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I totem e i tabù della sessualità giovanile
Educare a "emergere" nell'emergenza

Totems and taboos of youth sexuality
Educating to "emerge" within the emergency

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RIASSUNTO: Questo contributo indaga la relazione tra *desiderio* e *trasgressione* nella sessualità giovanile, sostenendo che tale binomio rimane centrale nella società contemporanea nonostante il declino apparente dei tabù tradizionali. Attraverso un approccio metodologico di tipo fenomenologico e dialettico, si esplora come le norme di genere persistano come strutture totemiche, influenzando i vissuti di identità, crisi e trasformazione nell'adolescenza e post-adolescenza oggi.

PAROLE–CHIAVE: sessualità, giovani, trasgressione, desiderio.

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the relationship between *desire* and *transgression* in youth sexuality, arguing that this binomial remains central in the contemporary society despite the apparent decline of traditional taboos. Through phenomenological and dialectical approaches, it explores how gender norms persist as totemic structures, shaping experiences of identity, crisis, and transformation in adolescent and post-adolescent contexts.

KEY–WORDS: sexuality, youth, transgression, desire.

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1. Introduction

The underlying hypothesis of this contribution is that the concepts of *desire* and *transgression*, particularly during adolescence and post-adolescence, are deeply interconnected. In order to detect signs of this connection within the relational dynamics of youth sexuality, it is considered essential to reflect on these two notions without ever treating them as radically distinct. This does not imply a simplistic identification or overlap between the two; rather, the approach taken is heuristic and methodological, rooted in the problematist perspective (Bertin, 2021), and proceeds along two lines: a) through phenomenological analysis (Banfi, 1973), the aim is to highlight the specific lived experiences of *desire* and *transgression* in the relational dynamics of youth sexuality in contemporary society; b) through the dialectical method (Bertin, Contini, 2004), the goal is to create a dialogue between two opposing narratives concerning the educational emergency related to the unpreparedness of education professionals in addressing emerging themes within youth sexuality. On the one hand, there is the narrative that supports the consolidation of a crisis and the end of transformative experiences of *desire* and *transgression* for today's youth; on the other, there is the perspective that identifies in these new experiences positive conditions for the emergence of new forms of existential protagonism.

We borrow from Sigmund Freud two concepts that enrich our reflection: totem and taboo (Freud, 1975). Totems and taboos are psychic devices that, since the dawn of human civilization, have served a protective function against the risk of internal violence and social conflict. From an evolutionary perspective, these symbolic tools were internalized by human beings to contain potential aggression arising within interpersonal relationships. For example, the worship of an animal or natural element served to reinforce the collective identity of a group, just as the prohibition of incest, rendered taboo, acted as a deterrent against sexual behaviors considered harmful to physical and social well-being within the community.

In light of this, it can be argued that Victorian civilization was marked by a strong link between *desire* and *transgression*, a connection further reinforced by Christian tradition. As modernity advanced and absolute moral norms gradually weakened, many old taboos, especially those

related to sexuality, appeared to lose their force. However, it is plausible to suggest that the desire-transgression binary has not disappeared, but rather has been regenerated and assumed new forms. In contrast to a prevailing psychological interpretation in the scientific literature, which holds that today's youth are less *transgressive* than in the past, one might ask whether new, less recognizable modes of expressing *desire* and *transgression* are instead emerging. What are the current forms of *transgression* within youth sexual relationships? And how is their relationship with *desire* being redefined today?

2. Masculinity and femininity between totem and taboo

We begin with a significant phenomenon: the categories of "masculine" and "feminine" are no longer experienced with the rigidity of the past. For young people, these two categories are certainly less rigid, but it is argued here that a certain type of masculinity and femininity still exists that functions in a totemic way and has significant repercussions on the relational dynamics of youth sexuality, relegating all other expressions of these two categories to the domain of the taboo.

Today, when young people are invited to reflect on this issue, they often identify with a perspective that sees masculinity and femininity not as fixed or opposing categories, but as endpoints of a continuum that includes numerous intermediate shades of gender expression (Bignamini, 2023). Moreover, positioning along this continuum is not perceived as a definitive choice, but as a fluid condition, subject to change depending on personal experiences and life stages.

Nonetheless, it is believed that despite this theoretical openness to plurality, binary categories of masculine and feminine still exert a strong normative grip on the collective imagination. As a result, even young people who claim to embrace non-essentialist views may still end up categorizing themselves and others based on how closely they conform to traditional gender norms—often with implicit value judgments attached.

To further investigate this phenomenon, it is useful to recall Franco Fornari's (1977) theory of affective codes, which illuminates how biological and cultural elements intertwine in constructing the meanings attributed to gender. This theoretical framework also proves effective when

applied to the analysis of sexual codes, offering a valuable lens through which to understand the ambivalences that permeate contemporary imaginaries of youth sexuality.

The codes of masculinity and femininity are partial and complementary: the former is "penetrative" and driven toward reproduction, achievable only through desire and pleasure, and therefore tends to avoid disinterested affective bonds that weaken its generative power; the latter, complementary to the former, is soft and receptive, animated by the capacity to give life and governed by the logic of enjoyment (Fornari, 2011). The masculine code is thus sustained by the imperative of desire; to be truly male, one must desire. The feminine code, by contrast, is linked to enjoyment—the opposite of desire—and, as Massimo Recalcati notes in his Lacanian reading (Recalcati, 2023), is close to whim. The widespread belief among youth that gender identity is formed through a complex process involving personal "choices" (Bignamini, 2023) clashes with the persistence of two totemic devices corresponding to the radicalization of the original masculine and feminine codes.

Recent scientific literature suggests the existence of a "male crisis" among new generations. For instance, Richard Reeves (2022) argues that young men in the Western world are experiencing a deep existential struggle due to the perceived loss of power brought about by the weakening of the traditional patriarchal system. Hanna Rosin (2012) links the "decline of men" to economic changes that favor emotional intelligence and communication skills, traits typically associated with femininity.

In this study, it is argued that a potential crisis is indeed unfolding, precisely because adolescence constitutes a formative phase during which masculinity is internalized by young males in the form of masculinization, thereby impoverishing it (Maltese, 2024). Thus, masculinity and masculinization are not the same; the masculine code has traditionally functioned by conflating these two concepts. What is commonly described as a "male crisis," often framed negatively, might instead be interpreted as a complex and demanding phase with the potential to generate either reactionary and aggressive responses or transformative possibilities—as is true of any genuine crisis. It is proposed here to interpret this moment also as the eruption of a form of youth transgression aimed at becoming a different kind of male. Rather than speaking of the "decline of men," it may be more accurate to speak of the "transgression of masculinity," which,

through new relational dynamics among youth, is destabilizing the totem of masculinity that once defined the masculine code.

Hence, the gradual weakening of the masculinity-masculinization totem is occurring thanks to youth transgressive experiences that take political, social, and cultural forms within the educational emergency related to deviance (Sirignano, 2019), as well as experiences that promote relational models centered on care and empathy.

3. Comparing youth experiences of transgression

Let us now consider some concrete examples. Among the new antisocial transgressive male experiences, the phenomena of Incel and Red Pill online communities stand out. The taboo of male virginity in young adulthood—complementary to the totem of penetrative and reproductive masculinity—is brought to the forefront in these spaces with assertiveness and rebellious intent, taking the form of a transgressive act. A 2023 qualitative study (Lamoureux, Boislard, 2023) analyzes how adult male virgins are represented in internet macro memes, suggesting that these memes offer insight into the representation of male virginity among young adults. The study emphasizes the power of digital content in shaping sexual identity and suggests new research paths, including those concerning adult female virgins. It reveals that male virginity in this age group is often perceived as deviant from the social clock, or the societal expectation of when sexual activity should begin. This condition is frequently experienced with discomfort and frustration.

Internationally, several recent contributions address the youth Incel and Red Pill phenomenon, while in Italy, Annalisa Dordoni and Sveva Maria Magaraggia (2021) fill a gap in the literature with a seven-month digital ethnography of Italian forums and social networks.

Their research shows how Incel and Red Pill online groups construct and reinforce alternative, yet violence-infused, misogynistic, and victimized models of masculinity. The study examined the languages, symbols, and narratives used by young men in these virtual spaces, which form part of the so-called "manosphere." These men self-identify as "betas," subordinate to the dominant "alpha" male model: virile, physically attractive, economically successful, and sexually active. Within these groups, male-

female relationships are described as a sexual marketplace governed by the rigid "LSM law" (Look, Status, Money), which asserts that only those with certain attributes can "access" sexual partners.

According to the authors, this hypercompetitive and hierarchical view of attraction fosters a deeply victimized narrative. Incels, in particular, feel rejected by women due to their appearance or lack of status, and blame women for their social and sexual isolation. Red Pill adherents claim to have "awakened" to the power dynamics they believe are at play, asserting that women are dominant and manipulative, and presenting themselves as holders of an uncomfortable truth about gender relations. Both groups use highly sexist and dehumanizing language to refer to women, often labeling them as "NP" (non-persons) and depicting them as sexual objects or adversaries to be managed.

This is a critical moment, as what has been described here as a negative transgressive phenomenon opposing the masculinity totem is, at the same time, fueled by anxiety about the growing spaces of freedom and power being claimed by women. This dynamic invites reflection on how totemic and taboo structures are neither fixed nor dogmatic. These transgressive masculinities may, in fact, conceal not a rejection of the dominant model, but a value-laden aspiration to replicate it through symbolic and verbal violence.

Nevertheless, there also exist forms of transgression that allow one to inhabit masculinity rather than negate it. In Italy, since the second decade of the 2000s, the term "bromance" has gained traction, borrowed from British youth culture. Bromance describes dynamic and emotionally expressive relationships between male friends that defy easy categorization.

These relationships are characterized by closeness, empathy, and emotional openness without necessarily implying a sexual dimension. The emergence of the term in youth imaginaries signals a vibrant form of transgression whereby young men allow themselves to embrace less monolithic and stereotyped masculine identities (Maltese, 2024).

Another relevant practice is cross-dressing, which in recent years has become more visible among youth. It conveys the idea that gender expression can deviate from traditional norms through personal aesthetic choices. While not a new phenomenon, its disruptive and transgressive potential today lies in its identity function and its challenge to binary

views of gender and sexuality. This fluidity is visually embodied by popular young artists such as Rosa Chemical and Achille Lauro.

The gender fluidity movement asserts the right to narrate one's personal story and seek supportive communities, particularly among those experiencing similar discomfort (Burgio, Lopez, 2023). As such, it also reflects the classical traits of adolescent crisis, now extending into early adulthood. This crisis represents both existential experimentation and distress. An increasing number of young influencers use their uniqueness as a strength, fostering supportive communities in contrast to individualism. Still, the transgression they embody must be managed and channeled, like all transgressive experiences. The struggle of growing up is a value that cannot be abolished; there is a risk that young audiences may absorb peer narratives as simplistic and dogmatic shortcuts in constructing their own identities.

This paper contends that the latest developments in the youth gender identity revolution reflect a broader tendency to totemize what remains, in many respects, taboo. This aligns with a contemporary dynamic in which the injunction to enjoy intensifies the challenges of living one's sexuality, embedding it within a paradoxical command that is increasingly difficult to navigate (Fabbri, 2024).

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