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Homosexualities, Homoparentalities

BOOK REVIEW

Alessandra Lemma and Paul E. Lynch (Eds.), **Sexualities: Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspectives**. Routledge, 2015.

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Sexualities may be read, in its entirety, as a choral attempt to unfreeze some psychoanalytic assumptions that, drawing upon a normative understanding of the oedipal resolution, have deprived sexuality of its historicity, ultimately disavowing its inherently fluid, enigmatic and ego-alien qualities. Contributors to this book variously articulate the importance of divesting sexuality of the illusion of fixity and normality, and reinvesting it with the centrality and plasticity well understood by Freud, but then lost in the American ego-psychology and British object-relations traditions - the father and mother of a psychoanalytic progeny often ill-at-ease with the sexed body and the vagaries of desire.

This collections of essays, opened by a historical contextualisation of psychoanalytic homophobia (Dagmar Herzog), is structured in three thematic sections: “Foundational concepts for a contemporary approach to sexualities”, “Homosexuality, and “Perversion revisited”. It is rich, varied and current in its theoretical and clinical references to sexualities and symptoms increasingly relevant in the contemporary Western society. These include atrophy of desire (Marilia Aisenstein and Donald Moss), variety of understandings of perversion (Heather Wood), unsymbolised manifestations of traumatic aspects of sexuality (Avgi

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Saketopoulou) and newly recombined sexual identities such as “bears” and “metrosexuals” (Vittorio Lingiardi). Overall, the theme of homosexuality takes centre stage. The editors explain this choice on account of the fact that “psychoanalytic thinking in this domain has not developed as much as it needs to” (p. 13). Various contributors (Nicola Barden, Peter Fonagy and Elisabeth Allison; Vittorio Lingiardi) acknowledge that sexual orientation is not inherently aligned with gender identity and that understanding sexuality is about exploring the subjective meaning, history, conflicts and gradients active in each individual’s psychosexual development, whatever the sex or gender of subjects and objects of desire. This change of perspective dissolves the traditional binary view of sexuality and allows us to explore the dimension of alterity in desire beyond the biological notion of sexed difference, into which it had long collapsed.

This comes at a cost and produces new lines of intrapsychic conflicts-less based on repression of the drives than on anxiety around loosening of repression (or changing lines of repression) and nostalgia for the dissolving patriarchal symbolic order. Extending the reflection on these transformations to the issue of transsexuality, for instance, Moss’ thought-provoking chapter conveys the poignant predicament of the mother of a thirteen-years-old child transitioning from female to male and the loss of orientation experienced by the analyst and the patient in working with this clinically. This chapter also reflects - as does Lingiardi when he addresses the complexity of relations between sexual orientation and gender identity - on the inevitable interplay between fluidity and fixity, integration and splitting. Moss points out that a genuine recognition of the very existence of such dialectic pre-empties the possibility of crediting any given map with the illusion of neutrality.

It is precisely because sexualities are now increasingly regarded as “disorienting” that psychoanalytic maps need redrawing, so that they can be receptive to the variety of situations that as clinicians we are expected to recognise and work with. Contributors to this volume mostly pursue this objective from within the psychoanalytic tradition *sensu stricto*, bar a few references to Lacanian and Jungian ideas, or to cultural studies (as the reader may find in the chapters by Fonagy and Allison; Barden; Lynch; Saketopoulou; Lemma). I regard this choice both as a strength and a limitation of this volume. On one hand, it is important for psychoanalysis to look inward, to consider what revision its body of theories needs and what has to be discarded, and to continue drawing on the strength of its clinical vantage point. On the other, it is also important to acknowledge that the impetus for change has been exogenous, coming both from other psychoanalytic traditions (Lacanian and post-jungian) and from feminist, queer and cultural studies, probably to an extent in which the contamination is irreversible and the archipelago of perspectives is converging to form a new territory. For instance, some contributions convincingly highlight the important shift that may be achieved if we consider sexual practices, including some of those usually associated with perversion, as symbolic of unmet aspects of one’s psyche and as purposeful for the unfolding and



integration of one's self, rather than in terms of self-destructiveness, evacuation urges or compulsive repetition of trauma. What I find missing, however, is the recognition - and therefore the dialogue that may usefully ensue - that this insight reflects the teleological viewpoint that is key to a Jungian approach.

One particular chapter stands out in my opinion as a successful case of *creatively inhabiting* this new territory, where different theoretical traditions meet. It is the riveting and very well written contribution on the purposefulness of perverse sexuality as a portal to unrepresentable psychic states (Saketopoulou). This draws indeed on the notions of "ego-shuttering" and "coming undone" put forward by the literary theorist Leo Bersani with regard to transgressive sexual practices, with the same source also referenced by Lynch (albeit not woven into the clinical work he presents) in its paragraph on the "dark continent" of anal sexuality. The latter represents one of the important openings contained in this book towards a conceptual revision of forms of sexualities, to which clinicians may at time struggle to be receptive, due less to lack of empathy than to inadequacy of symbolic containers for thinking about them. Such difficulties may also be compounded by negative emotional reactions (such as disgust) in the countertransference, as Woods lucidly explores in her chapter on "Working with problems of perversion". Freud's discomfort around the topic of anal sexuality also accounts for this "missed object" in psychoanalytic literature, whose recognition, in fact leads to ascribe to men too - whether with male or female partners - the implications of the presence of sexual pleasures and specific vulnerabilities around internal organs.

The psychoanalytic source referenced by most contributors to this volume is probably Laplanche's theory of otherness, according to which sexuality is inherently experienced as alien as it originates developmentally from the enigmatic, unconscious message of the other in response to the baby's primitive experiences. No good enough mirroring could spare this sense of incongruence and excess of sexuality, arising out of early parental implantations, which in adult life fuels desire towards a sexual partner "with whom to express, share and potentially resolve sexual feelings" (p. 49, Mary Target). Target also points out that, in this model, "it is only when [sexual] feelings have been taken in and accepted by another that they can feel authentically part of the self" (p. 50). Sexuality, therefore, compels an opening to otherness. Whereas Target adds that this other might be there just in fantasy ("The other has to be physically available or imagined to be so", p. 51), Lemma's clinical material leads her to argue that, for some individuals, "only action that had a physical impact was felt to be able to alter their experience of their body in a sexually aroused state" (p. 201). Crucially, she adds that, in individuals suffering from severe deficit of bodily mirroring, sexual conflicts may not be worked through exclusively in the transference.

This model is then developed in relation to carers' mirroring of same sex desire in children, whose specific failures and impact on psychosexual development are discussed by a number of contributors, with important implications on the



therapist's handling of countertransference. These include Lynch, who focuses on anxiety and shame engendered by mirroring of same sex desire, possibly leading children to develop it only in a secretive or transgressive fashion; Leezah Hertzmann, for whom the internal heterosexual couple may represent a non-identifiable with object, posing a burden on a same-sex couple in terms of defensive rigidity of roles and sense of rejection between partners; and Lemma, who considers issues of bodily self-representation and the use of prostitutes to make up for the mirroring failures that may have caused them.

In sum, this book offers an important contribution to the revision of psychoanalytic thinking on sexualities, or as Fonagy and Allison put it more radically, to the effect of “embracing de-legitimation, the wish to make strange, to counteract”, without which a “genuinely mentalizing approach to subjectivity”, that “eschews assumptions” could not be achieved (p. 135). In this spirit, I would suggest that the use by psychoanalysis of the word “intimacy”, which recurs in this volume, should also be subject to critical scrutiny. For instance, Lynch's chapter on gay male sexuality explores the difficulty for some gay men “to integrate intimacy with sex” as a result of excessive anxiety and shame and “to relegate the sexual to fantastic expression with unfamiliar or denigrated others (e.g., in anonymity, with strangers etc.)” (p. 143). He contrasts the capacity to be in a stable relationship with the enjoyment of more impersonal sex and ascribes intimacy only to the former.

In fact, the etymology of intimacy refers to the superlative of “internal”, that is beyond the comparative “interior”. Intimacy is the “most internal” space of an individual, which according to the philosopher Jullien (2013) is very different from emotional attachment, can be experienced, also sexually, with a stranger and is inherently conducive to a dialectical reversal into the creation of a shared, most internal space with an other. This other is not necessarily the one I love or with whom I make a pact as a couple, but the other with whom such innermost space may be found, albeit fleetingly, in a situation where transgression of customary boundaries may also allow an experience of transcending one's ego. Of course, impersonal sex might lack of intimacy, but that can also be the case with stable relationships, as we know from clinical practice and from life in general. Intimacy ultimately depends on the subject's capacity to access a “most internal” space and to experience it with an other.

After reading this stimulating book, I was left thinking that the recognition of the incommensurability of pleasure and excitement with ego-reassuring and defensive notions is among the most challenging tasks for a contemporary psychoanalytic approach to sexualities. Contributors to this volume, among the most authoritative explorers of this topic, show that, once the aspiration to normative regulation of desire is abandoned, psychoanalysis can become again an important voice in the archipelago.



Reference

Jullien, F. (2013). *De l'intime. Loin du bruyant Amour*. Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle.