**Marzio Barbagli**

# Comment on Catherine Hakim/2. Male Sex Drive, Mulierum Appetitus et Delectatio

**(doi: 10.2383/85807)**

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)
Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2016

**Ente di afferenza:**
*()*

Essays

# Comment on Catherine Hakim/2

## Male Sex Drive, Mulierum Appetitus et Delectatio

*by* Marzio Barbagli

doi: 10.2383/85807

In spite of the great transformations of the last half-century, Catherine Hakim maintains that in the Western world of today, "sex drive is [still] stronger in men than in women" [2016, 8]. This is a thesis upheld for some time by Roy F. Baumeister, a scholar to whom she appeals, who defines sex drive as "the motivation to engage in sexual activity" [Baumeister and Tice 2001, 99]. According to Hakim, this difference across genders is "universal," "does not change much across generations," presents "the same pattern across cultures around the world at the start of the Twenty-First century," and has had – and continues to have – significant social consequences. Thus, to this "surplus of male sexuality" corresponds a "male sexual deficit" [Hakim 2016, 5], that leads the male population to maintain the system of patriarchy.

Catherine Hakim and Roy F. Baumeister are not alone in arguing that men have a stronger sex drive than women. The great majority of French and Italians think exactly the same. Among the former, this idea is shared more by women (73%) than by men (59%) [Bajos e Bozon 2008]. As for Italians, the conviction that men have stronger sexual needs is diffused in equal measure across all social strata: male and female, young and old, Catholic and agnostic, northern and southern [Barbagli *et al.* 2010]. Mistaken, though, are those who take this as a proof of the thesis that "the male sexual deficit remains sizeable and may even be increasing" [Hakim 2016, 15]. In the Western world, the idea that men have a stronger sex drive emerged over the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, and became established in the Twentieth; but before that, a conviction quite to the contrary had dominated.

 

## 1. Female Libidinousness

In the mid-Thirteenth century, the French Dominican friar Vincent de Beauvais presented in his encyclopaedic work *Speculum Naturale* a synthesis of the theories on sexuality of the philosophers, theologians and scientists that had preceded him, to the effect that women were more carnal, more voracious and more insatiable than men [Elliot 1998]. This thesis had been repeated innumerable times. St. Jerome proclaimed in the Fifth century that:

> It is not the harlot, or the adulteress who is spoken of, but woman's love in general is accused of ever being insatiable; put it out, it bursts into flame; give it plenty, it is again in need; it enervates a man's mind, and engrosses all thought except for the passion which it feeds [Salisbury 1996, 86].

Likewise, the theologian Isidore of Seville observed in the Seventh century:

> The word *femina* comes from the Greek derived from the force of fire because her concupiscence is very passionate: women are more libidinous than men [*Ibidem*].

In the mid-Twelfth century, invoking potent imagery that betrayed an acute misogyny, the French doctor Gilles de Corbeil wrote that trying to satisfy the female organ was the quintessence of stupidity. The "mouth" of the vagina could never really be made full: it could be worn out, but not satisfied by frequent intercourse. It was inextinguishable, like Greek fire [Baldwin 1994, 134]. The German theologian Albertus Magnus observed a century later that pleasure and desire (*delectatio* and *appetitus*), reach their maximum in women. Many others added that women's libidos were not only greater than those of men, but also than those of all other animals – with the exception of the mare. This was proved by the fact that women were unique in not refusing sex after conception, and in experiencing even more pleasure in sexual relations while pregnant [Cadden 1993].

To avoid any misunderstanding, it is worth remembering that this idea of the difference between women and men vis-à-vis sexual desire and pleasure formed part of a wider worldview – one based on a binary opposition between active and passive. In heterosexual relations just as in homosexual ones, there was an active partner and a passive one: one who penetrated and one who let themselves be penetrated. But passivity had nothing to do with desire or pleasure. Women were considered receptive, because they were penetrated, and at the same time voracious and insatiable.

But why, asked the doctors, theologians and philosophers, did women, who were possessed of wet and cold humours, experience a sexual excitement so strong? Of the numerous explanations proposed, the most convincing seemed to be that based on the Hippocratic theory of reproduction, known as that of the "two seeds".

According to this theory, for conception to take place it was necessary for both man and woman to experience pleasure during coitus, and for both to emit their "seed". However, the woman experienced in coupling a "duplex delectatio" – a double pleasure deriving at one and the same time from the release of her own seed and from receipt of that of her partner. The pleasure of the man was, on the other hand, a simpler matter, because it was borne solely of his own emission.

The idea that women were more carnal, voracious and insatiable than men would enjoy considerable longevity. In *Malleus Maleficarum*, a text written against heresy in 1487 by Jacob Sprenger and Institor Kramer, two Dominican friars, one can read the following:

> To conclude. All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable. See Proverbs 30: There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, a fourth thing which says not, It is enough; that is, the mouth of the womb. Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils [MacHaffie 1992, 56].

Thus we can see that in the Sixteenth century it was still thought that the uterus was like a starved animal that, if not nourished continuously and copiously by sexual relations and procreation, would wander through the woman's body, restless and uncontrollable [Zemon Davis 1965].

In the Eighteenth century, the most prestigious Italian, French and German doctors (Franciscus Plazzonus, Jacques Ferrand, Paolo Zacchia, Giorgius Hornius, Giovanni Benedetto Sinibaldi) continued to hold up the thesis of female voracity and insatiability, albeit via different arguments. Some of them simply harked back to the authority of received scientific wisdom. Others maintained that women experienced greater pleasure because greater also were the surfaces of their bodies stimulated by intercourse. Still others observed that if they did not experience greater pleasure during sex, wives would not be willing to face the pain and risk associated with pregnancy and childbirth [Ellis 1921].

But between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, the thesis of greater female voracity and insatiability was abandoned and substituted by one that was radically opposed. In 1792, none other than Mary Wollstonecraft, in one of the first feminist documents, wrote:

> Men are certainly more under the influence of their appetites than women [1796, 312].

For the first time there appeared the thesis that

> women are apt to be congenitally incapable of experiencing complete sexual satisfaction and peculiarly liable to sexual anesthesia [Ellis 1921, 193-194].

It came to be considered that women were affectionate, tender and maternal, but lacking in sexual needs; cold, if not frigid. At the end of the Nineteenth century, Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero illustrated their point of view with a line of verse from Tennyson:

> The passion of man is to that of woman as the heat of the sun is to that of the moon [Lombroso and Ferrero 1893, 123].

This inversion of perspective was in part provoked by the profound change in the conception of the body and of procreation that had taken place at the turn of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, when the theory of the "two seeds" was abandoned, and orgasm, as well as emission of the female "seed", ceased to be considered relevant to conception.

No one thinks any longer that women might be "peculiarly liable to sexual anesthesia." However, the great majority of Italians and French (and probably majorities in other Western countries) as well continue to hold the view – as does Catherine Hakim – that men have stronger sexual desires than women.

## 2. Recent Studies: The Past Fifty Years

Over time, then, at least beliefs have changed enormously regarding sexual desire and pleasure on the part of men and women. But what can be said of real feelings and behaviour? Catherine Hakim asserts quite rightly that the sex surveys carried out in many Western countries over the last thirty years (I would say the last fifty years) are the best source at our disposal in trying to answer to such questions.

The data accruing from all of this research demonstrate that over the past half-century, the procreational orientation has lost a great part of its importance in these countries, giving way to two other orientations: the relational orientation, which considers sexuality a means to express and reinforce emotional and psychological intimacy, and judges pre-marital sexual relationships legitimate – but not extra-marital ones; and the recreational or hedonistic orientation, which is geared primarily toward physical pleasure, and which endorses whatever practice is conducive to achieving this, with whomever – even a casual first-time acquaintance for whom only physical attraction is felt. In all Western countries the number of people who masturbate has grown, the median age of first sexual intercourse has fallen, the number of sexual partners over the course of one's lifetime has increased, and the frequency of sexual intercourse has become more intense – especially for those over 50. The tendency towards "total body sex" has become established, and with it the multiplication of erogenous zones, the eroticization of the whole body, and the expansion of the repertoire of sexual techniques; ergo, practices such as *fellatio*, *cunnilingus* and heterosexual anal intercourse have become more extensive.

Has the difference in sexual feelings and behaviours between men and women diminished in this period? Catherine Hakim says no, and maintains that sex drive remains stronger among men than among women. I contend that the data from sex surveys conducted in many Western countries in the last half-century show that, in certain respects, this difference has indeed diminished – even quite considerably – and that in others it has disappeared entirely. Admittedly, only some of the data from these surveys can help us to reconstruct such changes over time. An example of ambiguous data can be found in Hakim's figure 1 (sex differences in unmet sexual desire) [2016, 7], which shows that differences along lines of gender have almost disappeared among the youngest cohort; however, by their very nature (i.e. reflecting the way in which the question is formulated), these data do not tell us whether this depends on the specific generation to which the respondents in question belong, or simply on their stage in the life cycle. The best data are those generated by surveys carried out at intervals over time, using the same tools of analysis (longitudinal studies) – like those carried out in Great Britain in 1990, 2000 and 2010 [Mercer *et al.* 2013] – or by those using partly different tools, such as those conducted in Italy in 1976 and 2006 [Fabris and Davis 1978; Barbagli *et al.* 2010], and in France in 1970, 1992 and 2006 [Simon *et al.* 1972; Spira and Bajos 1993; Bajos and Bozon 2008]. Also useful for comparison across generations are the surveys with retrospective questions. (For example: "Over the course of your life, have you ever masturbated?").

Analysing the data that satisfy these conditions, we can come to the conclusion that the difference between men and women has completely disappeared with regard to premarital sexual relations, and almost completely disappeared for age of first sexual relations. In all Western countries over the course of the Twentieth century, a great part of the male population had premarital sexual relations, often with prostitutes. On the other hand, a significant proportion of the female population were still virgins at time of marriage. The situation changed slowly over the course of the century, starting well before the so-called "sexual revolution" of the late 1960s. In the United Kingdom, for example, the proportion of women who were non-virgins upon marriage went from 19%, for those born before 1904, to 36% for those born in the following decade, before reaching 43% in the generation born between 1924 and 1934 [Chesser 1956, 311]. In Italy, this change started later, and in the 1930s about a third of women had had premarital sexual relations. Today, in all Western countries, the female population of recent generations no longer values virginity and does not wait for marriage to have sexual relationships. Many young women cohabit with their partners, and a good part of them see it as absolutely legitimate to spend a night of passion with a charming man they have just met.

Once, men tended to have their first sexual relations some years prior to women. In Athens, for example, for those born between 1942 and 1951 there was a difference of as much as five and a half years between men and women. In Italy, in the generation of the second decade of the Twentieth century, the median age of first sexual relations was 17.8 years for men and 22 for women. In the following decades, this age fell much more for the latter than for the former. In Great Britain it is today identical (17 years of age), and almost identical is the proportion of either sex that loses their virginity before 16 years of age (30.9% for males, 29.2% for females). Females in Denmark, Finland and Norway have their first sexual relations younger than males, whereas females in Italy have them a year later than their male counterparts [Bozon e Kontula 1997; Barbagli *et al*. 2010; Mercer *et a*l. 2013].

Until not so long ago, men also tended to have over the life course a number of sexual partners considerably greater than women. In Italy in 1976, for men between 55 and 64, the median number of sexual partners was 10.9, while for women of the same age it was 2.2 [Fabris and Davis 1978]. In France fifteen years later, among over-65s, 34.6% of men and 3% of women had had more than five sexual partners [Spira and Bajos 1993]. In the subsequent decades, this enormous (and today almost incredible) difference has continuously declined, thanks above all to the growth in the number of women who, over the life course, have had more partners. Today, among the younger generations, that difference is by now much reduced in some countries, and has almost disappeared in others. In Great Britain, for example, in the 16-24 age cohort, 19.6% of males and 16.4% of females have already had at least 10 sexual partners [Mercer *et al.* 2013].

Differences across gender have also greatly diminished where non-reproductive sexual practices are concerned: masturbation, oral sex, oral stimulation of the nipples.

And finally, contrary to what is argued by Hakim, and continuously repeated in the media, male demand for paid sex greatly diminished over the course of the Twentieth century. Indeed Alfred Kinsey [Kinsey *et al.* 1948] had already by mid-century observed that the frequency with which American men visited prostitutes had diminished – calculating that 69% of men had paid for sex at least once over the course of their lives. In the early 1990s this share had fallen to 16% [Michael *et al*. 1994, 63; 95]. In France, it went from 33% in 1970 to 18% in 2006 [Simon *et al.* 1972; Bajos e Bozon 2008].

Analogously to changes taking place in other aspects of private life, changes in sexuality were initiated in Northern Europe and arrived after some time in Southern Europe, before eventually reaching Eastern Europe. For those born in the 1920s in Sweden and Finland, there still existed significant differences along gender lines when it came to autoeroticism; differences which declined in succeeding generations, before disappearing entirely. In France and Northern Italy this process began later, and in Southern Italy and Russia later again. Thus today, while for European males masturbation has become universal, for females there are enormous differences between countries. In Sweden and Finland, the proportion of women of recent generations who masturbate is two or three times that of Russia, Puglia or Sicily [Kontula e Haavio-Mannila 2002; Bajos e Bozon 2008; Barbagli *et al.* 2010]. It is easy to predict that these differences will continue to diminish until they disappear, because the changes in the realm of sexuality are still in motion.

## 3. The Double Moral Standard and Its Decline

The factors that favoured the diminution of these gendered differences in sexuality over the course of the Twentieth century have been many. But without a doubt, one of the most important factors has been the decline of the double moral standard. Along with values, norms, social sanctions, beliefs and interpretive categories, this double standard long regulated the relations between men and women, cast fornication and adultery as exclusively male prerogatives – even if women might be held to be more "libidinous" – and found expression in myriad popular sayings (such as "young men may sow their wild oats" or "a reformed rake makes the best husband"). If we draw upon the words of Lord Gasparo, one of the personae in Castiglione's 1528 *Book of the Courtier* [2003], we can see the basis of this double moral standard in the idea that

> from the Incontinence of the Women arise more Mischiefs, than from that of the Men" [Castiglione 1742, 296].[1]

And that if the former are not "chaste",

> their children would be of dubious Parentage: And, considering the Propensity, which all Men have to their own Offspring, even the Tyes of Blood , which hold the World together, would be dissolved [*Ibidem*, 297].[2]

[1] "[...] dalla incontinéntia delle donne náscono infiniti mali, che non náscono da quella de gli huómini" [Castiglione 1742, 296].

[2] "[...] i figlioli sariano incerti: & quello legame che stringe tutto'l mondo per lo sangue, & per amàr naturalmente ciascuno quello che ha produtto, si disciogliería" [Castiglione 1742, 297].

This thesis was upheld two and a half centuries later by Samuel Johnson, according to whom it was female chastity upon which "all the property of the world depends." Indeed, according to Johnson, "confusion of progeny constitutes the essence of the crime [of adultery]" [Thomas 1959]. Thus the double moral standard formed a keystone in the social architecture that permitted an orderly transmission of property from father to son. But even in the past this was subjected to criticism – albeit rarely – arising precisely from the observation that women had "by nature" a greater sex drive than men (as Hakim would have said at the time). Another of Castiglione's characters asked:

> Why the Law does not make Lasciviousness as criminal in the Men, as in the Women? For if they are naturally more inclin'd to Virtue and Probity, they are more able to Preserve this Virtue of Continency: And allowing this, there could not be greater or lesser Degrees of Certainty with regard to their Children: For suppose Women were ever so much lascivious, and Men were all of them continent, and did not consent to their lewd Solicitations, it would be impossible for Women, by themselves, to prejudice them, in Relation to Posterity [1742, 297].[3]

In effect, as various authoritative scholars have observed [Thomas 1959], the double moral standard made possible not just the handing down of property from father to son, but also the treatment of wives' very sexuality as male property, whose value diminished enormously if they had sexual relations with any other man.

Residues of the double moral standard still linger today, to a greater or lesser extent, in the Western nations. But its decline has been in train for nearly a century, and all the signs indicate that this will continue until its complete disappearance.

## References

Baldwin, J.W.

1994 *The Language of Sex. Five Voices from Northern France around 1200.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bajos, N. and Bozon, M.

2008 *Enquete sur la sexualité en France.* Paris: La Découverte.

Barbagli, M., Dalla Zuanna, G. and Garelli, F.

2010 *La Sessualità degli Italiani.* Bologna: Il Mulino.

[3] "[...] Per qual cáusa non s'è ordinato, che ne gli huómini così sia vituperosa cosa la vita dissoluta, come nelle donne? Atteso che se essi sono da natura più virtuosi, & di maggiòr valore, più facilmente ancóra poríano mantenérsi in questa virtù della continéntia: e i figliuoli nè più nè meno sarian certi: che se ben le donne fóssero lascive, pùr che gli huómini fóssero continenti, & non consentissero alla lascívia delle donne, esse da sé à sé, & senza altro aiuto, già non potrian generare" [Castiglione 1742, 297].

Baumeister, R.F. and Tice, D.M.

2001 *The Social Dimension of Sex.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Bozon, M. and Kontula, O.

1997 "Initiation sexuelle et genre. Comparaison des évolutions de douze pays européens." *Population* 52(6): 1367-1399.

Cadden, J.

1993 *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages. Medicine, Science and Culture.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Castiglione, B.

1742 *Il Cortegiano: or the Courtier: written by the learned Conte Baldassar Castiglione, and a new version of the same into English. Together with his other celebrated pieces, as well Latin as Italian, both in prose and verse. To which is prefix'd The life of the author*. Prepared by A.P. Castiglione, Gent. London: printed for H. Slater, W. and T. Payne, T. Wright and J. Duncan.

2003 *The Book of the Courtier.* Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. [Or. Pub. 1528].

Chesser, E.

1956 *The Sexual Marital and Family Relationships of the English Woman.* London: Hutchinson.

Elliot, D.

1998 *Fallen Bodies. Pollution, Sexuality and Demonology in the Middle Ages.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ellis, H.

1921 *Studies in the Psychology of Sex.* Philadelphia: P.A, Davis Company, vol. III.

Fabris, G. and Davis, R.

1978 *Il Mito del Sesso.* Milano: Mondadori.

Hakim, C.

2016 "The Sugar in His Tea: Sexuality, Patriarchy and Sexual Politics." *Sociologica* 3: doi:10.2383/85805

Kinsey, A., Pomeroy, W.B., Martin, C.E. and Sloan, S.

1948 *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kontula, O. and Haavio-Mannila, F.

2002 "Masturbation in a Generational Perspective." *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality* 14(2-3): 49-83.

MacHaffie, B.J.

1992 *Reading in Her Story. Women in Christian Tradition.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Lombroso, C. and Ferrero, G.

1893 *La Donna Delinquente: la Prostituta e la Donna Normale.* Turin and Rome: Roux and Co.

Mercer, C.H., Tanton, C., Prah, P., Erens, B., Sonnenberg, P., Clifton, S., Macdowall, W., Lewis, R., Field, N., Datta, J. and Copas, A.J.

2013 "Changes in Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles in Britain through the Life Course and over Time: Findings from the National Surveys on Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles." *The Lancet* 382: 1781-1794.

Michael, R.T., Gagnon, J.H., Laumann, E.O. and Kolata, G.
1994 *Sex in America. A definitive Survey.* London: Little, Brown and Company.

Salisbury, J.E.
1996 "Gendered Sexuality." Pp. 81-102 in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, edited by V.L. Bullough and J.A. Brundage. New York: Garland Publishing.

Simon, P., Terrenoire, J.P., Gondonneau, J., Mironer, L., Dourlen-Rollier, A.M., Levy, C., Julliard, R. and Boulin, R.
1972 *Rapport sur le comportement sexuel des Français.* Paris: Editions Pierre Charron et René Julliard.

Spira, A. and Bajos, N.
1993 *Les comportements sexuels en France*, Parigi: La Documentation française.

Thomas, K.
1959 "The Double Standard." *Journal of History of Ideas* 20: 195-216.

Wollstonecraft, M.
1796 *A Vindication of the Rights of Women.* London: Printed for Johnson.

Zemon Davis, N.
1965 *Society and Culture in Early Modern France.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

# Comment on Catherine Hakim/2

## Male Sex Drive, Mulierum Appetitus et Delectatio

Abstract: Beliefs have changed enormously regarding sexual desire and pleasure on the part of men and women. The idea that men have a stronger sex drive emerged over the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, and became established in the Twentieth; but before that, a conviction quite to the contrary had dominated. On the other hand, data from sex surveys conducted in many Western countries in the last half-century show that, in certain respects, the difference in sexual feelings and behaviours between men and women has indeed diminished and that in others it has disappeared entirely. One of the most important factors that favoured the diminution has been the decline of the double moral standard.

*Keywords: Sexuality; Sexual Desire; Double Moral Standard; Gendered Differences.*

**Marzio Barbagli** is Emeritus Professor at the University of Bologna, fellow at the European Academy of Sociology and at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. He has published notably: *Educating for Unemployment. Politics, Labor Market and the School System, Italy, 1859-1973* [Columbia University Press, 1982]; *Sotto lo stesso tetto. Mutamenti della famiglia in Italia dal XV al XX secolo* [Il Mulino, 1984]; *Farewell to the World* [Polity Press, 2015].