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Title: *Fifty Shades*, Feminism and Gender Stereotypes: Notes on Researching BDSM

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 3 (2016)

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Publication date: December 2016

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, “Open Contributions”

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/11-fifty-shades-feminism-and-gender-stereotypes-notes-on-researching-bdsm/>

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Abstract: In this article I develop some reflections on my research on BDSM (bondage, domination and submission, sadism and masochism) in Italy. I comment the success of the book *Fifty Shades* paralleled by a tepid welcome received from the BDSM community of Milan, Italy. Empirical research on BDSM in Italy is, and was, not widespread; I briefly present the existing academic literature. Then, I reflect on the connections between BDSM and feminism both internationally and in the Italian context, starting from the sex wars of the 1980s. I discuss the total absence of the topic of feminism from the interviews and the participant observations I conducted with BDSM practitioners. I consider the traditional absence of feminism and gender studies from the Italian academia and the infrequent yet growing links between them. In general, BDSM remains an under-researched topic, in Italy as elsewhere. It is considered a marginal sexual practice or identity, but through it we can observe wider-ranging phenomena, like the reproduction or challenging of societal gender differences.

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***Fifty Shades*, Feminism and Gender Stereotypes: Notes on Researching BDSM**

LAURA ZAMBELLI

As a researcher focusing on bondage, domination, discipline and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM), I have been invited by the *g/s/i* editors to share some considerations on the topic. The 2015 issue of *g/s/i* concerned several aspects of domination, gender stereotypes, feminism, and all aspects which highlight fascinating features of BDSM. I have been addressing these issues, as well as the famous *Fifty Shades* trilogy, since starting my research on BDSM a few years ago.¹ These comments are partially the result of my doctoral research and partially of research conducted thereafter.

The Fifty Shades phenomenon

The launch of *Fifty Shades* in Italy has been followed and accompanied by a range of different phenomena as well as an increase in the activities of the BDSM community. I am presenting these facts together, yet without indicating a causal link.²

First, social media, magazines, and media extensively reported news about the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. This was replicated when the film was released in theatres. This produced the result of a heightened degree of interest towards BDSM and kinky sexual practices for both readers and the general audience of cinema goers. Gradually, in many bookstores, copies of the trilogy were well-displayed on the most visible shelves.

Just after the book launch, I was conducting fieldwork in the heterosexual BDSM community of Milan, and I registered a widespread contempt, or at best an absence of interest and a sense of superiority, towards *Fifty Shades*. In general, those who practiced BDSM deemed it inaccurate and banal. Some found it poorly-written (and there are, indeed, a few sentences repeated unchanged throughout the series of books). The most common remark was that *Fifty Shades* was not accurately depicting the reality of BDSM as it was for them, since it described abuses in a relationship, rather than a consensual and joyfully embraced sexual practice or lifestyle.

Since that time, I have noticed an increase in the range and variety of activities organised by BDSM practitioners in the city. Through social media and face-to-face interviews, I observed that the number of peer rope or bondage workshops was increasing, as was the frequency of happy hours and social meetings. I had the impression that the BDSM scene was flourishing and developing further. At the beginning of my fieldwork, there was a lone monthly meeting in Milan to which BDSM practitioners had an open invitation to attend and where they could drink, chat, and meet new partners. All the regulars who attended BDSM parties in clubs usually attended, month after month. After a while, though, the younger practitioners felt the need to develop their own space and time, and they organised a new meeting solely for those under 35, a gathering that still takes place. This, and the slant given to the event by the organisers, had the effect of drawing younger people interested in BDSM and kinky practices.

¹ I am particularly thankful to Ellen Nerenberg, who gave me the possibility to update previously published material on BDSM and gender stereotypes. See Laura Zambelli, "BDSM in Italy: Analyzing Stereotypes about Gender, Sexuality and the Body," in *Gender, Sexuality and the Body: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Sofia Aboim and Pedro Vasconcelos (Lisbon: Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, 2014), 92–104.

² A causal link between *Fifty Shades* and the opening up of discourses on different sexualities is suggested by Lynn Comella, "Fifty Shades of Erotic Stimulus," *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 3 (2013): 563–66.

Researching BDSM, sexuality and gender in Italy

The research of any kind (sociological, anthropological, etc.) on BDSM in Italy is very scarce. It was clear to me from the beginning of my sociological research that BDSM as a research field would not receive wide acceptance. When addressed, it was considered as part of the field of psychology. Besides my own, I know of the existence of only two published essays on BDSM. One of these publications focuses on “participants’ definitions of their sexual experiences and the construction of sexuality and sexual pleasure” from a psychological perspective, and is based on online interviews.³ The second is a theoretical analysis of BDSM located at the intersection of philosophy and sociology that focuses on BDSM as the relationship between pain and pleasure.⁴ This scarcity of research does not, in my opinion, reflect the absence of the phenomenon in the country, but merely the scarcity of academic interest in it or the difficulty of securing funding to conduct research on the topic.

Feminism and BDSM

The third issue I would like to address is the relationship between feminism and BDSM. As I have discussed elsewhere, the debate on their compatibility, which dates back at least to the 1970s, focuses on the nature of BDSM as either reproducing or disrupting some features of patriarchy.⁵ The feminist debate that developed in Italy differed from those that unfolded in the UK and the USA. In fact, at least during the 1980s and 1990s, sado-masochism was en bloc rejected by Italian feminists and, in particular, lesbian feminists. In the UK and USA, the ranks supporting BDSM as an empowering practice for women were more numerous. In Italy, lesbian sado-masochism, and in particular the identification of the ‘butch’ with a male figure, or the practice of BDSM outside of the bedroom and in the public sphere, were considered symptoms of collusion with patriarchy.⁶

Feminism in Italy still possesses a hybrid status between the taboo and the insult. As Di Cori and Barazzetti have remarked, women’s studies arrived in Italy at a later point in time than some other western countries and, further, suffered from a lack of recognition by and in the academy.⁷ To this day, the label can conjure an embittered woman, possibly a lesbian separatist. Gender and sexuality studies, as institutional entities, encounter difficulties in becoming established in universities. The incomplete institutionalization of gender and sexuality studies in the Italian academy can be partially characterized by the relatively late (or recent) founding of the gender section of the Italian Sociological Association (AIS), which was founded no more than five years ago.

I was therefore not surprised during the interviews conducted in relation to my fieldwork when no one mentioned feminism in connection with practices of domination/submission. While it seemed clear that younger practitioners may not have been exposed to developments in feminism of the late 1970s, I was more puzzled by the absence in responses from older research participants, both women and men. I asked Leah, who was 45 at the time of the interview, directly about the role feminism had had (or not had) both in her life as well as in the exploration of BDSM practices with her male partner.

³ See Elena Faccio, Claudia Casini, and Sabrina Cipolletta, "Forbidden Games: The Construction of Sexuality and Sexual Pleasure by BDSM 'players,'" *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 16, no. 7 (2014): 752.

⁴ See Nicoletta Landi, "BDSM. Ars erotica tra dolore e piacere," *Rivista di sessuologia* 35, no. 4 (2011): 261–67.

⁵ See Laura Zambelli, "Feminism and BDSM: empirical findings and theoretical debates in US, UK and Italy," *INSEP—Journal of the International Network for Sexual Ethics and Politics* (Forthcoming 2016).

⁶ Francesca Bettini and Antonella Nestola, "Il lesbismo e la pornografia," *Bollettino del C.L.I.*, no. Ottobre/Novembre (1986): 5–12.

⁷ See Di Cori, Paola, and Donatella Barazzetti. *Gli studi delle donne in Italia. Una guida critica*. Roma: Carocci, 2001.

Leah: Well, actually, I asked myself that—this [which seemed a] doubt, this contradiction. I mean, I'm a cultured woman, my politics are left-wing, well, not with a past of raging feminism, but still...

Laura: You were part of a generation that experienced feminism...

Leah: Yes, and I was, I was not in the first feminism, but still in '77 popular slogans were "my uterus is mine and I'm in charge of it!", "a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle", and all that, right?⁸ Well, so I asked myself, as long as I described myself a man's submissive, I asked "but how...[is this possible]?"...and I arrived at the conclusion that I am mature, meaning that that even in my being helpful and obliging, because I am always like that, I can allow myself to be obliging and helpful because I am a grown-up, an adult. And so my being helpful is a strong position...because I can allow myself to care for somebody else, because I am already strong myself. [...] If you talk about eroticism and all that [...] Well, one can also leave the clichés at the door, right? So, if I like my hair to be pulled and all that, it's not so that I feel diminished, I mean, after all one has to recognize a few things, like impulses, fantasies...I'm a person, a cultured person, at work I'm a certain kind of person, with friends I'm a certain kind of person, and if in a relationship with a man etc. etc. there are moments in which...I give you the power, it's ok for me. This doesn't invalidate anything of what I am in the other contexts, in the other moments of my life.

Leah starts from the assumption that she and her partner are equal in the relationship, besides some wider differences between men and women, because she is a "strong advocate of the existence of gender differences."⁹ Since Leah negotiates a BDSM relationship within a consensual framework in which she feels equal to her partner, BDSM is acceptable for her.

Since the 2000s, and in some cases even before, feminist debates started including BDSM and other sexual practices into their scenario of "acceptable practices."¹⁰ Younger feminists and groups formed more recently have not been included in my doctoral research; yet I have the impression that BDSM and kinky practices are considered taboo less and less. The meaning attached to them is changing and allows for positive values. If we compare this to the almost completely unified front against BDSM of the 1980s-1990s, the difference is evident and BDSM appears as a clearly more accepted feminist practice today than it once was.¹¹

Gender stereotypes and BDSM

In her article in this journal of last year, Nerenberg cites my research from 2014 in which I maintained that BDSM in Italy reproduced rather than challenged sexual and gender stereotypes.¹² I was at the first stages of the research then, and the fieldwork and the interviews fortunately continued thereafter. I expanded my understanding of BDSM in relation to sexual and gender stereotypes. Many younger BDSM practitioners explored their sexual and gender identity through the practice of BDSM. Ursula, for example, 23 years old at the time of the interview, explored her femininity, masculinity, gendered identity as well as her sexual preferences:

⁸ "My uterus is mine and I'm in charge of it!" ("L'utero è mio e me lo gestisco io!") is a popular feminist slogan. The following phrase is also a popular feminist slogan.

⁹ The original Italian version is "differenza di genere," although Leah probably referred to the theory of sexual difference. She explains it as a qualitative difference between men and women, which does not lead to a hierarchical positioning; women and men are essentially different but equals.

¹⁰ See Monia Dragone et al., eds., *Il movimento delle lesbiche in Italia* (Milano: Il dito e la luna, 2008).

¹¹ My research did not include more recent developments of international and local feminisms, which, I am sure, conceptualize BDSM also as empowering and, eventually, a manifestation of female agency.

¹² See Ellen Nerenberg, "The Fifty Shades of (the) Grey (Zone), Or, the Absent BDSM," *gender/sexuality/italy* 2 (2015). See also Zambelli, "BDSM in Italy," 92–104.

I essentially hated my body, yes, I didn't accept myself as a woman, eventually I thought of becoming an FtM [female to male], to transition, then luckily I got out of this phase and identified again with the female gender [...]. [By] having relationships with more people and widening my sexual vision, I realized I was comfortable with my body once again. [...] I had several experiences with women, I thought I was lesbian, that is, I just felt like a "butch." Now I feel a lot like a "femme," instead!

As Ursula, other women, and less often men, using negotiating tools offered by BDSM, scrutinize their sexual preferences and gender identity. The attitude of negotiating many different aspects of sessions and practices, in order to please oneself and the other(s), constitutes a useful exercise for further extending such negotiation to other personal spheres.

BDSM remains an under-researched topic, in Italy as elsewhere. It is considered a marginal sexual practice or identity, but through it one can observe wider-ranging phenomena, like the reproduction or challenging of societal gender differences.

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