that struggles of oppressed peopleâ€"such as those of women, Black and LGBT peopleâ€"are separate, when in fact they frequently overlap. And separatists have frequently downplayed divisions within a supposedly united "LGBT community"â€"such as those of class. In fact, class divisions among LGBT people have increased. The overall decline in homophobia has made possible the rise of a layer of middle- and even ruling-class gay men in particular. Tim Cook, for example, is CEO of Apple and is paid $378 million a year, while in Britain the organising board of Pride London is chaired by Michael Salter, political head of broadcasting in the prime minister's office.

There is then, a real need for a political analysis which takes account of class, as well as gender and ethnicity, and attempts to integrate them into a coherent account of sexuality both in the past and today. The expansion of LGBT academia since the 1970s means that a huge amount of research has been done into different periods and issues. The work which remains to be accomplishedâ€"the book, in fact, which I'm currently writingâ€"is an attempt to place those studies within a broader framework tracing the relationship between "intimate life"â€"sexuality, marriage, children, friendshipsâ€"and capitalism as a whole, and avoids an academic idiom to make such an account accessible to as many activists as possible. A history of intimacy and intimate relations remains incomplete without such a narrative being embedded in a broader account of capitalism as a system, for capitalism remains the most intrusive form of production and organization that humanity has known.
What follows is part of that history of sexuality and capitalism, in this case dealing with the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, at the boundary between capitalism and the feudal society which preceded it. Medieval, feudal society had been almost entirely rural. The state apparatus was much smaller than that of capitalism, and the church was the main ideological support for the ruling class. Marriage was essentially an economic arrangement. For the ruling class it was a way of cementing strategic alliances between different families, while peasants could only marry after they had built up enough resources to farm a piece of land. The purpose of sexuality, according to the church, was reproduction: those who took part in non-reproductive sex, particularly men who took part in same-sex acts, were "sodomites", who faced severe punishments such as being burned alive. Anyone who behaved in ways thought inappropriate to their gender risked a similar punishmentâ€"Joan of Arc was burned alive in 1431 partly because her wearing men's clothes defied social norms.

Finally, it's important to appreciate that we are not dealing here with "gay" or "trans" people in the modern sense. This is one of the most striking discoveries that historians of sexuality have made in the last few decades–that for much of

history, modern concepts like “homosexuality” do not apply. As the reader will discover in the account of Renaissance Florence below, there existed no conception that same-sex desire was limited to a small number of people, or that human beings could be categorized as LGBT or straight.

The Italian Renaissance

The city states of the Italian Renaissance, such as Florence and Venice from the fourteenth century on, mark the first example of a society developing from feudalism towards capitalism. Italian Renaissance society had much in common with that of the Middle Ages. The real social developments of the period, and the towering artistic achievements of Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, should not lead us to idealize it. Huge disparities of wealth and power were the norm: the richest five percent of the families in Florence owned more wealth than the entire rest of the population. The ruling minority preserved their power through methods including the regular use of torture. Slavery of non-Christians was made legal in 1364, and thousands of slavesâ€”mostly Tartar women from the Black Sea regionâ€”were to be found in elite households throughout Italy. Waves of plague still swept across Italy. Violence of all kinds was common, including, as we shall see, sexual violence against both adults and children. [8]

Yet there were also changes from feudal practices. The city states were not ruled by kings, nor was land the basis of power and wealth, as it was for feudal aristocrats. In Florence, census returns from 1427 show that the richest people owned some land, but most of their wealth was in the form of goods and money. That wealth depended on trade, finance and manufacturing. Venice used its large navy to dominate the Adriatic, and controlled lucrative trade connections with the Byzantine Empire (which included what is now Greece, the Balkans and part of Turkey) and the Muslim world. Florentine banks were part of Europe-wide financial networks, and by the late Renaissance one in five of its people worked in industry, producing woolen cloth. The two occupations with the greatest wealth in Florence were those of banker and wool merchant. [9]

These developments were associated with the expansion of the previously small state. The Florentine state was partly funded by taxation, calculated on the basis of each household’s wealth; that wealth was assessed in a census administered in 1427 by over seventy clerks. Trade involved contracts, and resolving contractual disputes required lawyers. The most common occupation in Florence was that of notaryâ€”a person who draws up legal contractâ€” and the second most common was administrator, while the fourth richest group by occupation was lawyers [10]

Religious people were not, on average, rich; their average wealth was only one-fiftieth of that of the average banker. Religion was important in these societies; in many ways, their dominant religious beliefs were the same as those of the Middle Ages. But we do start to see gradual and complex changes, as the state began to take over the kind of social regulation which had previously been the role of the church. [11]

The prosperous bankers, merchants and lawyers who held political power in these cities had supplanted aristocracies, but there had never been a clean break with aristocratic values. The city states represented the initial moves towards capitalist, urban society, but remained islands in a feudal sea, where most people still worked the land as peasants. The merchant class continued to accept some feudal values: most Florentine people on middle incomes, for example, held most of their wealth in land, as the feudal ruling class always had. The most important state body in Venice, the Major Council, was controlled by merchants and bankersâ€”who in the early thirteenth century declared themselves to be a new hereditary nobility, whose members joined the Major Council as they came of age. [12]

We also find a mixture of political ideas about how societies should be ruled, and who is fit to rule them. A striking

break from medieval assumptionsâ€"that monarchs rule by divine right and that the ruling class therefore always has morality on its sideâ€"is found in the writings of NiccolÃ² Machiavelli. In The Prince, his most famous work, Machiavelli argues that wicked people such as criminals have sometimes seized state power, and that immoral behaviour may be the most effective way for a ruler to maintain such powerâ€" "a prudent ruler cannot, and should not, honour his word when it places him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist." Elsewhere, Machiavelli rejects the medieval view of society as static and unchanging, and suggests that conflicts between classes are a key feature of society. [13]

Marriage, men, and women

A large majority of people in these societies, though not all, married at least once. Marriage was not about the personal feelings of the man and woman involved; among all except the poorest people it concerned money and power. In late fourteenth-century Florence, for example, Buonaccorso Pitti found a bride in the following way:

He let it be known that he was willing to leave the choice of a wife up to Guido di messer Tommaso del Pelagio, â€˜the most respected and influential man in the city,' â€˜provided he picked her among his own relatives.' Pitti's motives were openly political: â€˜I sent the marriage broker to tell him of my intentions, and I did so in order to acquire his good will and a marriage alliance with him, so that he would be obligated to work on my behalf for a reconciliation with the Corbizi,' a family with whom Buonaccorso had feuded in 1380. The broker came back a first time to say the Guido del Pelagio would be pleased to have Buonaccorso â€˜as his parente, [kinsman]' and a few days later reported that Guido was able to offer in marriage Francesca, daughter of his cousin . . . " [14]

Florence was dominated by a number of extended family lineages, each including dozens of nuclear families, one of which, the Medici, came to rule the city for much of the fifteenth century. The elite and middle layers of the population were criss-crossed by networks including those of lineage, patronage, and common membership of religious organisations, and marriage was a carefully considered strategic move within the context of these networks. That marriage is about reinforcing social networks and stability, not the happiness of the marriage partners, is made clear by the fifteenth-century Florentine writer Matteo Palmieri:

[B]y giving and receiving spouses in legitimate marriage, they gather in, through parentadi [relatives] and through the love that unites them, a large part of the city. Thus, conjoined by kinship, men help one another in charity; they give counsel, favours and assistance to one another . . [15]

Marriage was a financial matter in a second sense: the bride needed to bring a substantial dowry to her new husband (with the sole exception, again, of the poorest people), generally provided by her family. Historian Sharon T. Strocchia sums up the practice:

[T]here could be no marriage without a dowry . . . The dowry provided the economic means for a new couple to begin its livelihood together: a young labourer might use his wife's dowry to purchase tools, a master artisan might buy his own shop, or a merchant establish a new business venture . . . The dowry also carried the significant social and symbolic functions of guaranteeing the honour due to the prospective bride and her family . . .
The wedding rituals themselves began with the two families signing a contract that specified the amount of the dowryâ€"an event at which the groom was typically present, but the bride was not. The marriage could only be concludedâ€"with feasting, consummation, and the ceremonial public procession of the bride to her new husband's homeâ€"once the dowry had been paid. [16]

The amount of money considered acceptable as a dowry constantly increased, more than doubling between 1400

and 1500. Quite early in this inflationary process, both Venetian and Florentine states intervened to ensure that dowries could still be paid and women could still marry. In 1420, Venice set a legal maximum on dowries; the preamble to the law made clear that the state was intervening in an area which had previously been controlled by heads of families. The Florentine state became even more involved in the support of marriage, setting up a Dowry Fund in 1424–25; a deposit made while a girl was still a young child could be reclaimed, with a substantial amount of interest added, when she married. [17]

Women's role in society, particularly among the rich, was thus immediately related to material concerns: to their ability to strategically link family and other networks through marriage, and to produce legitimate heirs to whom family property would be transmitted. Women were not valued as human beings in themselves, and their feelings and desires were of little importance. In 1345, Filippo di Vinzono seduced the daughter of a schoolteacher, Guidono Frami. The legal record of the case stresses the harm done not to her reputation but to that of her father: Filippo "had intercourse with her several times with great damage and loss of honour to the said Master Guidono."
The dowry system made it explicit that every woman had a monetary value. In 1394, Facino Bono raped Maria, the twelve-year-old daughter of his friend; as well as serving a six-month jail sentence, he was ordered to pay fifty gold ducats towards Maria's dowry. Her value had fallen, since she was no longer a virgin, but the addition of a substantial sum to her dowry balanced this out. [18] Punishments for illicit sex with women, meanwhile, varied according to class, and that the issue of whether the woman had consented to sex or been raped was not an important issue.

The Florentine statutes of 1415 set a fine of 500 lire for men who had intercourse, whether consensual or forced, with a virgin, a respectable widow or a married woman, and allowed harsher punishment depending on the â€˜condition and quality of the person.' For the violation of women â€˜of lesser condition' the fine fell to 100 lire, while sex with a consenting servant or prostitute carried no penalty at all. [19]

Wealthy women, viewed as a valuable commodity in a society where violence and rape were indeed commonplace, were expected to remain secluded at home, while the public spaces of the streets were reserved for men. The Italian Renaissance continued to accept the medieval view that women's sexual desires were stronger than men's, and that women were inferior intellectually, so that women must be not only protected, but controlled.

This is not to say that prosperous women in Renaissance Italy were no more than passive victims. Some took the initiative in taking lovers; others gained control of their sexual lives in the unexpected context of a convent. Despite their inferior legal status, women were able to become guardians of orphans, and to own propertyâ€"both crucial when around one in four women were widows. [20]

The position of poor women was very different from that of the rich. They could not afford to remain secluded at home, and were constantly exposed to the threat of sexual violence. Court records include many accounts of plebeian girls and women attacked while alone on country roads or in the fields, servants and apprentices exploited sexually by their masters, isolated widows and daughters powerless to defend their homes and virtue against assailants. Moreover, whether forced or consensual, most sexual relations between socially dominant men and their servants, slaves or other disadvantaged women simply evaded any judiciary control. [21]

However, poorer women might gain an independence denied to rich women, since some trades were dominated by women workers. Silk winding in Venice, for example, was carried out by a largely female workforce: adult women did skilled work, while young women and girls did the unskilled work of transporting materials. For these women, their skills and earning potential were more important in winning a husband than a dowry supplied by their family. Because there was no inherited wealth to protect, sexual standards were also different: premarital sex was common, and permitted as long as a couple intended to marry, while long-term informal unions and clandestine marriages were also commonplace. [22]

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In feudal North-Western Europe, couples usually married in their mid- to late-twenties, when they had amassed the goods to set up a joint household, and they then lived together in a household based on one married couple. The typical picture in Renaissance Italy was very different. In particular, there was a large age difference between men and women at marriage. In urban Florence the average age at first marriage was thirty for men and eighteen for women. In Venice, men also married at about thirty, while their brides were even younger, aged thirteen to fourteen. (The age gap between bride and groom was smaller in the countryside and among the poor; historians differ in their explanations of this.) [23] The fact that men married so late affected expectations of their behavior. Adolescence continued, many authors agreed, until a man reached about twenty-eight. After this age, most men would marry and become head of a household, and older men were expected to be grave, rational, and in control of their sexuality. Only after reaching the age of twenty-nine or thirty could a man in Florence be elected to significant public positions, and some posts were reserved for those aged over thirty-five, forty, or forty-fiveâ€"this in a society where many men would die before reaching such an age. [24]

Large numbers of men in their twenties thus had few economic and social responsibilities in these cities, particularly those from the most privileged classes. They played a major part in public and sometimes violent masculine traditions such as the "wars of the fists," huge public fights between different groups of men, involving from dozens to thousands of people. Oxen were driven through the streets, pursued by large dogs trained to bite off their ears, and prevented from running away by typing ropes to their horns. Once the ox was dead the men would "present" the animal in front of the balcony of a wife or sweetheartâ€"a meeting point between the enclosed female world of the home and the male, public world. Male gangs also fought in the street with rocks; anyone nearby could easily be injured or killed. These large numbers of unmarried young men played an important role in illicit forms of sexuality, such as prostitution and sex between men. But first, we should consider the lives people lived after marriage [25]

The family and children

Some two out of three households consisted of a family form familiar to usâ€"a couple, usually with children, or a widow with children, sometimes also living with an older relative, or with the child or children of their son or daughter. A large minority of peopleâ€"perhaps one in eight in the territory controlled by Florenceâ€"lived in a multifamily household, headed by an elderly man. In the city of Florence itself, one in eight men never married: at least some of these men lived alone. One in four women were widows, living with or without their children. Substantial numbers of rich women never married and lived in convents [26]

We have seen that marriage typically involved partners of unequal age, that people married because of strategic considerations involving power and wealth, and that the behaviour expected of women was very different from that expected of men. All these factors must, at least, have made it difficult for intimate and loving feelings to develop between marriage partners. Renaissance ideas about sexuality also did little to encourage intimacy. We think of sex as something that two people do together. The Renaissance view was that sex was something that one person did to anotherâ€"in the case of a mixed-sex couple, that men did to women. For example, in the 1380s Francescina, wife of a Venice surgeon, initiated an affair with one Benedetto da Argos. She took an active role in the relationship, using her maid to carry notes between the couple, and making arrangements for a meeting with him. The fact that Francescina had broken with the passivity expected of women meant that she was thoroughly condemned by the authorities:

> Unmindful of her salvation, motivated by sensuous desires, in contempt of God and sacred matrimony as well as to the detriment, dishonour . . . and censure of master Giovanni, her husband, and her children . . . she attracted and induced to herself Benedicto da Argos allowing herself to be known carnally by Benedicto . . . [27]

In the fourteenth-century view, Francescina and Benedetto do not have sex with each other. Despite her having taken the initiative in their relationship, as a woman Francescina cannot carnally know a man; rather, she allows

herself to be known carnally.

However, we also see the first appearance of a different concept of marriage, one which stresses affection and intimacy between husband and wife. Matteo Palmieri, quoted above describing marriage as reinforcement for a city's complex social fabric, also argued that it gave rise to a profound emotional attachment: "Of all human associations giving rise to affection, none produces a nobler love, or more deeply rooted in nature, than the matrimonial union." The Venetian writer Francesco Barbaro asked his readers, "What greater pleasure, than to have a woman, a companion in days fair and foul, a wife and friend? To her you can confide your most intimate thoughts about the matters which concern you. [28] This is not to say that people should marry for love: Palmieri speaks of marriage "giving rise to affection," rather than being originally based on it. In any case love was, in this period, regarded with some suspicion, as a kind of madness which temporarily overwhelmed people, absolutely not a suitable basis for a long-term commitment. Nor do these writers suggest that sexual attraction is essential to a marriage: Barbaro's hypothetical wife is described as a supportive, charming companion and confidant, not as sexually attractive to her partner. None the less, these writers suggest that marriage involves a deep emotional relationship. As Ruggiero comments, "typically . . . adultery cases reveal couples seeking affection outside of marriage . . . because they had not found it there . . . many seem to have felt that relationships between men and women should have an affective component. [29]

We see a mixture of attitudes in these approaches to marriage, the continuation of tradition combined with the first signs of change. The same is true of attitudes to children. An evocative summary by historian Christiane Klapisch-Zuber makes clear how much Renaissance attitudes to childhood differ from those of our own society:

All the children of 8, 11 or 15 who followed the mercenary soldiers, the 10- or 12-year-old vagabonds in search of adventure . . . the runaways who had broken with their father or their patron, the orphans who supported a family at 7 or 12 years old, the prisoners of war of 4 or 6 years old, the wanderers, the beggars, the little girls sold by their parents . . . all this sad childhood . . . is scandalous in our eyes. The tender age of these unfortunate creatures, however, did not particularly shock the society in which they lived . . . Integration into the adult world began early . . . [30]

As in the Middle Ages, many children died before they reached adulthood. In the mid-fifteenth century, Giuliano di Giovencho de' Medici and his wife Lionarda were the parents of fifteen children, which was by no means unusual; rich women in Renaissance Italy typically gave birth every eighteen months. Only four survived to adulthood, dying aged 26, 30, 31 and 41. Giuliano wrote about "the children God has lent to me and my wife Lionarda. [31]

Such levels of child mortality must have made raising a child in the Renaissance a very different experience from parenting today. For example, in 1385 the notary Jacopo Landi married a woman called Mattea; five years later they had a son, Pavolo, and the next year a daughter, Lagia. In the next five years two more daughters were born, and three years after that another daughter, who did not live till her first birthday. But Jacopo had been lucky: four of his five children were still alive in 1400, his son aged ten and his eldest daughter nine. But that year the plague struck, killing Jacopo's wife and all but one of his children. The next year he remarried, and in 1404 the first child of his second marriage was born. He named the boy Pavolo, like the first child of his first marriage. One year later a daughter was born, as in his first marriage, and again he named the girl Lagia. In this period nearly a third of girls bore the name of a sister who had died, and some one in eight boys of a brother. The practice was referred to as "remaking" the dead: a sharecropper in 1470 explained to the authorities that his son Antonio had the same name as a previous son who "died, and I remade him. [32]

A second striking difference between Italian Renaissance society and our own is the practice of wet nursing. Only the poorest women breast fed their own children. Rather, from shortly after birth, children were sent to a wet nurse, usually in the countryside, who breast-fed children for money, a woman whose own child had been weaned, or had

died, or had been passed on to another wet nurse. Sometimes household slaves acted as wet nurses. The child would remain in the countryside until they could eat solid food, at which point they returned to their family. It is not clear why parents adopted the practice. Some historians suggest it was because children were more likely to die in the first years of life, and so parents postponed emotional bonding with the child until that risk declined. Others point out that women had children so frequentlyâ€"on average, a child every eighteen months among the richâ€"that if they were to feed their own children they would be permanently locked in an exhausting cycle of childbirth and breastfeeding. Whichever explanation is valid, the idea of giving up a newborn baby to someone living miles away for the first few years of their life seems completely alien to us. [33]

Yet, at the same time, there is evidence that parents valued their children as individuals. Matteo Palmieri, a fifteenth-century Florentine historian, described in his best known work Della vita civile the period of life after weaning:

The child begins to make known his wishes and partly to express them in words. The whole family listens and the whole neighbourhood repeats his sayings . . . On his ways infinite hopes are founded, wonderful evidence is seen of subtle intelligence and keen memory.

This interest in the child as an individual is associated, in Palmieri's writing, with the desire for the child to succeed as a member of the Florentine ruling or middle class by acquiring literacy and numeracy. Fathers, he suggests, should realize the individual potential of their children by teaching them to read, forming letters perhaps from biscuits or fruit; in this way, the children could be expected to stay ahead of their peers. Contemporaries also argued that, as Philip Gavitt puts it,

If the man who acquires wealth and lands has no heirs, his labour has been in vain. In contrast, a man who leaves heirs never dies . . . [34]

Raising children and caring for them as individuals was here inseparable from success in business, itself part of developing a wealthy and respected family name through subsequent generations.

But this is not to say that wealthy parents thought of their children only in business terms. They were affected by deep grief when their children died. Giovanni Morelli recorded his prolonged anguish when his eldest son, Alberto, died at the age of nine. He reproached himself that, unwilling to accept how close to death his son was, he had not sent for a priest to perform the last rites. He also expressed remorse about their emotional relationship, telling himself that "you loved him . . . and never did you let him be happy in your love." Historian John Najemy notes that Morelli's contemporary Giovanni Rucellai "who, like Morelli, lost his father before he could know him, wrote in his memoirs . . . that â€˜it is said that the greatest love there is, is that of a father for his son.' [35]

Parents developing an emotional bond with their children therefore ran the real risk that the child would die before adulthood. In his work I Libri della Famiglia, Alberti, mentioned above, stages a debate on the topic between different viewpoints. One speaker vividly portrays parents' concern their young children:

Consider, you who hate to see them cry when they have fallen and hurt their hands, how much anguish it is to a father to think that more children perish at this age than at any other . . . In fact this first period of life . . . seems to be almost nothing but attacks of smallpox, measles and rose rash . . . Those little ones are often weighed down with some illness which you do not know yourself and which they are unable to explain to you . . . Even the little pains of children thus keep the soul of the father in agony.

But another responds, suggesting that the parent whose child has died should remember the good times and

reconcile themselves to the will of God: “if at some point in the course of childhood it pleases God to end your child’s days, I think it is the father’s duty rather to recall and to render thanks for the many joys and delights which the children have given him than to sorrow because the one who lent them to you has in his own time claimed them again.” What is more, he continues, life all too frequently involves persecution, oppression, and exile, and to die young is to escape all this: “Fortunate those who depart from so many trials and end their days young in the house of their fathers in our country.” The debate between the two characters reflects a wider ambivalence in Renaissance attitudes to children. [36]

One institution combined state involvement in the lives of children and a concern that children be cared for with what looks to us like striking coldness and even neglect on the part of parents. This was the foundling hospital, where abandoned children were cared for. At the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence, an institution managed by both the local state and church, almost two hundred children were accepted in 1466â€”just less than nine percent of the baptisms that year in Florence and its surrounding territory. One in three of the children came from Florence, and almost all of these were the children of slave women made pregnant by members of the families which owned them. The remaining children, however, came from the countryside, and were mostly the children of middle-income and poor people such as labourers and artisans. Many of these children would have been illegitimate, or their parents would not have been able to afford to raise them. But children were also abandoned for other reasons: one child was left because her mother had been widowed, had remarried, and her new husband did not want a child from her former marriage in the house. Parents did not necessarily intend to abandon their child permanently: many children were left with tokens by which they could be recognised if their parents came later to reclaim them. [37]

Almost all the children admitted to the Ospedale were babies between three hours and three weeks old. They stayed in the institution for six to twelve days, in which time they were fed by its in-house wet nurses, some of whom the Ospedale hired as wage labourers and some of whom they bought on the local slave market. They were then sent to wet nurses in the countryside and returned after weaning to be placed with foster parents. The Ospedale sought to eventually place the children with adoptive parents who would apprentice them to a trade: either the adoptive parents or the Ospedale itself provided girls with dowries so that they were able to marry. Such bodies marked a new involvement by the state in the support of the family as an institution. [38]

Illicit sexuality

Sexuality was only socially approved in Renaissance Italy if it took place within marriage, including, among poorer people, informal arrangements resembling marriage. Yet many men did not marry until around thirty, and women, particularly rich women, led secluded lives and were not sexually available to these unmarried men. Men in their twenties were sexually active in other ways. Some had sex with female slaves owned by their families; others had sex with prostitutes, some with nuns and, finally, some with other young men, or more precisely, with teenage boys. All these behaviors were condemned by the church and the state, and in Venice sodomy was punished by burning the perpetrator alive. Yet sex with nuns, prostitution and in Florence even sodomy were, while condemned, generally tolerated in practice.

Convents may seem a very odd place to begin a discussion of illicit sexuality. Yet sexual misbehaviour by nuns was a serious social problem in Renaissance Italy. In a society which took entirely for granted the truth of religion and the power of the prayers of the faithful, convents were as much a part of a city’s defences as its military. One abbess remarked that the prayers of a convent in which all the nuns remained celibate were more effective than two thousand horses, and the city of Florence subsidized the construction of convents. Yet many nuns had not entered convents because they had a vocation to sexual abstinence: rather, they were abandoned there by families without funds to provide them with a dowry. Many women, often from rich families, found themselves in this situation; in 1427, more than one woman in twenty in Florence was a nun. [39]

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Some convents were deeply spiritual places, but in others sexual activity was frequent and to some extent tolerated. Sex with a nun was a serious offence, as were other sexual acts which breached religious taboos, such as having sex in a church or with a Jew. Yet sources show there were prosecutions in dozens of Venetian convents in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and in many convents the numbers went into double figures. The convent of Sant' Angelo di Contorta became notorious; at one point the nuns were in the habit of going for picnics with young men on nearby islands, where they would have sex with the men. One nun became pregnant, but the child was raised alongside other foundlings the convent took in and so escaped notice. Twenty-four years later, another nun became pregnant; she was involved with two men and did not know which of them was the father. It also became clear that the abbess was involved in relationships with two men, one of them a convent employee. In the end the convent was closed down. [40]

But the evidence suggests that such a convent was the exception; prosecutions took place because their sexual misbehavior had become too public to ignore. In general, a certain level of sexual activity in convents was tolerated. The same combination of moral condemnation and de facto tolerance applied to prostitutes. (These statements apply to female prostitutes: while some teenage boys received generous gifts from male lovers, no evidence has so far emerged about male prostitution in this period.) Every city included a districtâ€"in Venice, several districtsâ€"characterised by taverns, street prostitution, and brothels. In Florence the city government itself established brothelsâ€"one in 1403 and two more in 1415â€"because it was concerned about the amount of sodomy in the city, and hoped that making female prostitutes available would reduce it. [41]

Regarding sodomy itself, there were wide variations between the responses of different city-states. Venice continued the traditional response of burning the offender, though distinguishing between active and passive offenders, with only the active partner usually executed. Sentences for passive partners included public whipping, banishment from the city, or having their nose cut off, and they might also have been left with permanent impairments as a result of torture. Complete legal records, which tell us the numbers of people prosecuted, have survived for two periods. The total number of cases for 1426–50 was 81, an average of just over three a year; for 1476–1500 the total was 196, an annual average of just under eight cases. [42]

If the aim of these penalties was to entirely suppress sex between men in Venice, they were unsuccessful. Evidence suggests that sex between males continued to be commonplace, particularly among young men and adolescents, and it was only when violence was involved that prosecutions occurred. Some areasâ€"a portico and the doorway of a churchâ€"were known to be places where young men met after dark, and the authorities ordered lanterns to be lit there to discourage this. Until 1420, Venetian law did not apply outside of the city itself, so that sodomy was not illegal on the ships of the substantial Venetian navy; the authorities commented that so much sodomy was taking place on the ships â€˜that it is surprising that divine justice has not sunk them.' [43]

Moral condemnation of sodomy in Florence, particularly by the church, was no less severe. Saint Bernardino of Siena took the traditional view that anyone could be tempted to commit the sin, warning the faithful that they should "not converse with any sodomite [or] heretic lest he contaminate you." [44] Sodomy was a grave sin and seen as a serious social problem, and from the 1320s Florentine law punished it with castration and death by burning. As in Venice, the level of convictions was lowâ€"only eight between 1352 and 1355, for exampleâ€"and prosecutions only took place in cases of violent rape or child abuse. But between the 1380s and 1430s, the approach of the Florentine state changed. Historian Michael Rocke argues that the expansion of Florence's power in this period led to "political and social demands for a more centralised and efficient system of justice". In particular, several state bodies were established to regulate matters of public order and morality:

The regime instituted citizen magistracies in these years to uncover and prosecute political conspiracies (1378), to regulate prostitution and administer municipal brothels (1403), to protect the inviolability and sexual purity of convents (1421), to enforce the norms of public office holding (1429) and, finally, to pursue and punish sodomy . . .

This expanded state involvement in personal life, which also included the creation in 1419 of the Ospedale degli Innocenti and in 1425 of the Dowry Fund, led in 1432 to the establishment of the Officers of the Night. This body regulated most cases of sodomy in Florence until its abolition in 1502. [45]

The law regarding sodomy had already been changed by this point: sources suggest that the penalties of the 1320s were considered so harsh that they were never used. Instead, from 1415, a first offence of sodomy was punished by a huge fineâ€"about five times what a skilled artisan earned in a yearâ€"with only the second offense being punished by execution. With the establishment of the Officers of the Night in 1432 the fine was greatly reduced though still large, and fines replaced execution so that only on a fifth offense might a person face the death penalty. In 1459 the fines were further reduced, and laborers and poor artisans were often only compelled to pay a small part of them. Death sentences were rare in practice, and actual executions rarer still: the Officers of the Night only condemned three people to die in their seventy years of existence, and only eight more were condemned by other bodies. Of these eleven sentences, sources suggest that only three were carried out. [46]

Punishments for sodomy in Florence were much less harsh than those in Venice, but the numbers prosecuted were vastly greater. Between 1406 and 1500, the Venetian authorities convicted 268 people, while in Florence almost three thousand were found guilty, ten times as many men in a much smaller city. Various innovations increased the numbers of convictions. Special boxes were placed in churches, in which people could leave anonymous written accusations. If a public accusation was made and a conviction resulted, the accuser received a quarter of the imposed fine. If a man freely confessed to sodomy, his fine was reduced by half. Michael Rocke comments on a further means of reducing punishment, and on the system as a whole.

If a person voluntarily turned himself in before he was implicated by other means, confessed his sexual relations and named his partners, then he was guaranteed full immunity from prosecution. Sodomy was the single crime for which the judiciary system in Florence granted immunity. This unique benefit for self-confessed sodomites is a telling indication of how far the regime was willing to go in order to cast its controls over sodomy more widely. [47]

Officially, sodomy was condemned, but the large numbers of men implicated and the relatively low level of punishment meant that it was more like an accepted practice for which men were taxed.

Being a sodomite in fifteenth-century Florence was, however, an entirely different thing from being a gay man today. For one thing, men who had committed sodomy were not a minority. Michael Rocke:

it can be roughly estimated that by the time they reached the age of thirty, at least one of every two youths in the city of Florence had been formally implicated in sodomy to this court alone [that is, the Office of the Night]; by age forty, at least two of every three men had been incriminated. [48]

This means, incidentally, that same-sex experience was not particularly characteristic of educated people or artists. As Rocke puts it, artists like Michelangelo and Da Vinci “were no more commonly involved in homosexual activity than were butchers or shoemakers.” In the words of a law of 1459, “it is evident how much sodomy is presently practised in this city, especially by artisans and the poor. [49]

A second difference from our conceptions of sexual identity is that a strict distinction existed, in people’s thinking and practice, between an active and a passive sodomite. In the case of men and women, we saw that in Renaissance Italy sex was not something two people did together, but something one person did to another. Likewise, court records make a clear distinction between the active partnerâ€"which here means a male who penetrates another anally, thrusts his penis between the other male’s thighs, or sucks the other male’s penisâ€"and the passive partner. This distinction was not based on personal preference, but on age. Ninety percent of those convicted for passive

sodomy were eighteen or under, with an average age of sixteen; 93 percent of those convicted for active sodomy were nineteen or older, with an average age of thirty-four. There was, then, a dividing line at about eighteen or nineteen, marked particularly by a young man growing a beard. Teenagers were expected to be passive, and men were expected to end a relationship with a boy who had “got too old.” For any man to be sodomised was disgraceful, but particularly for older men who had reached an age when they could assume responsible state positions; men could only become Officers of the Night themselves, for example, if they were over forty-five and married. [50]

Teenagers were stigmatised, as older men were not, as having abandoned their masculinityâ€”legal records refer to men using them “like a woman”. There are examples of the use of derogatory terms like “a bitch in heat,” though there is no evidence that they adopted feminine behaviour or mannerisms. Men who sodomised teenagers, meanwhile, as long as they took the active role, did not compromise their masculinity in any way. But, though teenagers faced more social condemnation than adult men involved in sodomy, they received much lighter penalties; for almost all of the seventy-year existence of the Office of the Night, it did not punish those aged under eighteen at all. [51]

It seems that the lives of male Florentines were typically divided into three stages. As teenagers they were pursued by young men in their twenties. In their twenties a small number married, while most had sex with prostitutes, servant or slave women, or teenage boys, sexual experiences which did not, in general, involve them in any long-term commitment. Around the age of thirty, however, most married and fathered children, and we have seen that financial commitment was a crucial aspect of marriage and parenthood, though a minority of men remained single throughout their lives. So, many men likely followed a course of experience similar to that of Francesco di Giuliano Benintendi. Denounced at the age of twenty for passive sodomy and at twenty-two and twenty-four for sodomising various boys, afterward he vanished from the judiciary records; in 1480, now aged thirty-five, he was married and had a son of six months. [52]

There were certainly many individual variations from this modelâ€”men who married at eighteen, married men who were discovered sodomising a teenager by their outraged wives, and men who never married and continued to practise sodomy. Some masters compelled servants and apprentices to have sex with them, while other teenagers sought out sodomy and many had several partners. Some boys had sex in return for money or presentsâ€”in any case, it was the convention that a man who took a teenager to an inn paid the billâ€”while others were involved in relationships that continued for years. Some relationships were close and caring, while others were exploitative; teenagers were accused of extorting large sums from men obsessed with them, while older men were accused of sexually exploiting teenagers. Active partners were on average much older than passive ones, physically stronger and with more social authority, in a society where much more violence than our own was tolerated: the last thing we are looking at here is some lost golden age of equality and liberated sexuality [53]

Yet neither are we looking at a society characterised by the gay oppression of our own time. Sex between males was not restricted to a minority. It was an aspect of life stages which many men experienced. The integration of sodomy into Florentine society is clear from the fact that parents often knew about their teenage son’s associations, and even facilitated them. For example, in 1460 four men were pursuing teenage Francesco di Marco Fei; as part of trying to seduce the son, they each sent his parents gifts of veal, barrels of olive oil, or clothing. In 1497, 28-year-old Attavanio di Giuliano Benintendi was accused of having slept with seventeen-year-old Antonio Giannini every night for several years, as part of a relationship which involved giving him clothes and money. Antonio’s parents were accused of knowing about the money and gifts, welcoming Attavanio into their home every evening, and even providing a bed for the couple. In some cases such an attitude may have reflected parents’ acceptance of a relationship important to their son. But religious figures also accused fathers of more or less pimping their teenage boys for cash, and amid the complex and competitive social networks of Renaissance Florence, where personal relationships and marriage always had a material side, it’s not hard to imagine that a good-looking teenage son, no less than a beautiful teenage daughter, might have had a role to play in advancing his family’s fortunes. [54]

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The beginning of capitalism

Even as early in its development as the Italian Renaissance, we can see some features of the relationship between capitalism and intimate life which were to remain relevant for centuries to come, some continuing to this day. An initial point is the ability of capitalism to completely transform the feudal society which preceded it. As Marx and Engels were to write in The Manifesto of the Communist Party in 1848, the capitalist ruling class “has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound human beings to their â€˜natural superiors,’ and has left no other nexus between one human being and another than naked self-interest...” While we do see evidence of marital and parental love, that description fits well socially mobile Renaissance merchants, who had overthrown feudal aristocrats to come to power, but now assessed the marriages of their children in terms of political advantage and hard cash. The transformative power of capitalism in the realm of ideasâ€”as Marx and Engels put it several pages later, “ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions... are swept away... All that is solid melts into air”â€”is powerfully illustrated by the case of sodomy in Florence. Acts which so shortly before had been punished by burning people alive now incurred a fine, most of which did not actually need to be paid, or in the case of young people resulted in no real punishment at all.

What emerged from that state of flux was a world where, as portrayed in the many examples cited by Machiavelli, people need not remain in the social rank into which they were born as lords or peasants. A great merchant lineage could rise, like the Medicis, from obscure origins in the thirteenth century to rule Florence for much of the fifteenth. It was possible, then, for people to gain some control over their own destiny, so that the characteristics of individual people became a matter of increasing interest. Children were to be valued to some extent in their own right, and to some extent as bearers of the family’s fortunes who must be equipped to compete for their place in the world.

A favorite theme of right-wing polemic in our century is the need to reduce the size and influence of the state, as if the state were incidental to capitalism, an avoidable parasitic growth. Yet the historical record makes plain that the state develops as part of capitalism from the very beginning, underpinning contracts between capitalists, stepping in to regulate or prevent disruptive social behaviour. The Italian Renaissance state expands, dealing with issues from dowries to abandoned children which had previously been the responsibility of the church or individual families. Indeed, for as long as capitalism has existed, we see that the state has also intervened to regulate the family and sexual behavior, even while it asserts that such things are “private” matters.

Finally, we have seen that, just as the Italian merchant class valued children both in themselves and as potential competitors who would prolong the lineage, so there was an ambiguity in attitudes to marriage. Marriage began to be about emotional satisfaction, and a man’s wife to be valued as a supporter and companion. Yet she was also of value as a way of linking family networks in the present and transmitting their wealth to legitimate heirs in the future. For workers these ambiguities, between wealth and power on the one hand and human affection on the other, did not exist. They married early, since they did not amass a dowry; their only real wealth lay in their ability to labour, and so a working woman’s skills were more important than a sum of money. Unlike the aristocracy, or even the merchant class, members of the working class did not depend for their social position on inherited wealth, so that marriage, childrearing, and personal relationships in general had the potential to become matters unconnected with money, questions purely of relations between human beings. The extent to which that potential was realisedâ€”how far workers did succeed in creating truly human relationshipsâ€”was to be a major theme through the centuries to come.

[1] See Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution, Penguin, London, 1991, 306–323.

[2] See Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution, Penguin, London, 1991, 306–323.

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[3] Charles Fourier, The Theory of the Four Movements, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 3, 124

[4] . Robert Owen, “From Lectures on an Entire New State of Society (1830): Marriage,” A New View of Society and Other Writings, Penguin, London, 1991, 323.

[5] Manfrez Herzer, Magnus Hirschfeld: Leben und Werk eines jüdischen, schwulen und sozialistischen Sexologen, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York, 1992, 32–33; Clara Zetkin, “Women’s Work and the Trade Unions,” Selected Writings, International Publishers, New York, 1984, 58.

[6] Dan Healey, Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 2001, 133; Frances Lee Bernstein, The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses, Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, 2007, 32–33, 103, 112.

[7] Support for same-sex marriage hits new high”, Washington Post, 5 March 2014.

[8] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 100; John M. Najemy, A History of Florence 1200–1575, Blackwell, Oxford, 2006, 240.

[9] David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch–Zuber, Tuscans and their Families: a Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427, Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 1985, 58, 103, 126, 129; Franco Franceschi, “The economy: work and wealth” in ed. ed. John M. Najemy, Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1300–1550, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2004, 127–143.

[10] Herlihy and Klapisch–Zuber, 21, 128, 129.

[11] Herlihy and Klapisch–Zuber, 129, 94.

[12] Herlihy and Klapisch–Zuber, 103; Guido Ruggiero, The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford, 1985.

[13] NiccolÃ² Machiavelli, The Prince, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961, 99–100; NiccolÃ² Machiavelli, Florentine Histories, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1988, 105.

[14] Najemy, History, 228.

[15] Herlihy and Klapisch–Zuber, 353.

[16] Sharon T. Strocchia, “Gender and Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities”, eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis, Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy, Longman, London/New York, 1998, 43?6.

[17] Stanley Chojnacki, “Daughters and Oligarchs: Gender and the Early Renaissance State” in Brown and Davis, 75–80.

[18] Stanley Chojnacki, “Daughters and Oligarchs: Gender and the Early Renaissance State” in Brown and Davis, 75–80.

[19] Michael Rocke, “Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy” in Brown and Davis, 157.

[20] Rocke, “Gender and Sexual Culture . . . ”, 165; Thomas Kuehn, “Person and Gender in the Laws” in Brown and Davis, 93; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 217.

[21] Rocke, “Gender and Sexual Culture . . . ”, 162.

[22] Najemy, Italy, 138; Rocke, “Gender and Sexual Culture . . . ”, 162–3.

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[23] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 87, 211; Ruggiero, 13; Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 1985, 19.

[24] Klapisch-Zuber, Women, 96; Richard C. Trexler, Public Life in Renaissance Florence, Academic Press, New York/London, 1980, 391.

[25] Robert C. Davis, “The Geography of Gender in the Renaissance” in Brown and Davis, 24–30

[26] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, Table 10.1; Klapisch-Zuber, Women, 41; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 216; Chojnacki, “Daughters”, 72.

[27] Ruggiero, 46.

[28] Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 230–1.

[29] Ruggiero, 63.

[30] Klapisch-Zuber, Women, 112.

[31] Klapisch-Zuber, Women, 158; Philip Gavitt, Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: the Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410–1536, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1990, 240; Table 19, 241.

[32] Klapisch-Zuber, Women, 99, 291, 301–2.

[33] Klapisch-Zuber, Women, 133–7; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 254.

[34] Gavitt, Charity, 276, 281–3.

[35] Najemy, History, 223.

[36] Renée Neu Watkins, The Family in Renaissance Florence: A Translation of I Libri della Famiglia by Leon Battista Alberti, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1969, 52–5.

[37] Gavitt, Charity, 193, 199, 206–10.

[38] Gavitt, Charity, 188–90, 243.

[39] Trexler, Public Life, 35; Chojnacki, “Daughters”, 72–5; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 58, 153.

[40] Ruggiero, 71–80.

[41] Ruggiero, 76; Davis, “Geography”, 31–2; Najemy, History, 246.

[42] Ruggiero, 121–8.

[43] Ruggiero, 134–9.

[44] Najemy, Italy, 111–3; Najemy, History, 247.

[45] Rocke, Friendships, 7, 23, 27–9.

[46] Rocke, Friendships, 31, 64, 78–79.

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[47] Rocke, Friendships, 4, 46, 49, 52.

[48] Rocke, Friendships, 115.

[49] Rocke, Friendships, 135–6.

[50] Rocke, Friendships, 89–92.

[51] Rocke, Friendships, 51-2, 107–10.

[52] Rocke, Friendships, 121.

[53] Rocke, Friendships, 163–70.

[54] Rocke, Friendships, 175–9.

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