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Special Issue

Scientia Sexualis and Historiography of Sexuality

Aldo Mieli, Italian Historian of Sciences and Gay Rights Activist: The Will and Desire to Knowledge

Paola Castellan¹ [<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1814-870X>]
Anna C. Zielinska² [<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0300-7297>]

Abstract:

The Italian historian of science Aldo Mieli is one of the key figures in the new “sexual science”, which emerged in several European countries at the beginning of the twentieth century. Founder and editor-in-chief of the journal *Rassegna di studi sessuali* (1921-1928), his role in Italy can be compared to that of Magnus Hirschfeld in Weimar Germany. This paper has three aims, two historical and one philosophical. First, we present the complex life of Mieli, drawing on published and unpublished sources. Second, we present the attempt to create in Italy also a community of young researchers who would reflect on sexuality and homosexuality without prejudice – interrupted by an early arrival of fascism. Finally, we claim that for many of those who do not recognize themselves in the dominant heterosexual norms, the new “sexual science” brought a hope one of suppressing arbitrary prejudices and of bringing a richer and more diverse knowledge of human sexuality, and thus of human condition.

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Introduction

The emergence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of “sexual science”, a discipline associating biomedical, psychological and sociological knowledge, creates a point of convergence between the history of sciences and the history of the LGBT movements. The early works on homosexuality by Johann Casper, Carl Westphal and Richard von Krafft-

¹ Paola Castellan is currently a PhD student in sociology at the University of Lorraine, at the research institute TETRAS. CLSH – 23 Boulevard Albert I^{er} – 54000 Nancy (France). E-mail: paola.castellan@univ-lorraine.fr. The article is based upon the work made by Paola Castellan in her Master dissertation in the philosophy and history of sciences, done under the supervision of Anna C. Zielinska, within the Master program Madelhis (Castellan 2023).

² Anna C. Zielinska is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Lorraine, Nancy, France & member of Archives Henri Poincaré. 91, av. de la Libération, 54000 Nancy. E-mail: anna.zielinska@univ-lorraine.fr

Ebing,³ based on real case studies and favoring the interview method, aroused the interest not only of the medical community, but also of many educated homosexuals, who realized the emancipatory power of a scientific and naturalistic approach to the study of sexual orientation (Escherich 2021).

The relationship established between sexual science and homosexuality⁴ was therefore not exclusively one-way and subjugating (Foucault 1976), but it, on the contrary, took another turn, characterized by mutual influence. This is particularly visible in the numerous scientific references in Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' pamphlets from the second half of the nineteenth century, advocating sexual reforms (*Forschungen über das Rätsel der mannmännlichen Liebe/Studies on the Riddle of Male-Male Love*) (Brooks 2012). This German lawyer and activist became influential upon authors such as Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll, who frequently cited him in their studies. By the turn of the twentieth century, Ulrichs' legacy had been taken up by the Berlin physician Magnus Hirschfeld, who indeed collected, edited and published Ulrichs' pamphlets in 1898 for the first time in one volume (Ulrichs 1994). The same Hirschfeld founded the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee (WhK, Scientific-Humanitarian Committee) in Berlin in 1897 and the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft in 1919. These two institutional moves were among the most incisive attempts to make sexology an autonomous science aimed at 'depsychiatrising' homosexuality.

In Italy, a Jewish, socialist and homosexual historian of sciences Aldo Mieli (1879-1950) had attempted to replicate Hirschfeld's reformist experiment, despite the fact that the "will to silence" (*volontà di tacere*, rather than will to knowledge) regarding sexual issues was omnipresent in this country (Benadusi 2005a). Mieli opened up a scientific debate on sexuality and the homosexual question in the journal *Rassegna di studi sessuali*, which he founded in 1921. His case is all the more interesting in that the *Rassegna* was founded only a year before fascism came to power. In a very short moment in time, two opposite phenomena occurred and can be studied in parallel: on the one hand, strategic efforts and compromises adopted to carve out a place in the public debate and, on the other, blatant realization how the dictatorship progressively hindered and repressed the "will to knowledge".

A Biographical Sketch

Aldo Mieli was born in Livorno, Italy, in 1879 and grew up in Val di Chiana, where his father's family owned large estates. A graduate of the University of Pisa, he obtained a position as professor of chemistry in Rome in 1904, before turning to the history of sciences in 1912. In 1919, he founded the journal *Archivio di storia della scienza* (*Archive of the History of Science*), which he directed without interruption until 1943. The publication intended to become "the central organ of the history of science in Italy and to represent the Italian voice abroad in this domain" (Abbri 1998), within a country oppressed by the fascist regime which, according to Mieli, "made the air absolutely unbreathable" (Pogliano 2007, 296). In 1927, the magazine took the more international title of *Archeion*. The following year, he moved to Paris, to occupy the position of permanent secretary of the International Committee for the History of Science (CIHS), founded on his initiative in Oslo and housed at the International Synthesis Center (CIS) directed by Henri Berr, a French philosopher. Transformed into the International

³ Cf. Casper, *Über Nothzucht und Päderastie und deren Ermittlung Seitens des Gerichtsarztes* (1852), but also *Klinische Novellen zur gerichtlichen Medizin* (1863), Carl Westphal *Die conträre Sexualempfindung* (1870), & *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) by Richard Krafft-Ebing.

⁴ In this paper, we will use the term "homosexual" in a broad sense. In the first treatises on sexual psychopathy, homosexuality, cross-dressing and transsexuality were indeed considered as a single phenomenon.

Academy of History of Science (AIHS) around 1932, the institution still exists today, preserving its international prestige. Still at the CIS, Mieli was entrusted with the direction of the History of Science Section, created especially for him. He also continued to edit *Archeion* from Paris.

In 1921, Mieli also founded the journal *Rassegna di studi sessuali*, which he directed until 1928. The journal was inspired by two German journals: the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (*Yearbook for Intermediate Sexual Types*), edited by Magnus Hirschfeld, and the *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft*, edited by Albert Eulenburg and Iwan Bloch. According to the publisher's intentions, *Rassegna* was meant to have “a scientific and a practical goal”: “to coordinate as for their general directions” the studies in sexual sciences (*sessuologia*) and “to disseminate this knowledge to a wide audience” while seeking “to achieve, through the clarity of ideas, a greater elevation of the human spirit, a higher standard of private and social life, and more justice in appreciation and sanctions” (Mieli 1921a, 1).

A Political Program

In both journals open doors to a better understanding of the scientific, political and personal life of Aldo Mieli. When he needed to leave the editorial board of the *Rassegna*, he pursued, more discreetly, his struggle to promote the movement of sexual reforms in *Archeion*, in particular from the point of view of dedramatization of homosexuality.

As a head of *Rassegna*, he took part in two international conferences on sexology in Berlin. First, in 1921, the first international conference for sexual reform based on sexual science (*Erste Internationale Tagung für Sexualreform auf sexualwissenschaftlicher Grundlage*), organized by Magnus Hirschfeld, was clearly marked by reformist ambitions. Second, in 1926 – the first international congress of sex research (*I Internationalen Kongress für Sexualforschung*) – was organized by Albert Moll and InGeSe,⁵ and presents itself as purely scientific.

Just like Hirschfeld, Mieli wanted to deploy the prestige of sciences to promote reformist politics in the area of sexuality. It appeared quite clearly in the first years of *Rassegna*, when Mieli pronounced a discourse in 1921, just after the opening speech by Hirschfeld. He started his talk with a discussion of divorce, of sexual education in school and fight against venereal diseases. He later introduced the “problem of homosexuality, which is of great importance throughout the world due to the many issues related to it”. He stated finally that even though in Italy there is no legal disposition similar to the §175 from the German Penal code,⁶ this should not prevent Italians from working against prejudices which “are a vestige of medieval barbarism”, detached from any scientific understanding of the world (Mieli 1921c). The second congress was to be held in Rome in 1922, but the severe crisis that hit Weimar Germany in 1922 (Mieli 1922a) prevented the participation of the German delegation and was canceled.

Mieli's reformist aspirations remained discernable in *Archeion*. In 1937, he had discreetly acknowledged in a footnote that he saw himself as belonging to the group of those who contributed to the work on the evolution of the perception of homosexuality, writing on a slightly prophetic note:

⁵ InGeSe (*Internationale Gesellschaft für Sexualwissenschaft*) was founded in November 1913 in Berlin in contrast to ÄGeSe (*Ärztliche Gesellschaft für Sexualwissenschaft und Eugenik*), which had been established nine months earlier. Its founders defended a positivist conception of science. It ceased to function after the outbreak of the First World War. In the first half of the 1920s, following the interests of Julius Wolf, Max Marcuse, and Moll, it reconstituted itself and planned to hold its first congress in October 1926.

⁶ §175 StGB was a provision of the German Criminal Code (from 1871 till 1994 in an altered form), which made sexual relations between males a crime.

The analysis of scientific and practical ideas which, in the first twenty years after the war, were advanced and defended regarding the sexual phenomena will be *per se* an interesting subject both for the future historians of science and for the historians of social facts. Having lived through a large part of this movement, we will perhaps contribute with some elements which seem to us of the greatest importance, both in terms of current affairs and of history. (Mieli 1937)

In 1942, in a long and bitter review of the Argentine edition of *Sex and Character* by Otto Weininger⁷ published in *Archeion*, he recalled the scientific movements of the early 1920s. He presented the willingness of homosexuals to speak out as a decisive element in order to take distances “not only from the old notion of sin”, but also from the notion of “moral contempt”. Tracing the chronology of the sexual reform movement, he paid tribute to the political strategy adopted by Ulrichs and Hirschfeld:

[...] one of the determining factors of these new appreciations, which, naturally, were introduced and strengthened relatively slowly, was the fact that homosexuals themselves entered the stage. The abundant works of Numa Numantius (Karl Heinrich Ulrichs [...]), as well as his poems *Auf Bienchen Flügel* [*On the Wings of the Little Bee*, 1875], were the product of a loner. On the other hand, at this time, Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), founder of the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, encouraged homosexuals to collaborate with doctors and sociologists to participate in the liberation campaign. In 1900, he founded the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, of which the scientific value and influence in the years before the First World War cannot be denied. (Mieli 1942, 143 - 144)

Intellectual Milieu

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The Italian Society for the Study of Sexual Questions (SISQS)

Willing to follow Hirschfeld's path, Mieli not only launched the journal *Rassegna*, but also founded the Società Italiana per lo studio delle Questioni Sessuali, known as The Italian Society for the Study of Sexual Questions (SISQS), in 1921, on the model of the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee. Divided first into thematic groups, then into academic groups, *Rassegna* is its official organ. Mieli, who in 1902 had been one of the organizers of the socialist strikes, opened the Society it not only to medical doctors, lawyers and educators, but also to “all people over the age of twenty who are seriously interested in sexual problems”. The initial groups were devoted to sexual education, the study of “intermediate sexual forms” and finally to the fight against venereal diseases and the study of prostitution (Mieli 1921d). The group devoted to the study of “intermediate sexual forms”, coordinated by Mieli himself, and the “Roman university group”, were the only ones to be really active during the first year of the Society's life (Mieli 1922b, 123). Probably dissolved in 1924, the first of two is the sole of which the members identity remains unknown to this day, Mieli having ensured the greatest discretion. Given the secret nature of the group, it is therefore impossible to establish today the existence of an “active and conscious group in Italy in the 1920s and 1930s” on the theme of homosexuality (Susani 1991). Some new

⁷ Otto Weininger (1880-1903), Austrian philosopher of Jewish origin, author of the highly influential and yet very controversial book *Geschlecht und Charakter* (*Sex and Character*, 1903). Despite its misogynistic and antisemitic stances, the book was very successful also in Italy. The author famously committed suicide a few months after the publication.

elements that have emerged on the functioning of the university group could, however, also shed light on that dedicated to the study of homosexuality.

The academic group was only active during the years 1921-1922, under the secretariat of Corradino Marciani, a young doctor from Lanciano, and the presidency of Ettore Ruggieri, future cardiovascular surgeon. The enthusiasm of these young researchers was so great that in December 1923, a new group was formed in the small town of Lanciano (Abruzzo) and the pharmacist Armando Marciani, brother of Corrado, became its secretary.

In Ettore Ruggieri's memory note for his friend and colleague, he not only provides us with a topology of the places where the SISQS youth group operated, but he also introduces the informal aspect of their meetings. Indeed, Ruggeri writes:

I still vividly remember a cultural group that Corradino managed to join and to which he later had dragged me, along with a few other young colleagues. This group, led by Aldo Mieli, a university lecturer in the history of science, met every week in the evening: in summer in Piazza Navona, in the open air around a table at the Caffè dei Tre Scalini, and in winter in the charming setting of the Caffè Greco. Among them were a few teachers and a young nobleman from Ferrara, whose name would be carried high on the wings of fame: Filippo De Pisis. [...]. There were many topics that caught our attention at these nocturnal meetings, and they were discussed with simplicity, without any academic emphasis [...]. From time to time, the group took on an official character by holding large meetings to listen to lectures given by well-known figures from the academic world: Baglioni, Amantea, Foà, Boldrini and Mieli himself. Corradino was responsible for organizing these meetings, which required a genuine effort. (Ruggeri 1973)

At the Berlin conference in 1921, Mieli had not only visited the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*, but also a “wide variety of cafés and clubs, from the most refined dance halls to *Theater des Eros* and the most ignoble bars [...] as well as several private places of friends” (Mieli 1926c, 345) that abounded in Berlin during the Weimar Republic. It is possible that he intended not only to replicate the editorial strategies implemented by the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee*, but also to initiate a similar fashion to gather and lead discussions.

Yet while it is true that in 1923 the SISQS exceeded a hundred members with the opening of new groups, this numerical success was accompanied by a conservative involution of the debate.

Around the Leonardo Da Vinci Publishing House

For Magnus Hirschfeld, the alliance with the publisher Max Spohr was decisive for his success (Beachy 2014, chap. 3). Mieli directly founded his own publishing house, *Leonardo da Vinci*, in 1922, and he was in charge of both *Rassegna* and *Archeion*. It was established with the help of three partners: Alberto Lofari, Gino Chiappini and Angelo Pisani.⁸ Although it was not possible to reconstruct the identity of Alberto Lofari, the relationship between Mieli, Pisani and Chiappini was longstanding and not limited to professional collaboration.⁹ Chiappini, who looked after the interests of the enterprise from Rome, was the nephew of the dialect poet Filippo Chiappini (Giovanardi 2012). Angelo Pisani, whom Mieli affectionately called “Angelino”, was registered with the Casellario Politico Centrale in Rome as a typographer and anti-fascist, and was Mieli's common-law husband from 1919 to 1939, both in Rome and

⁸ “Foglio degli annunci legali della provincia di Roma”, 6 maggio 1922, *Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale “Vittorio Emanuele III”*, BNC, Rome, 499.

⁹ Mieli, “Notarelle autobiografiche”, unpublished.

in his Parisian exile. Although in the 1930s Pisani married Eda Bonacchi, with whom he had two children, Enzo in 1934 and Rita in 1936, he continued to cohabit with Mieli.¹⁰ Both Pisani and Chiappini were members of the SISQS, and Pisani was not only the printer but also the “main manager” of the journal from 1923 to 1925, as well as of *Archeion*.

The Leonardo da Vinci publishing venture functioned within the post-war printing industry and its economic difficulties. He hoped that “Leonardo” would enable him to publish in Italy a number of “milestones” of sexual science, such as Hirschfeld's *Sexual Pathology* (Hirschfeld 1921) or Edward Carpenter's *Intermediate Sex* (Carpenter 1908). Mieli indeed announced the publication of Hirschfeld's opus magnum in *Rassegna* in 1923, where the book work was presented as ready for print. Yet, the project was halted. Apparently, there was a gap between Mieli's initial ambitions and its actual realization due to the political and economic circumstances.

Some efforts have also been made toward the general audience. For example, several articles appearing in the *Rassegna* were reedited by a small independent publisher, Edoardo Tinto, in the series *Biblioteca dei curiosi*, on sale for the modest sum of one lira. Tinto began to work on an encyclopedia of sexology in the 1930s, but this project also remained unfinished. The details of the collaboration between Mieli and Tinto are not well known.

Framing the Social Debate

While it is not possible to “deny the existence of a group, or even of the core of a nascent movement”, it is not easy to identify “a common project” nor, above all, “the individual identity of each of those who have become its bearers”, notes the writer Carola Susani (Susani 1991). The working orientation for the study group of intermediate sexual forms had been outlined in 1921 by Mieli himself and was, unsurprisingly, inspired by the scientific orientation of the Berlin Institute. This meant, among others, to privilege the statistical survey as a methodology, with the idea of “carrying out a precise and fundamental study” of homosexuality. This is why he invited “all people (doctors, lawyers, educators, police officers, etc.) who would like to collaborate in the work by providing data or setting up special surveys”, enabling to carry out studies showing “the real frequency of homosexuals” to become members of one his projects. It was also crucial to show the extent of blackmail to which many homosexuals were confronted (Mieli 1921e, 336). Mieli's passionate interventions in the *Rassegna* testify to his intention to fight the latter. In 1922, he noted that “considerable preparatory work had already been carried out” (Mieli 1922b, 123), yet there is no trace of it in the journal.

Generally speaking, he remained a lone voice, not only denouncing the difficulties in the lives of homosexual people but also regularly addressing issues related to homosexuality. His only ally, at least in the first issues of the journal, was the “illustrious biologist” Proteus, who wrote under the pseudonym. For Susani, through the papers by Proteus and/or Aldo Mieli, the discourse on homosexuality constantly returns “as the ‘red thread’ of the *Rassegna*” (Susani 1991). Proteus, a convinced “constitutionalist”,¹¹ left some of the most interesting pages of the entire *Rassegna*, both from a purely scientific and a philosophical point of view. While Hirschfeld declared that he wanted to reverse the relationship between science and morality by basing sexual morality on science rather than science on sexual morality (Abraham 1931, 35), Proteus went even further. He claimed a complete separation between sexuality and morality:

¹⁰ Judicial register, file “Angelo Pisani”, Casellario Politico Centrale, cote 4005, Archivio Centrale di Stato, Rome.

¹¹ Constitutionalist theory has had some success in Italy and hypothesizes that homosexuality is due to a congenital anomaly, detectable in the body by a hormonal dysfunction.

[...] the designation of moral or immoral does not apply to manifestations of sexuality. The acts of sexual life, in themselves, are neither moral nor immoral, but simply lie outside the realm of morality: they are amoral. (Proteus 1922, 342)

Since Mieli was more concerned with stimulating scientific debate on a quantitative rather than a qualitative level, he certainly chose many of his collaborators based on their scientific prestige rather than the opinions they expressed. A late positivist, he firmly believed in the emancipatory power of science in any form. Several associates thus came from the field of history of science rather than with an expertise in the studies of sexuality and also worked with *Archeion*. Among them, those who have directly addressed the theme of homosexuality can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

However, sexology being by nature a discipline at the crossroads of science and humanist culture, it is in the latter that Mieli finds his best allies. Among those who were willing to address the question of homosexuality without moral prejudices were the Anglicist Guido Ferrando, who, like Mieli, would later be forced into exile, just like other teachers Piero Padulli and Roberto Olegna or the openly homosexual painter Luigi Filippo Tibertelli De Pisis. Until 1925, other authors, protected by pseudonyms or signing only with their initials, wrote reviews of several homoerotic novels of the time, including *Corydon* by Gide, described as “a book of capital importance for all specialists in the controversial problem of homoeroticism” (R. A. 1925).

But from 1926, the year of the anti-democratic turn of the regime, all references to homosexuality disappeared from *Rassegna*, except a few rare articles where it was discussed in terms of degeneration or analyzed from the point of view of its potentially criminal dimensions.

It might be helpful to compare the Berlin experience with Mieli's Roman one from the point of view of the importance of the movements they have launched for a wider population. Hirschfeld's *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* was founded in 1897, a quarter a century after the German penal code added the § 175 (in 1871), punishing what was called “unnatural fornication, whether between persons of the male sex or of humans with beasts”. The Prussian code from 1851 already included a similar article (§ 143), denounced early on by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Karl Maria Kertbeny. These sections of the Prussian, and then German law sparked a lively and long-lasting debate within the scientific and medical milieu on the homosexual question. Several famous trials that took place in Germany in the early years of the 20th century strongly polarized public opinion on the question of whether or not she should be punished so severely, and sexual science was often evoked in the courts. In 1898, one of the first activities of the WHK was, therefore, to present a petition for the abolition of Section 175 to the Reichstag, with the support of the socialist August Bebel. Even if the petition did not lead to the modification of the law, it had the merit of collecting thousands of signatures from eminent figures in German scientific and literary culture¹² over the years and of uniting the homosexual community around the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*.

In Italy, on the other hand, the Zanardelli penal code promulgated in 1889 did not directly punish homosexuality, even though repressive forms of control persisted despite the adoption of progressive legislation. The fact that Italy, till 1926, was very probably more liberal than Germany (either genuinely or at least this is how things were perceived) and that

¹² The signatories include Albert Einstein, Richard Krafft-Ebing or Albert Moll.

Mieli had only a few years (1921 to 1926)¹³ to truly develop his ideas freely, prevented Mieli from forming around him a scientific and intellectual community equivalent to the German one. The latter was indeed inspired by increased awareness of the problem of the inexistent rights and effective repressions of homosexuals. Mieli's impact on the formation of the scientific debate remained an unrealized potentiality rather than a reality.

Mieli's Contribution to the Science of Sexuality

What was Mieli's scientific contribution to the understanding of homosexuality? In most cases, homosexuality or gender dysphoria have been experienced in the greatest secrecy, preventing their true emergence in all complexity. The wide distribution and scientific prestige of works such as *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Krafft-Ebing (Krafft-Ebing 1886), but also of work produced by the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft in Berlin, had contributed to disseminating an image of homosexuality as the "contrary sexual feeling" (*conträre Sexualempfindung*) according to the most accredited etiology proposed first by Ulrichs¹⁴ then taken up by Westphal (Westphal 1870), and by psychiatry in general.

However, homosexual identity is not carved in stone, neither from the physical point of view, nor from the psychological one, and certainly not from the point of view of behavior (Eribon 2012). One of Mieli's most significant contributions to the understanding of homosexuality, therefore, lies in his attempt to clarify gay masculinity. While adhering to the biological standpoint and recognizing the importance of hormonal variations in determining sexual orientation, Mieli adopts positions much more nuanced than those of Hirschfeld. He criticizes the theory of "sexual intermediaries" for its deterministic biological materialism, believing that the body cannot systematically influence the psyche. Indeed, he writes:

[...] while I adhere to these theories regarding biological phenomena, I have reservations about the part concerning the psychological ones. And while a parallelism between the two need to be recognized, we cannot nevertheless suggest that the thought is *absolutely* determined by the conditions of the body, although these exert an influence which can be preponderant in certain cases. Thus, we can indeed recognize the influence of the androecium and the gynoecium (to call the typically masculine and feminine internal secretions that way) absolutely determines, for example, the secondary sexual characteristics, we cannot consider that, whatever either the importance of their influence, the structure of the testicle or the ovary undoubtedly determines the psychological tendency towards one or the other sex. (Mieli 1921b, 85)

Mieli thus recognizes the possibility for homosexuals to maintain a psychology consistent with their biological sex. He also adheres to the theory of innate bisexuality present in every individual:

... I tend to admit an innate bisexuality, independent of somatic conditions, and which presents for each individual a relationship which we must assume to be constant or variable within very narrow limits. (Mieli 1921b, 92)

¹³ While the press censorship began already in 1923, it is in 1926 that the fascist laws (*leggi fascistiche*) were passed, creating de facto a fascist regime, and transforming the Italian parliamentary monarchy into a totalitarian dictatorship.

¹⁴ His expression "Anima muliebris in corpore virile inclusa" (female spirit trapped inside a male body) from the pamphlet *Mnemon* (1868) became the de facto pillar on which European psychiatry built homosexual psychology at the end of the 19th century.

Furthermore, regarding homo-affectivity, Mieli cultivated a vision of Socratic love and male friendship as part of sexual phenomena, as an unconscious tension. This is what emerges from the pamphlet *Il libro dell'amore* (*The Book of Love*) of 1916 and from certain pages of the *Rassegna*, where he writes:

Let it suffice for me to say here that I believe that friendship always has a basis, even unconscious, in sexuality, and that the sympathy which unites two friends (I am not talking here about entirely cerebral friendship, which can to be reduced to exchanges of letters between people who have never seen each other, to discuss, *puta caso*, the points of intersection of bumps of degree n , with surfaces of degree m , in a space of s dimensions) is not nothing other than a phenomenon of a sexual nature, and that is where it draws all its strength and all its beauty. (Mieli 1924b)

Finally, a supporter of Hans Blüher, he maintains that the basis of human sociality does not rest exclusively on economic factors but, above all, on erotic tensions. Blüher actually asserted that if heterosexual relationships are the basis of the family, homoerotic relationships are the basis of all human society.

The Shadows of the Survival Strategies

Given his engagement in favor of sexual freedom and liberalism in general, certain ambiguities remain concerning Mieli's political stances. These started already in 1926, in Berlin, on the occasion of the presentation given at the congress organized by Moll (Mieli 1928a). Mieli uses the opportunity of this public appearance to express his appreciation of the demographic policies inaugurated by Mussolini's government, suggesting that they were intended to establish a "new sexual Enlightenment" (Abbri 2022). It is useless to say that later developments of fascist policies, despite some initial superficial similarities to the ones promoted by the Weimar Republic, evolved in a very different direction, as far as possible from any kind of *sexuelle Aufklärung*.

However, Mieli's public statements need always be placed in their context. He traveled to Berlin with an Italian delegation, composed, among others of some members of the SISQS (Mieli 1926a, 322), such as Silvestro Baglioni, who "joined the fascist party a few years ago", Mieli wrote to Moll. In addition, *Rassegna* itself, due to its financial difficulties, had received that year, at the suggestion of Baglioni, a "congruent subsidy" of 2,000 lire from the *Direzione generale della sanità* (General Directorate of Health), which reported directly to the Ministry of the Interior (Mieli 1926a, 321, 1926b, 286).

The SISQS also hoped to organize the second InGeSe congress in 1928 in Rome, which would create for Mieli an opportunity to maintain his international links with the sexual research movement. But finally, the event was not held in Italy because, as Mieli wrote to Moll, "the political and scientific atmosphere is certainly not conducive to holding an international congress", just like in 1922. Mieli was convinced that Italian intellectuals would not be free to express themselves without incurring sanctions (Sigusch 2009).

Abbri points out that even in an article written in the context of his trip to Romania in 1936, Mieli openly criticized the international sanctions imposed on Italy following the invasion of Ethiopia (Mieli 1936, 193). But Mieli, at the same time, knew that he was being closely monitored and that the Paris consulate had already refused to issue him a passport in 1930 because he was listed in the Bulletin of Wanted Persons as a "dangerous socialist".¹⁵ In Romania, too, in large sectors of the political class and the cultural milieu, the corporatist

¹⁵ Judicial register, file "Mieli Aldo", Casellario Politico Centrale, cote 3271, Archivio Centrale di Stato, Rome.

ideology promoted by Italian fascism had a significant appeal (Santoro 2018). In both cases, it cannot be ruled out that Mieli concealed his opposition to the regime in order to avoid very possible sanctions.

In contrast, when Mieli speaks privately, negative assessments of fascism and Mussolini are the rule. This is how he presents the Italian leader in a letter to the historian of sciences, George Sarton:

... Mussolini, an extremely ignorant man, although endowed with acute intelligence and extraordinary abilities (not devoid of megalomania, perhaps even pathological, and which, for the good fortune of Italy, could result in a real madness, and thus rid the country of a tyrant much worse than Nero, who at least was or wanted to be an artist and only bothered a few senators or patricians), who invents scientific theories and claims that they represent *fascist science*, a science that must be followed and adored like all the actions and words emanating from the great head of the *Duce*. (Pogliano 2007, 297)

One finds traces of these ideas as early as 1923. In a letter responding to the proposal of the socialist publisher and journalist Piero Gobetti to merge their publishing houses, Mieli had declined the offer, while still adding a friendly comment on the recent fascist ambush of which Gobetti had been the victim:

... It has been a long time since I wanted to write to you to propose an exchange of advertising between our periodicals, but above all to congratulate you on the serious and serene attitude that you have taken towards the social and political events of today, and of your pride in facing stupid persecutions which reveal more and more the petty mentality and the eagerness to mistreat those who practice them. (Gobetti 2017, 225)

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In public, Mieli never opposed the reactionary and authoritarian drift of the country, not even in the scientific field. To find a public justification for his anti-fascism, we had to wait until the last years of his life. After recalling his membership in the socialist party, from which he had been excluded for “passive pederasty”,¹⁶ he declared his “irreducible aversion to fascism and totalitarianism of all forms” (Mieli 1948, 494–95). Nevertheless, veiled and between-the-lines critiques also emerged in the 1920s. In 1924, for example, in the midst of the Matteotti crisis, he asserted the superiority of Cesare Lombroso’s “positivist doctrines” over “sentimental and non-constructive *idealism*”,¹⁷ which is a philosophically confused way was used by some politicians “to construct on this basis a sociology and a policy of the mentally handicapped” (Mieli 1924a). A few years later, while being well established in Paris, he advanced his ideas on demographic policies allusively, defying the ban on propagating neo-Malthusian theories. In his review of the works of one of the main representatives of American birth control policy, Dr. William J. Robinson, Mieli concludes:

It is not possible to summarize the views of Dr. Robinson here, the books themselves being extremely condensed. Their tendency, as we have said, is clearly radical and therefore represents a partisan fight, but one which is supported calmly and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lombroso’s Jewishness, socialism and materialism was one of the reasons why the Italian fascism did not adopt his ideas directly, even though part of his heritage nourished it indirectly, as racial laws in various countries was partly informed by his works.

objectively. Some of these ideas, such as the need for sex education and the fight against hypocrisy, etc., have also been supported by the author of this “Rassegna”, while others can sometimes be the subject of certain reservations. On the whole, however, as the first years of this Rassegna show, I find myself in agreement on essential points with the deserving and very active author. (Mieli 1928b)

These last sentences appear in the previous pages of the journal that he failed to save, and thus become his moral testament, his discreet and informed opposition to fascist policies regarding sexual matters.

Two Runaways

Today, his correspondence with Sarton and Moll clearly indicates that Mieli left Italy for political reasons – not exclusively, but quite importantly (Chimisso 2011; Pogliano 2007; Sigusch 2009). Economic motivations due to poor management of the family fortune as well as those of a lack of professional recognition add up to the political motivation. Yet the correspondence between Mieli and Henri Berr, preserved in the IMEC archives in Caen, opens up new hypotheses regarding the reasons why he left France.

Silencing Homosexual Voices in Italy

When national socialist movements came to power in the 1920s and 1930s, they attempted to once again promote a degenerative view of homosexuality. The first repressive actions, therefore, aimed precisely to stifle the voices of homosexuals who, with their scientific prestige, could question the binary model of gender and sexuality with an internal epistemological vision of their own desires. In Germany, the fire at the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft on May 6, 1933, certainly constituted a paradigmatic event, a reminiscence of the Reichstag fire set on February 27, 1933, very probably also by the Nazis (Hett 2014). A few days later, thousands of books were burnt on May 10, 1933, also in Berlin, after a wave of similar events in different towns. The strengthening of the § 175 followed, imposing prison for homosexuality throughout Germany. What happened in Nazi Germany, however, was only a culmination of policies that characterized the authoritarian drift throughout Europe.

In Italy, under the fascist government, the repression of homosexuality had taken violent forms (Benadusi 2005b; Goretti and Giartosio 2006). From the first years of the takeover by fascism, more traditional morals and customs became the norm, and a conservative version of Catholicism became the only acceptable ethical doctrine, as Mussolini supported the Church on a number of levels (Adamson 2014). The new cultural and political climate was imposed as early as 1923 by censorship of press freedom (Petrosino 1996) and by draconian policies of public security administration (Benadusi 2005b). In November 1926, the promulgation of the *Testo Unico di Pubblica Sicurezza* (TUPS) ushered in the definitive season of the regime's pervasive control. TUPS strengthened the management of public security by placing it under the exclusive control of the government and effectively weakening the rule of law. The sanctions that already existed in the liberal era, such as warning (*diffida*), admonition (*ammonizione*) and confinement (*confino*), were applied *en masse* to political opponents and ordered by a provincial commission responsible only to the government and no longer before the courts.

The *Rassegna* was also a victim of these policies. If, from 1921 to 1924, it appeared regularly every two months and the theme of homosexuality was treated in each issue, both from a scientific and anthropological and literary point of view, from 1925 to 1928, the issues

became more and more discontinuous, and the theme of homosexuality is more and more reduced. The addition of “and eugenics” to the title of the journal in 1924 is also an indicator of a first change in the editorial line (Masi 2014), which became more radical in 1926. In 1927, the journal finally took the title of *Review of sexual studies, demography and eugenics* (*Rassegna di studi sessuali, demografia ed eugenica*), abbreviated to *Genesis* any reference to homosexuality having disappeared.

Restrictions on personal freedom also affected the editorial staff of *Rassegna*. Mieli himself denounced it in 1940 in the pages of *Archeion*, in the obituary of the moral philosopher Ludovico Limentani, who, between 1922 and 1923, had fueled a lively discussion with Proteus on morality and sexuality. Mieli writes:

Limentani also actively participated, with Gaetano Pieraccini and Guido Ferrando among others, in the development of the Florentine Group of Sexual Studies, an action which was interrupted by political persecution. (Mieli 1940, 191)

The documents kept at the Casellario Politico Centrale of the State Archives in Rome show that these and other collaborators were victims of real political persecution. Subjected to close surveillance, they were often refused passports to travel abroad. Pieraccini was also arrested for the first time in 1925 as a socialist, and later sentenced in 1930 to one year in prison.¹⁸ Mieli must certainly have been aware of this condemnation because Pieraccini contributed to the *Rassegna* in 1926 and in 1927, and he was then a regular member of the Florentine sexual studies group.

We can also imagine that the ground collapsed under his feet when, in August 1927, the *Corriere della Sera* informed about the progressions of a project to reform the penal code, introducing among others the crime of homosexuality. The editorial team invited *Rassegna* collaborators to comment on the bill, and Proteus, in particular, presented convincing arguments against the introduction of the offense (Proteus 1927). It was from this moment that Mieli began to concretely weave his own intrigues to leave the country. Thus, in November, he had “come to Paris” for the “centenary of Bertholdt [Marcellin Berthelot]” (the official reason, which must always be said, because no one has the right now to go abroad), but also to orient oneself “in the possibility of a move” (Pogliano 2007, 299). In Mieli’s letter to Sarton, the reasons for his departure are very clear:

Personally, I don't feel observed at the moment, or rather not too observed. But if I see that things are getting even worse and there is no hope of them changing (unfortunately it is very likely that this gentleman will have to enchant Italy for many more years), I will even think about take refuge abroad. It's difficult because outside, you have to start a new life. But despite the beautiful sun and the magnificent landscapes of Italy, we are suffocating, and the danger of finding ourselves on an island among common criminals (the ‘*confino*’, as we say among ourselves) is imminent for everyone (Even for the fascists themselves!). (Pogliano 2007, 298)

In Paris, Mieli met Michel Lheritier, secretary of the *Comité international des sciences historiques*, with whom he discussed the possibility of creating a committee specifically devoted to the history of sciences, in anticipation of the VIth International Congress of Historical Sciences, which was to be held in Oslo in August 1928 (Pogliano 2007, 299). Before

¹⁸ The confinement would later be transformed into an admonition because of his age, Judicial register, file “Gaetano Pieraccini”, Casellario Politico Centrale, cot 3954 and file “Gaetano Pieraccini”, Political exile office, cote 794, Archivio Centrale di Stato, Rome.

returning to Italy, he had already played the idea of staying in France, in another letter to Sarton:

Regarding what I have already written to you, I plan to stay in Italy for about three months, then, if possible, to settle in Paris for a while, hoping that events will mature in the meantime. However, there is nothing definitive in my program yet, and external circumstances can change at any time. (Pogliano 2007, 301)

The agreement reached with Henri Berr at the *Centre international de synthèse* (CIS) stipulates that Mieli's private library will also be transferred to Paris, which will allow Mieli to make personal use of it while allowing access to CIS members. Mieli would be a librarian for life in exchange for a monthly salary of 2,000 francs (Tosi 1997). At the insistence of Berr of the Italian Consulate in Paris, Mieli also managed in 1930 to obtain a passport for Angelo Pisani, who was hired as assistant librarian and with whom Mieli cohabited again. This lasted till his forced and sudden departure from France to Argentina in 1939.¹⁹

Leaving France

As a Jew, Mieli's departure from the CIS and Paris has often been linked to the anti-Semitic sentiments that were growing throughout Europe. If this factor should not be underestimated, the correspondence between Mieli and Berr, still insufficiently exploited, highlights the determining role of his homosexuality. This impression is confirmed by judicial documents kept in the Paris Archives and the National Archives of France.

Although homosexuality has not been a crime in France since 1791, a rampant discriminatory culture persists, and the gap between the legislator's ideal and actual police practice has not yet been bridged (Pastorello 2010). At the end of the 1930s, the European political climate deteriorated rapidly, even in France, following the migration crises generated by racial policies in Germany and Italy and by the civil war in Spain. In this historical context, Mieli was arrested in Paris twice in 1937 for "public outrage of modesty" while he had homosexual relations with strangers.²⁰ This offense was often used to indiscriminately prosecute homosexuals who, to avoid scandal, rarely lived their relationship within the home. Locked up in the prison La Santé in Paris, he was sentenced in July to four months, and in October again to two months, succeeding in both cases in obtaining a suspended sentence thanks to Henri Berr.²¹ A few days after his second arrest, Mieli resigned, officially for health reasons, from his position as director of the history of science section of the CIS.²² It was probably following these episodes that relations between Mieli and Berr began to deteriorate, as IMEC documents show. The financial crisis which also hit France in the early 1930s prompted Mieli to raise questions relative to his work arrangements. Berr refused to grant him the requested salary increase, not without pointing out that he "would have less right than anyone to preferential treatment" following "the unfortunate events".²³

The accusatory lines published by Mieli on the pages of *Archeion* in the 1938 editorial "Passato e futuro" were addressed to Berr. Pogliano and Abbri saw them as one of Mieli's most "incomprehensible" pages:

¹⁹ Correspondance Mieli-Berr. Fond Berr, IMEC, Caen.

²⁰ N/REF 2022-2580 Jugement de la Cour d'Appel - Correctionnel concernant Mieli Aldo en date du 9 juillet 1937 et du 11 octobre 1937, Archive de Paris, Paris

²¹ Letter from Mieli to Berr & Letter from Mieli to Toledano de 10 juillet 1937, communication de Beffray à Berr de 27 juillet 1937, Fond Berr, IMEC, Caen.

²² Letter from Mieli to Berr du 28 octobre 1937, Fond Berr, IMEC, Caen.

²³ Letter from Berr to Chiappini du 4 mars 1938, Fond Berr, IMEC, Caen.

But the scientist is not a pure spirit: at certain times he needs to eat; at others, he may realize that the dress he is wearing is all frayed and worn. The scientist may also have children to raise, even if they are not his own. And if, under a futile pretext, which may even have a certain taste of ignorant innocence, some might try to cut off his sustenance by invoking a common evil and distributive justice for all, while demanding from him the same services as before (and even by exerting undue pressure as to prevent him from expressing his opinions in scientific and other matters), and if some also try to prevent him from being able to affirm his sacrosanct rights, by hindering the support that can be provided to him by business people, which leaves him abandoned to his usual incapacity regarding the practical life, then this scholar will be obliged, by *force majeure*, to look elsewhere for a possibility to live, to make his living. (Mieli 1938, 9)

The children in question are those of Pisani, the “practical in business” person being Gino Chiappini, to whom Mieli had entrusted the management of his legal and financial interests.

When writing the above editorial against Berr, Mieli had already reached an agreement with the Argentinian mathematician Rey Pastor, to establish an Institute for the History of Science in Latin America and to transfer *Archeion* and its library to Buenos Aires (Plá 1972). After his arrest in 1937, Paris probably no longer offered Mieli any prospects. In March 1939, the break was complete and Mieli informed Andrea Corsini about the invitation to the Universidad del Litoral: “Currently, the mission is temporary, but I hope that in a few months it will be permanent”.²⁴

Events followed quickly and, in April 1939, he was forced to anticipate his departure. With the decree-law of May 2, 1938, the French government strengthened the immigration legislation. In particular, the article 13 abolishes the practice of suspended sentences for offenses against foreigners (Ben Khalifa 2012). Thus, on January 31, 1939, the Paris prefecture issued an expulsion order from France against Mieli for his arrests in 1937, giving him four days to leave the country. The expulsion order once again highlighted his sexual orientation and took him by surprise.²⁵ He also wrote to Berr: “This stop, after two years, is completely unexpected. It seemed like everything had calmed down”.²⁶

Mieli went as planned to Belgium and Holland to give a few talks, but did not return to France. On May 23, 1939, he again asked Berr for help in obtaining “the certificate of good conduct for the last five years”, a document required by the Argentine consulate and now impossible to obtain. He also wrote to “dear Angelino” to insist on Berr’s intervention with the police prefecture. The despair is great, and Mieli concludes: “dear Angelino... If everything were to disappear, what would there be left for me to do, except kill myself?”²⁷

Mieli arrived in Argentina in July 1939 after a trip “in the worst conditions” and “utterly depressed”.²⁸ Arriving at the University of Litoral, he learned that Pisani had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Paris. He contracted syphilis in Rome around twenty years earlier. He again asks Berr to support Madame Pisani and her children. Pisani died at the Santa Maria della Pietà psychiatric hospital in Rome on March 10, 1944, and the Italian police closed his case, calling him a “mentally deranged anti-fascist.”²⁹

²⁴ Letter from Mieli to Corsini du 7 mars 1939, Museum Galilei, Florence.

²⁵ Ministère de l'Intérieur, 1937 – 1940, Direction générale de la Sûreté nationale. Fichier central (1934-1940), cote 19940462/351, dossier 34828, Archive National de France.

²⁶ Letter from Mieli to Berr du 11 avril 1939, Fond Berr, IMEC, Caen.

²⁷ Letter from Mieli to Pisani du 19 mai 1939, Fond Berr, IMEC, Caen.

²⁸ Letter from Mieli Berr di 7 juillet 1939, Fond Berr, IMEC, Caen.

²⁹ Judicial register, file “Angelo Pisani”, Casellario Politico Centrale, cote 4005, Archivio Centrale di Stato, Rome.

Conclusions

Mieli needed to be cautious, but this did not prevent him from being ambitious. His projects to establish the field of studies of sexuality devoid of superficial and suffocating morality failed. But their failure testifies of their existence, and of the presence of competent people willing to be a part of a reformist movement. Engaged in the reformist struggles in the field of sexuality, he was certainly not an anti-fascist activist. Yet his private stances show him as an “existential antifascist”, a category introduced into the historiographic debate by Guido Quazza in the mid-1970s. According to Quazza, the confrontation between fascism and anti-fascism did not only take place at the political and military level, but also developed at the level of “collective identity construction”. If anti-fascism is understood from a broader, existential perspective, Mieli becomes a man who ensured his physical and professional security and fought to remain true to himself, to his identity as a sexologist, homosexual and free thinker till the end.

His life reminds of an ancient Talmudic story where two men, to escape death, take refuge in the very place where, apparently, death awaits them (Elihoreph and Ahijah, the sons of Shisha, *Babylonian Talmud*, Sukkah 53a5). Mieli’s encounter with destiny was not so much with death as with fascist regimes, which he tried, in vain, to escape throughout his life. As we have noted above, in 1942, Mieli harshly judged the Argentine edition of the famous book by Weininger. And at this occasion, he praised (despite some worry) his then surroundings:

The fact that this was published today [an openly antisemitic book], in a period of a world war, in democratic Argentina, perfectly connected to the Anglo-Saxon world, brave champion of freedom, and where, as in the rest of America, the unfortunate Jews, persecuted in Germany, and then in Italy and in France, have found a fraternal refuge, seems to be more than an unfortunate accident – it is rather a real social danger. (Mieli 1942, 147–48)

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Yet the following year, in October 1943, the military government that came to power in Argentina forced him to suspend the publication of *Archeion*, considered a “periodical that had always shown itself to be an enemy of fascism and nazism” (Pogliano 2007, 345). Mieli had been less careful than usual. Or perhaps he was deluding himself into thinking that he had finally found refuge from fascism. More likely, he had nothing left to lose: isolated from the international scientific community, fallen into poverty, he wrote his *Little Autobiographical Notes* (*Notarelle autobiografiche*) with a typewriter which was missing the character *n*, systematically added by hand.³⁰ Seriously ill, his constant hospitalizations no longer allowed him to try to avoid this last encounter with fascism he had fled for most of his life. Even his escapes have been failures.

Since Mieli’s life looks like a parable, this paper went beyond a biographical presentation with several materials which have never been presented before. It had indeed three aims, two historical and one philosophical. The first is obvious: the presentation of the complex life of Aldo Mieli. We have shown the difficult position of someone who suffers from a multitude of discriminations and needs to carefully choose his struggles, while thinking about the preservation of his own life and freedom. Secondly, we would like to highlight the attempt to create in Italy also a community of young researchers who would reflect on sexuality and homosexuality without prejudice. Its development was interrupted by the very early arrival of fascism and its conservative, repressive morality sanctioned by law.

³⁰ We would especially like to thank Italian journalist and gay activist Giovanni Dall’Orto for sharing this unpublished document as well as valuable research tips.

Finally, and this point was properly philosophical, we attempted to argue against the standard Foucauldian dogma attributing to the development of sciences of sexuality an oppressive influence on those who were non-heterosexual or non-binary³¹. On the contrary, for many of those who do not recognize themselves in the dominant heterosexual norms, the scientific process brought a double hope: the one of suppressing arbitrary prejudices and the one of bringing a richer and more diverse knowledge of human sexuality, and thus of human condition. Perhaps, to use Redondi's expression, Mieli's "revenge" today is not limited to the recognition of his role in the internationalization and professionalization of the history of science, but it is also realized in this "will to know" which, reappearing in the post-war period, always demands better living conditions for LGBT people.

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³¹ This position is present in several interpretations of Foucault, but the French author himself acknowledges that the scientific developments of the 19th century in particular, were driven by the will to knowledge, but the desire to tell the truth of sex ("dire la vérité du sexe"). He nevertheless seemed to think that this scientific truth is a weaker and more dogmatic than other truths, e.g. the one of *ars erotica* of other civilizations (Foucault 1976, 76).

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