

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Shaped by censoring attitudes: pornography in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy

Claudio Monopoli 

Independent scholar

Email: claudio.monopoli@phd.unipd.it

(Received 12 July 2024; revised 20 October 2024; accepted 22 October 2024)

Abstract

Through an analysis of the Italian context, this article illustrates how censoring attitudes shaped the modern meaning of pornography between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the years of the Great War. The difference between the ideas of pornography and obscenity is pointed out through a concise examination of censorship archive documents from the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom, the State of the Church, and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, followed by an overview about how sexuality was intended by Italian sexologists and moralist intellectuals during the period of nation-building following the unification of 1861. In their writings, pornography is described as a source of corruption, especially for young people, and a social threat to be stopped. From 1891 onwards, mobilisations and struggles against pornography were organised by associations and politicians: these activities and debates, which led to the demand for specific legislation to address this phenomenon, are here reconstructed through newspaper articles and archive documents until the Great War period, when the use of the word pornography became even wider, as well as the debates around it and its social meaning.

Keywords: censorship; sexuality; pornography; sexology; culture and media

Introduction

The meaning of pornography, its definition, and the word itself, have a clear historical origin, rooted in a precise historical context. Despite the existence of sexually explicit texts, images, and artefacts since the earliest recorded history, the terms used to describe such products have undergone significant changes across different communities over the centuries. The category we currently resort to is pornography, which has been employed by scholars to explore sexually explicit productions dating even as far back as the sixteenth century (Hunt 1993; Adamo 2021, 19–38). However, this use is not entirely embraced in historiographical debates. For example, *I Modi* ('The Ways'), the famous series of engravings by Giulio Romano from 1524, are often mentioned as the first pornographic images printed in modern Europe; however, Bette Talvacchia (1999, 103) has refused this label and has pointed out how the category of pornography is linked to values not belonging to Renaissance societies but existing only in later Western culture.

My approach to the subject is to define pornography as a system of discourses that exists outside of any production of material culture. The creation of pornography, therefore, results from framing particular objects, images, and texts as offensive to morality and therefore unacceptable, so a pornographic object cannot exist without the discourse that identifies it. From this perspective, there is never an inherently pornographic nature to any cultural production; rather, certain types of sexual representation are discussed and labelled as pornographic.

From this perspective, the definition of pornography lies in its unacceptability, which leads to restrictive and suppressive practices against the dissemination of such materials. In further detail, the origins of pornography can be found within attitudes that are censoring in nature. Even if censorship is traditionally associated with the actions of illiberal governments and institutions, it can also be related to a multitude of experiences and attitudes deriving from debates, exchanges, struggles and interactions surrounding the production and dissemination of cultural products: this broader interpretation is suggested by the so-called 'New Censorship Theory' (Bunn 2015, 39).

To better define the role of censoring attitudes in the shaping of pornography and its meaning, a comparison between several national contexts would be ideal: the spreading of this word, the products falling under this label, but also the debates to stop their circulation were transnational phenomena. However, this topic has been scarcely considered by scholars and it is still needed to explore individual national contexts more deeply. Within the European scenario, the Italian context offers specific perspectives on this phenomenon: the use of the word pornography in its modern meaning is attested in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the new-born Kingdom of Italy was facing the challenge of stabilisation and nationbuilding.

On the theme of pornography in Italy between the nineteenth and early twentieth century there is a lack of contributions and research. As affirmed by Lisa Z. Sigel, 'little has been written about modern Italy, despite its designation as the birthplace of both modernity and pornography' (2005, 4): even after almost 20 years, little has changed, and the more recent and valuable publications on this theme regarding the Italian context are mainly focused on the second half of the twentieth century. The only references available for the period under consideration are from the 1980s and 1990s (in particular Tomassini 1985; Wanrooij 1990), which are, however, still valuable. In this perspective, this contribution wants to bring attention to themes and chronology still barely explored, and offer research suggestions for the history of pornography in Italy.

Following a brief comparison with censorship contexts in early nineteenth-century Italy, this article illustrates how censoring attitudes created the modern meaning of pornography through the analysis of the cultural context in the Kingdom of Italy until the years of the early twentieth century. The first part is focused on the origins of the word pornography, before it became common and spread in public debates, and offers an overview on how former Italian kingdoms used to deal with obscenity. In the second part, the topic of sexuality in the Kingdom of Italy is analysed in its connections with the nation-building process, which leads to the theme of pornography, its meaning and its supposed threats. The last part is dedicated to the war against pornography that took place in Italy between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the years of the Great War, which made even wider its use, the debates around it and the way it was defined.

Before pornography, before Italy

The origins of the word pornography are still far from an exhaustive definition or a precise chronological positioning. The first mentionable trace is probably a book published in

1769 by the French writer Restif de la Bretonne titled *Le pornographe* (Darnton 1995, 86), while the word pornography started to spread only some decades later. Walter Kendrick (1987, 6–11) described how, during the first half of the nineteenth century, pornography was a label used on images and objects from the ancient Greco-Roman world, found from around the middle of the eighteenth century during the several archaeological campaigns which took place especially in Pompeii and Herculaneum. The artifacts discovered in this area revealed sexual behaviours judged as totally opposed to the image of Ancient Roman virtues chosen by the Bourbon kingdom to promote its morals, and in 1821 the Cabinet of Obscene Objects, a non-accessible room of the Archaeological Museum of Naples, was established to store them (De Caro 2019, 5). Authorities, however, never used the word pornography to describe those artifacts: in official documents, they referred to them with the word obscenity, used also to describe frescos with sexually related contents in Pompeii.¹ The first official definition of pornography, according to Kendrick's well-known book, can be found only in an English medical dictionary from 1857, meant as 'a description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene'; however, the modern meaning of pornography can be found no earlier than 1909, when the *Oxford English Dictionary* added the meaning of 'expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature or art', coming from what prostitutes manners were supposed to be (Kendrick 1987, 1–2).

Prior to the advent of pornography, the concept of obscenity existed. This term was previously used in Italian contexts to describe any materials deemed inappropriate due to their sexual content. Its meaning, however, was related mainly to illicit public displaying or selling rather than to the contents of the products in themselves. This is testified by police documents, which also suggest that the violation of obscenity related laws was not considered a serious matter. In 1856, the police took action against a Venetian fine arts seller who was publicly displaying a naked Venus in his shop, which was attracting young people: no sanctions were envisaged, and police merely asked him to remove the painting from public display.² Two years later, in 1858, multiple seizures of obscene photos were followed by convictions related to unauthorised selling, while the breaking of the law in defence of decency was barely mentioned in the same documents.³ Obscene materials were sometimes also described as lascivious or offensive to modesty and good morals, but these definitions were much wider than and different from the modern idea of pornography. In the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, for example, the political uprisings that occurred in 1820 were defined as 'serious injuries to public morals' in edicts and law texts of the following year:⁴ a phrase usually referring to obscene materials embraced even political contents. However, this was not unusual: the portrayal of sexuality and, therefore, obscenity has historically been associated with satire and the use of humour to discredit and ridicule political figures (Englisch 1926, 36–37; Darnton 1995, 69). In the State of the Church, for instance, obscene materials, both visual and written, are listed in seizure reports of books and pictures with political contents,⁵ and images depicting 'the August Effigy of the Supreme Pontiff with reprehensible allusions' are also attested.⁶

In the nineteenth-century Italian states preceding the unification of 1861, morality and good morals defined the social models, and censorship, mainly focused on religious and political content, tried to exclude content opposed to those ideals from the public scene. The term obscenity has its etymological roots in the Latin word *ob-scena*, which signifies being outside of the scene. During the early nineteenth century, this term was employed to justify cultural suppression and censorship, driven by paternalistic intentions. These actions were largely directed towards the subaltern classes and implied distinctions based on the degree of cultural affiliation of the user (Vörös 2014, 124–125). Materials with sexually related contents of course fell under this category, but, in the

second half of the nineteenth century, a new label evolved to indicate the danger this kind of product was representing in the new national state: like many European countries, Italy started to embrace the fight against the phenomenon called pornography.

Nation building and pornography

In the newborn Kingdom of Italy, since the early years after its proclamation, obscene materials were considered and treated quite differently than in the context of the former Italian states, as attested by public debates and declarations from politicians. In 1865, the Minister of the Interior Giovanni Lanza published a circular on the ‘sale and public display of obscene books and figures’:

the most noble art of printing and photography is being used as a filthy and corrupt market, for the sake of sordid and dishonest earnings. ... All honest and discreet people recognise and lament the harm that the dissemination of these obscene figures and these small volumes of licentious narratives cause to the youth, and how much such licence contributes to corrupting and fomenting in the young vices and fatal habits that are harmful not only to morals, but also to their physical and intellectual development; and truly such foul speculation is unworthy and intolerable in a civilised people of noble and free aspirations. The corrupting of customs marks decadence in the nation. It is therefore the duty of the Public Security Administration to exercise careful, incessant surveillance to prevent the public display of books and prints, and especially photographs that offend modesty and morals⁷

In the same year, the deputy Luigi Zinni intervened in parliament against the printing of pamphlets and photographs that ‘reproduce filthy naughtiness’, while the need for surveillance was repeated in 1871 by a new circular by Giovanni Lanza (Frajese 2014, 219). In 1866, *Il Brenta*, a periodical dedicated to culture and arts, denounced how ‘Novel and Photography, these two great productions of the day, which repeat the images of things that were or are ... now have unfortunately acquired the reputation of deviating people from the paths of the just and honest and of leading them to immorality’.⁸

All these voices from the public sphere shared concerns about vices, habits, and education on sexual themes, especially regarding young people. In the censorship contexts of former Italian states, similar concerns did not find space in public debate. Furthermore, there were no calls from institutional representatives for more surveillance against obscenity. In the second half of the nineteenth century, both in Italy and in other European countries, scientific publications and debates on sexuality began to multiply in liberal contexts. Articles, books, pamphlets and disparate expressions of a moralistic, cultural or medical nature converged to convey the idea of what was appropriate and respectable: this perspective went hand in hand with the nationalistic view and defined appropriate sexual conduct, discarding all others with the label of barbarism, abnormality and disease (Mosse 1984, 4). Thus, for example, Paolo Mantegazza, in *Fisiologia del piacere* (*Physiology of Pleasure*) from 1854, and Ferdinando Tonini, in *Igiene e fisiologia del matrimonio* (*Hygiene and Physiology of Marriage*) from 1862, among many others, described marriage as the only appropriate context for sexuality, whose only purpose had to be procreation (Rifelli 1991, 66–67). This perspective about morality, marriage and sexuality was also echoed by the spreading of novels and modern literature in Europe and Italy, which both shaped the imaginary of romantic love and defined gender roles in every social practice, including sexuality (Banti 2016, 40–45). In the following decades, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, multiple authors, such as Silvio Venturi, Pio Viazzi, Antonio Marro and Giuseppe Senizza, debated extensively on how to construct a

correct sexual education. One of the common targets of accusations and invectives were the so-called *Malthusian practices* or *Malthusianism*, which involved contraceptive strategies designed to prevent conception (Bonetta 1990, 334).

The idea of sexuality as a mere reproductive activity easily took root in the society of the newly born Kingdom of Italy, which was facing the nation-building process. Intended as a community of descent (Banti 2005), the Italian nation needed to preserve and even strengthen its generative power, and science, morality and politics became the tools for constructing a propaganda with this aim. From 1870 onwards, the Franco-Prussian War gave rise to the first concerns about the possible decline of the nation: the theme of population growth as the root of national power led France, Germany and, over the decades, almost all European states to replace Malthusian approaches to avoiding overpopulation with neo-mercantilist policies aimed at encouraging procreation: in Italy, this process reached its peak a few decades later under the Fascist regime (Togman 2019, 50–71). Between the end of the nineteenth century and the first 20 years of the twentieth century, in Italy, as in many other European countries, sexuality became synonymous with procreation, and enormous efforts were made in cultural production and public debates to present this as the only legitimate meaning. In the same period, sexologists dedicated an enormous amount of publications to analyse and explain sexual behaviours: despite the miscellaneous and diverse interpretations offered, the common aim among scientists was the social, cultural, and evolutionary development of Western populations, which required a careful study of individual habits and practices (Beccalossi, Fisher, and Funke 2023, 5–7). Educating people, especially the young, was felt to be the only way to avoid the spread of immoral and insane behaviours.⁹ On the subject of sex education, the Italian sexologist Giuseppe Senizza (1919, 49–51) denounced how young people were affected by a serious ignorance of sexuality, a consequence of school, religious and family education, which led to the consumption of pornography:

a newly-formed word, coined in Paris to indicate not only all the filth that is printed in books and in certain newspapers, but also the drawings of these and other figures, all of which the Parisian people, who have always enjoyed them so much, have become so fond of in recent times (*Corriere Della Sera* 1880).

With this description about its circulation in Europe, the word pornography entered the Italian public debate in 1880. Its differences with obscenity were immediately marked, and pornography was presented as an unprecedented phenomenon of the late nineteenth century. In 1886, the Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera* affirmed: ‘Each era has its sins: the sixteenth century had obscenity: we have pornography. Obscenity is less harmful because it is frank, superficial, and has only momentary effects; while the second is insidious, idealises vices, and often usurps tears due to sacred affections’ (Nervi and Pozza 1886, 2). This definition of pornography presents some traits widely shared by multiple authors and intellectuals of those decades: this category was used not only to describe a specific kind of aesthetic or simply sexually explicit contents, but it was meant to identify a real lifestyle and a set of practices capable of corrupting both young people and the whole nation. Since the early years when this word started to be used, pornography was perceived as a label meaning social unacceptability, which complicated the ways in which sexuality was illustrated and described. In 1886, for instance, Paolo Mantegazza’s *Gli amori degli uomini* (*The Love of Mankind*), an anthropological analysis of sexual habits worldwide, caused a great deal of scandal and was even condemned by some critics as pornography: this shows how controversial the subject of sexuality was in publications, and also how the boundaries between sexology and pornography could be perceived as blurred (Campani 2022).

From a historical perspective, the theme of pornography offers interesting elements for the analysis of the relationships between sexuality and society (Sigel 2005, 7–8). Products falling under this definition and inconvenient sexual practices were used also as class signifiers. The bourgeoisie portrayed itself as a morally sound social class, in contrast to the lascivious conduct of the urban proletariat, pointed out as a social milieu in which venereal diseases, prostitution and, above all, pornography proliferated (Stone 1995, 86–89). This idea was also strengthened by the scientific writings coming from the fields of sociology and social medicine: authors such as Alfredo Niceforo, Giulio Obici, Giovanni Marchesini and Giovanni Lorenzoni described how obscene discourses proliferated in boarding school environments and among the working-class categories, but also how readings and images of the same kind circulated (Wanrooij 1990, 31–32). However, as a signifier of class, pornography was also portrayed as a social disease that threatened the upper classes, especially young people. In a conference held in 1891, a doctor denounced a recurrent condition he was facing among young boys, and his speech was published in newspapers due to the seriousness of the theme:

At barely thirteen or twelve years of age, young men present themselves sick to the doctors, and if they belong to the so-called bourgeois or wealthy classes, they are regular buyers, readers of pornographic publications, which have the effect of making attractive that foul spectacle of swarms of filthy and provocative females that are nowadays unleashed on the streets of the city, in public gatherings (*Corriere Della Sera* 1891a, 3).

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, when pornography became a topic widely debated and protests against this phenomenon began to rise, moralist intellectuals pointed out how pornographic materials were particularly dangerous for women. For instance, in 1891, Alfredo Comandini wrote:

Women – who are the most threatened by the spread of pornography in our customs, and who must feel the most offended by it – must courageously take part in this propaganda work. And the more resolutely they must take part if they are young, if they are beautiful, if they are loved and loving – because any advance in pornography, which is vice and depravity in our customs, is detrimental to the love that is virtue and strength (Comandini 1891, 2).

Comandini's concern about the danger pornography represented for women, however, was not aimed at protecting people and bodies from processes of reification, commodification and domination, which is what part of the feminist movement in the second half of the twentieth century intended to do (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988). Intellectuals of that time, mostly men, expressed purely moralistic issues: what needed to be safeguarded was not women's freedom, but the corruption caused by conduct defined as immoral, represented by and through pornography.

The only way to protect people from pornography and all the sexual practices considered to be deviant and immoral was identified in education. The already mentioned Giuseppe Senizza (1919, 49) explicitly identified the lack of sexual education as the cause of the spreading of pornography:

It is ignorance that makes the sexual issue what is generically called 'pornography', because if the sexual issue is looked at through a different lens from that of stupid ignorance, it appears to be something quite different from the lubricity that has

been made of it, and it becomes a subject of study and meditation on both the psychological and the social side.

Pornography itself was the index for one of the most common non-generative sexual practices considered a huge threat for the nation and its generative power: masturbation. Since 1712, with *Onania* by John Marten, masturbation signified sin, as the biblical episode regarding the coitus interruptus of Onan taught. Marten's writing succeeded in bringing together previous narratives about the weakness of the flesh and alterations in sexual conduct in an interweaving of moralistic critique and medical treatise: autoeroticism was related to excess, addiction, secrecy, loneliness, but also to homosexuality (Laqueur 2003). This narrative became rooted in both moralist and scientific debate because of the huge success of Auguste Tissot's *L'Onanisme*, from 1766, which was translated in Italy in 1770 and republished many times in later decades, with over 20 Italian editions during the nineteenth century alone. In this work, Tissot identified masturbation as a loss of vital fluids, and thus a state of emaciation, not occurring in sexual intercourse because of liquids exchanging between man and woman (Garlick 2012, 311–313). In *Fisiologia del piacere*, Paolo Mantegazza (1854, 71) discussed about 'manustupration, a vice far more frequent than anyone can imagine, and which, concealed in the most impenetrable mystery, slowly gnaws away at the germ of strength and intelligence in the most robust age, thus modifying entire generations'. With the passing of the decades, this became a common belief even outside scientific fields. A few years before the First World War, Raffaele Calabrese drew attention on several occasions to the dangers of pornography for young people: in a report submitted to the Royal Commission for Juvenile Delinquency in 1911, he highlighted how 'obscene postcards and photographs, illustrated albums, numerous books, so-called popular books, which for a few cents, in suggestive and improbable covers, pass into the hands of boys of all ages, good soldiers', corrupting their abilities required for the army (Wanrooij 1985, 32). Similarly, General Angelo Schenoni (1912), in regards to military training of young people, denounced how

sensual vice gnaws ... at the fibres of intelligence and consumes the vital substances... Finally, sensual vice quickly ruins the health and physical strength of the body. Not only because of the continuous weakness that results from it, but also because of the infirmities that are mostly its inevitable and fatal consequence.¹⁰

During the years of the Great War, it is possible to find similar quotes even from citizens living in the peripheries of the Italian peninsula:

while phalanxes of young men face death in the field, others, perhaps unable to hold a rifle because of the feebleness of their eyesight, consume the comfortable idleness of citizens by hurling the poisonous slime of the most brazen corruption everywhere.¹¹

From the last decades of nineteenth century, pornography was used as a label for materials considered a serious threat, able to scandalise and raise social anxiety about national wellbeing. For this reason, it also became synonymous with materials to be stopped and the target of social and political struggles.

The war against pornography

In 1880s, when the word pornography was becoming more and more popular, there were no specific laws in effect against obscene materials, but the print law of 1848, coming from

the Kingdom of Sardinia, recognized in its Article 17 the outrage against modesty as a criminal offence and ordered a ban on the printing of writings and images contrary to good morals (Tomassini 1985, 59–60). New laws came out only in 1888, with the Public Safety Act, whose Article 64 stipulated that ‘figures or drawings offensive to morals or morality, to public decency and to private citizens may not be exposed to public view’, and specified that ‘modesty is such an innate feeling in the human soul, such a necessary condition for achieving morality, the foundation of the family and the State, that it is only fair that the legislator defends it with punitive measures against those who offend it’ (Ferretti 1903, 57–58). Even if pornography was not explicitly mentioned, this law became the only tool to stop pornography in the succeeding years. On 30 June 1889, the new Penal Code was approved, whose Article 339 provided for the punishment of ‘anyone who offends decency by writing, drawing or other obscene objects, in whatever form they are distributed or displayed to the public or offered for sale’ (Crivellari and Suman 1896, VII: 475).

In the following years, the debate about pornography, its spreading and its representation as a public threat, was growing more and more, as well as the debates about the possibility of issuing specific and more severe laws against this phenomenon. Just two years after the introduction of the Penal Code and the Public Safety Act, Luigi Carelli (1891a, 447–456) denounced how ‘the offence of modesty’ was ill-defined and limited to voluntary transgressions, but also pointed out how the existing laws were weak and unenforceable, considering the actual ways in which pornography was spreading. The need for an effective measure raised the spectre of censorship, which was considered by the author an illiberal experience of the early decades of the nineteenth century, and so inapplicable to the modern Italian society (Carelli 1891b, 522–531).

The step from debates to political mobilisation was less than short. In March 1891, a single issue of a newspaper entitled *La Pornografia* was published, which presented the project for a popular mobilisation against the spread of pornographic productions (Nava 1891). The year 1891 marks the beginning of the anti-pornography movement in Italy: in addition to the magazines and newspapers that raised questions and made moral judgements about sexuality and pornographic materials, associations and politicians with a wide range of ideologies began to gather in several meetings, conferences, demonstrations and various activities. In April, the first huge meeting against pornography was held in Milan: monarchists, republicans, socialists and clericalists took part to give their interpretations and solutions based on their beliefs; however, newspapers also report how this meeting ended in arguments and brawls between the participants (*Corriere Della Sera* 1891b, 3). Despite this improper start, people and associations were not deterred from joining the several initiatives that followed. Intellectuals and politicians, Catholic and non-Catholic, with any political leaning, tried to make their voices heard in the fight against pornography, even leading to the founding of new groups and associations focused on this phenomenon. In 1894, the mathematician and professor at the Military Academy Rodolfo Bettazzi founded the ‘Turin League against Pornography’, which five years later became the ‘League for Public Morality’. This association, however, did not achieve any great social victory, was not able to push the institutions for new measures on the subject, and was not popular among the masses and working classes due to positions that were not always clear and consistent regarding modernism and the relationship with the Church (Wanrooij 1990, 44–55).

At the same time, chronicles and scandals about pornographic materials in those years made people aware of the need to stop their circulation because of the social threat they represented. One of the most important cases in this regard is dated May 1907, when the Public Security Commissariat of the Trevi district in Rome received a notification that shocked public opinion as soon as the news broke. According to the information received

by the authorities, a few years earlier a twelve-year-old boy had been tracked down by the German photographer Wilhelm von Plüschow and taken to his studio, where he was then narcotised. When he woke up, the boy found himself in the photographer's bed, with his trousers down and a viscous substance on his anus and the surrounding areas of his body. Shocked by the incident, he burst into tears, but the photographer rewarded him with money and invited him to return to the studio, where he was subjected to similar treatments and photographed in the presence of other boys for about two years. The photographer von Plüschow, who was already known to have created a scandal in 1898 for similar nude photo productions in his former studio, was convicted of corruption of minors and indecency by means of photographs (Falco 1919, 5). A few years before the 1907 incident, von Plüschow had had a large number of his photographs confiscated by the police because of their scandalous content (*Avanti!* 1904, 3). On the front page of the newspaper *Battaglie d'oggi*, Lino Ferriani commented on the events of 1907 in this way:

These facts are far worse than the Camorra, the Mafia, hooliganism, and woe to the nation that draws a veil over them and does not courageously aid justice – which cannot accomplish everything by itself – in striking down the guilty. At the German photographer's, over 2000 obscene photographs of boys and girls were found, including groups, which would, I believe, have made even Aretino and Casti blush: those 2000 photographs represent two thousand victims, two thousand children ruined forever. (Ferriani 1907, 1)

Despite the public debate within Italian borders, the real effectiveness of the initiatives organised by the associations against pornography emerged only when they started to be part of international organisations to stop the spread of pornography. Since the late nineteenth century, the market for pornographic materials had been recognised as a transnational network. In response, international conferences, which brought together moralistic associations from a range of countries, proposed the establishment of shared regulations to halt the dissemination of such materials. In 1908, the secretary of the Association for Public Morality in Milan, Girolamo Calvi, invited the Ministry of the Interior to express its official adhesion to the upcoming Conference of Paris, which was finally held in May 1910: its result was the *Yellow Book*, an international agreement to shape a common law against pornography which, in the first instance, was a guide for each state in the making of new legal strategies. Italy started to compare its control system with others from Europe, especially the French-speaking countries.¹²

However, Luigi Luzzatti, Head of the Government and Minister of the Interior at the time of the *Yellow Book*, did not immediately propose a new law to tackle the expanding pornographic market: instead, in June 1910, he issued a ministerial circular asking prefects all over Italy to send the Ministry of the Interior a quarterly report on all operations against pornography.¹³ With this move, Luzzatti did not provide new legal tools in line with other countries to address the problem, and this was the reason why his circular did not receive a unanimous consensus. On 20 June 1910, four days after the ministerial document, an article signed by Giulio Cesare Buzzati, one of the delegates for Italy at the Conference of Paris, was published in the newspaper *Corriere Della Sera* and explained how the main goal of the *Yellow Book*, the modification of existing laws inspired by principles internationally shared, was far from being achieved (Buzzati 1910, 1). To react to this kind of criticism, the Ministry of the Interior started to send bulletins to newspapers with the aim of illustrating how the government was actually tackling the spread of pornographic materials even without a proper law. In the period immediately following the issuing of the circular, the seizure and subsequent confiscation of a substantial number of postcards and booklets was declared on 7 July 1910. These seizures were conducted in both Rome

and Turin, with 2,500 postcards and 50 booklets confiscated in Rome and 12,000 postcards in Turin (*Corriere Della Sera* 1910b, 2). Since September 1910, these bulletins started to become more and more complete and reported data from all over Italy. On 18 September, the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* published the results of the initial three-month period of the campaign against pornography, after Luzzatti's circular was issued: police activities, which were conducted primarily in major Italian cities such as Turin, Genoa, Venice, Florence, and Palermo, had resulted in the seizure of 32,000 postcards, 6,500 photographs, 2,200 books and brochures, predominantly owned by vendors, including booksellers, postcard sellers, and hawkers (*Corriere Della Sera* 1910a, 4). The last bulletin published before the end of Luzzatti's government was dated 28 March 1911 and declared the seizure of '40,000 picture postcards, 20,000 photographs, 3,500 photographic negatives, 10,000 brochures, 300 drawings, and many other objects such as puppets, watches, cigarette cases, transparent papers, mirrors, and films' (*Corriere Della Sera* 1911, 7).

In December 1910, six months after the issuing of the circular following the Conference of Paris, Luzzatti proposed a draft new law against pornography: its purpose was to punish all activities relating to pornographic products, eliminating the ambiguous wording of 'offence against modesty' (Luzzatti 1910). Bureaucratic timing and the fall of the government at the end of March 1911, however, did not allow the draft law to be passed. Nonetheless, this project was once again considered after the outbreak of the Great War, when various parliamentarians and associations, both in large urban centres and in the suburbs, asked the government for new measures against the spread of pornography. In these years, the debate about the threat of pornography and the need to stop it became more intense than in the previous years. In the autumn of 1915, the newspaper *L'Italia* invited associations and individuals to send telegrams to the Ministry of the Interior requesting that pornography be stopped (*L'Italia* 1915, 2): until 24 December, almost 500 telegrams arrived.¹⁴ The common narrative portrayed the war against pornography as a parallel to the military war, of equal importance, to be fought in society with the aim of defending young men destined to become soldiers at the front from corruption and weakness (Comino 1916). This narrative can be found also in the letters coming from associations and individuals from all regions of the country, and from any class, urban or rural area: pornography was compared to the enemy coming from the other side of the border. Despite numerous requests and widespread efforts, however, neither Antonio Salandra's government nor subsequent governments during the Great War years succeeded in passing the Luzzatti draft law, and the proposing of new measures against pornography became impossible.

Despite this increased perception of social danger from 1915 onwards, police documents reveal that in Italy fewer cases about the spreading and selling of pornographic material were registered during the war period. Thanks to the quarterly reports requested by Luzzatti's circular of June 1910, all the police activities against pornography between 1910 and 1919 are reported: a review of the documents received by the Ministry of the Interior reveals that 76.42 per cent of the cases were initiated prior to Italy's declaration of war on Austria-Hungary, namely up to 23 May 1915. The remaining 23.58 per cent of cases pertain to the subsequent four years, which were affected by the Great War and the mobilisations of associations, citizens and local institutions demanding stricter laws against pornography during wartime.¹⁵ These data leave room for two possible interpretations: on the one hand, they could confirm the lack of zeal by the authorities regarding the surveillance on the circulation of pornographic material in the period following Italy's entry into the world conflict, as revealed by widespread complaints and public debate; but, on the other hand, they could perhaps reveal an exaggerated alarmism on the part of associations and moralists compared to the cases actually found in the country. Nevertheless, both of these interpretations corroborate the assertion that the social

significance of pornography and its role in public discourse are inextricably linked to the prevailing censorship attitudes governing this particular category of material.

Conclusion

Focusing on the context of Italy during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the years of the Great War, the sources here analysed have revealed how the spreading of the word ‘pornography’ and its epistemology is linked to debates about how to stop the circulation and the production of such materials. These intentions and practices are not part of any form of structural censorship adopted by the Italian government and institutions in the liberal age. The recommendations of recent censorship studies and the difficulty of investigating practices of silencing and limiting, however, encourage a re-evaluation of the relationship between public speeches and measures against pornography and the broader and more nuanced category of censoring attitudes.

In the context of the former Italian states, governments adopted a policy of preventive censorship to control the circulation of cultural products and prevent the dissemination of ideas that they deemed to be undesirable. Police activities, as attested by the cases reported from the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom, the State of the Church, and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, were mainly addressed to religious and political contents or unauthorised production and selling activities: representations of sexuality crossed censors and police only if related to these two fields, and the label used in these cases was the one of obscenity. The primary concerns raised by the authorities regarding obscene materials were the circumvention of the established control system for printing and censoring rules, their display in public contexts rather than the more appropriate private ones, and their potential for satirical interpretation, which could convey unintended political ideas; but representations of sexuality were not perceived as wrong or dangerous in themselves. The modern idea of pornography, the making of this meaning and the use of this word came out only decades later, when Italy was unified under one crown and one flag: in this new context, sexuality was intended as a social sphere and a reproductive activity which allowed the national community to grow and be healthy. In this perspective, the representation of unproductive sexual practices, or just the spread of materials displaying sexual pleasure, was considered a social threat and fell under the categories of vice, immorality and disease: this was the intended meaning of pornography as constructed by sexologists and moralists since the latter decades of the nineteenth century. These representations were now perceived as problematic not because of the side effects on social order, as during the context of the former Italian states, but due to their contents and their display of sexuality outside the expected moral horizons.

In the liberal Italian society, preventive censorship was considered unacceptable and incompatible with modern social values; however, pornography was perceived as a huge threat able to corrupt young people and weaken the nation, as testified by the several writings from sexologists and moralistic intellectuals quoted above. Despite the potential for sexual education to address this phenomenon, the urgent need to halt the dissemination of pornographic material received most of the attention and resources. From 1891 onwards, associations and mobilisations called for the establishment of regulations and legislation to address this phenomenon. The organisation of international conferences dedicated to this topic and the formulation of legal frameworks further supported the efforts of Italian moralists. These initiatives and efforts ultimately resulted in the shaping of public opinion regarding the topic of pornography, rather than the enactment of legislation. While journal articles, letters from associations, and pamphlets proliferated, the existing law from 1888 pertaining to offences of morality and modesty remained unaltered, despite repeated attempts by governments from the late 1910s

onwards. The only strategy embraced by the government was additional surveillance and the quarterly reports about police activities related to pornographic materials. It can thus be asserted that the significance and implications of pornography in public discourse were shaped by a collective intention and efforts to prohibit, restrict and, consequently, censor it.

The chronology followed in this article, from the first appearance of the word pornography in the late nineteenth century until the First World War, prompts reflection on the significance of the efforts to prohibit, restrict and regulate the circulation of pornographic materials. These efforts are here summarised under the category of censoring attitudes. However, a more comprehensive examination of the Fascist era, which established a wide-ranging censorship apparatus and enacted specific legislation against pornography in response to the International Convention for the Suppression of the Circulation of and Traffic in Obscene Publications of 1924, could further substantiate the existence of a definitive correlation between censorship and pornography. Accordingly, when viewed through the lens of a more expansive chronology, it becomes essential to ascertain whether the censorious approach to pornography that emerged during the Italian liberal era can be regarded as a transitional phase that paved the way for the subsequent reactions manifested in Fascist censorship and anti-pornographic legislation. Furthermore, an examination of the interconnection between censorship and pornography in Italian society enables a re-evaluation of the history of sexuality within this context, encompassing both political and cultural dimensions.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. Some examples can be found in: Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASNa), Ministero della pubblica istruzione, Real Museo Borbonico e Soprintendenza generale degli scavi 1848–1864, folder 343, file 12; ASNa, Ministero degli affari interni, folder 2124, file 275.
2. State Archive of Venice (ASVe), Presidenza della Luogotenenza delle Provincie Venete, Atti 1852–1856, folder 278, file XIV 6/10, n° 7330.
3. The document, which is a report in the form of a table where several police operations are listed and described, can be found in Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASVe), Presidenza della Luogotenenza delle Provincie Venete, Atti 1857–1861, folder 291, file 1/2, n° 222.
4. An edited version of this law can be found in *Collezione Delle Leggi e de' Decreti Reali Del Regno Delle Due Sicilie. Anno 1821, Semestre I 1821*, 93.
5. Even if not in a large amount, documents related to this kind of case can be found in the Archivio di Stato di Roma (ASRm), Ministero dell'Interno, folders 1938–1943.
6. ASRm, Ministero dell'Interno, folder 1941, file 236.
7. Giovanni Lanza's circular of 17 April 1865 is quoted in Wanrooij 1990, 20.
8. This quotation from *Il Brenta* of 18 January 1866 can be found in Zannier 1993, 2:11.
9. Some recent contributions on the interactions between sexology and morality, which led to multiple forms of censorship, can be found in the special issue *Censorship and Sexual Science in the Twentieth Century* of the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (Volume 33, Issue 1, January 2024).
10. Schenoni's pamphlet is attached to Pietro Calvino, *Lettera del Segretario della Lega contro la bestemmia al Ministro dell'Interno e Presidente del Consiglio Antonio Salandra*, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913–1915, file 12985.2, folder 151, Pornografia Italia (1914).
11. Letters with similar concerns can be found in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913–1915, file 12985.2, folder 152, Proteste contro le pubblicazioni oscene.
12. Documents about Italian participation to these conferences and diplomatic exchanges with foreign countries following the *Yellow Book* signature can be found in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913–1915, file 12985.2, folder 151, Pornografia Estero (1914).
13. Circular of 16 June 1910, n. 12985.2, Pubblicazioni pornografiche, in Ministero dell'Interno, Bollettino ufficiale del Ministero dell'Interno, n. 19, 1 luglio 1910, in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913–1915, file 12985.2, folder 151, Repressione della pornografia (1910–1912).

14. All the telegrams can be found in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913–1915, file 12985.2, folder 152, Proteste contro le pubblicazioni oscene.
15. These data can be found in the documents of ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913–1915, file 12985.2, folders 151–152, and ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1916–1918, file 12985.2, folder 205.

Archival sources

Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS):

Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1913–1915, file 12985.2, folders 151–152;

Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Polizia giudiziaria, 1916–1918, file 12985.2, folder 205.

Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASNa):

Ministero della pubblica istruzione, Real Museo Borbonico e Soprintendenza generale degli scavi 1848–1864, folder 343, file 12;

Ministero degli affari interni, folder 2124, file 275.

Archivio di Stato di Roma (ASRm):

Ministero dell'Interno, folders 1938–1943.

Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASVe):

Presidenza della Luogotenenza delle Province Venete, Atti 1852–1856, folder 278;

Presidenza della Luogotenenza delle Province Venete, Atti 1857–1861, folder 291.

References

- Adamo, P. 2021. *Hard core: istruzioni per l'uso: sessuopolitica e porno di massa*. Milan-Udine: Mimesis.
- Avanti! 1904. 'Ladri al Lavoro!' 18 January.
- Banti, A. M. 2005. *L'onore della nazione: identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla Grande Guerra*. Biblioteca Einaudi. Turin: Einaudi.
- Banti, A.M. 2016. *Eros e virtù: aristocratiche e borghesi da Watteau a Manet*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Beccalossi, C., K. Fisher and J. Funke. 2023. 'Sexology and Development'. *History of the Human Sciences* 36 (5): 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09526951231213970>.
- Bonetta, G. 1990. *Corpo e nazione: l'educazione ginnastica, igienica e sessuale nell'Italia liberale*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.
- Bunn, M. 2015. 'Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After'. *History and Theory* 54 (1): 25–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.10739>.
- Buzzati, G. C. 1910. 'A Proposito Della Circolare Luzzatti Contro La Pornografia'. *Corriere Della Sera*, 20 June.
- Campani, F. 2022. "'In Science, the Obscene Does Not Exist": Paolo Mantegazza and the Blurred Boundaries between Sexual Science, Anthropology and Pornography (1870–1910)'. *Revue d'histoire Culturelle. XVIIIe-XXIe Siècles*, no. 4 (March). <https://doi.org/10.4000/rhc.2070>.
- Carelli, L. 1891a. 'L'art. 339 e Le Pubblicazioni Ed Esposizioni Oscene'. *La Scuola Positiva* 9–10:447–56.
- Carelli, L. 1891b. 'L'art. 339 e Le Pubblicazioni Ed Esposizioni Oscene'. *La Scuola Positiva* 11–12: 522–31.
- Collezione Delle Leggi e de' Decreti Reali Del Regno Delle Due Sicilie. Anno 1821, Semestre I*. 1821. Naples: Real Tipografia.
- Comandini, A. 1891. '...'. *La Pornografia*, 17 May.
- Comino, A. 1916. *Guerra Alla Pornografia. Conferenza Della Sera Del 9 Dicembre 1915 Nel Salone Contrado Ferrini*. Mondovì: Tipografia dell'Immacolata.
- Corriere Della Sera. 1880. 'Pornografia'. 17 August.
- Corriere Della Sera. 1891a. 'La Conferenza Pessimista Di Un Medico Sui Vizi Dell'odierna Gioventù'. 30 April.
- Corriere Della Sera. 1891b. 'Le Violenze Di Iersera al Meeting Contro La Pornografia'. 13 April.
- Corriere Della Sera. 1910a. 'I Sequestri e Le Condanne per La Repressione Della Pornografia'. 18 September.
- Corriere Della Sera. 1910b. 'La Repressione Della Pornografia. Sequestri e Condanne'. 7 July.
- Corriere Della Sera. 1911. 'La Lotta Contro La Pornografia'. 28 March.
- Crivellari, G. and G. Suman, eds. 1896. *Codice Penale per Il Regno D'Italia. Vol. VII*. Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice.

- Darnton, R. 1995. *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- De Caro, S. 2019. *Il Gabinetto segreto del Museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli*. Milan: Electa.
- Dworkin, A. and C.A. MacKinnon. 1988. *Pornography and Civil Rights*. Organizing Against Pornography.
- Engelich, P. 1926. *L'eros nella letteratura*. (1st Italian ed: 1976). Milan: Garzanti.
- Falco, G. 1919. *Su Alcune Anomalie Sessuali, Con Una Tavola*. Pisa: Tipografia Ferdinando Simoncini.
- Ferretti, E. 1903. *La Legge Di Pubblica Sicurezza Pel Regno d'Italia*. Portici: Stabilimento tipografico Vesuviano.
- Ferriani, L. 1907. 'E Lo Scandolo Del Fotografo?' *Battaglie d'oggi*, 21 July.
- Frajese, V. 2014. *La censura in Italia: dall'Inquisizione alla polizia*. Quadrante Laterza. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Garlick, S. 2012. 'Masculinity, Pornography, and the History of Masturbation'. *Sexuality & Culture* 2012 (16): 306–320.
- Hunt, L., ed. 1993. *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*. New York: Zone Books.
- Kendrick, W. 1987. *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*. New York: Viking.
- Laqueur, T.W. 2003. *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*. Zone Books.
- L'Italia*. 1915. 'Protestate!' 23 October.
- Luzzatti, L. 1910. 'La Legge e La Pornografia. Relazione al Senato Italiano, Dicembre 1910'. *Quaderni Di Vita* 1 (4): 1–12.
- Mantegazza, P. 1854. *Fisiologia del piacere*. Milan: Giuseppe Bernardoni.
- Mosse, G.L. 1984. *Sessualità e nazionalismo: mentalità borghese e rispettabilità. Storia e società*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Nava, C. 1891. 'Intendiamoci!' *La Pornografia*, 17 May.
- Nervi, and G. Pozza. 1886. 'La Mandragola Di N. Macchiavelli al Teatro Scribe Di Torino. La Conferenza Del Panzacchi'. *Corriere Della Sera*, 4 December.
- Rifelli, G. 1991. 'Sessualità: Nascita Di Un Concetto e Di Una Disciplina'. In *Per Una Storia Dell'educazione Sessuale 1870–1920*, by G. Rifelli and C. Ziglio. Florence: La Nuova Italia.
- Schenoni, A. 1912. *Regole ed usanze di condotta nella buona società: norme di buona creanza per i giovani d'ogni condizione: raccomandabili a tutti gl'istituti d'educazione civili e militari*. Modena: Società tipografica modenese.
- Senizza, G. 1919. *L'educazione Sessuale*. Florence: Ceccoli E.
- Sigel, L.Z., ed. 2005. *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern European Pornography, 1800–2000*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Stone, L. 1995. *La sessualità nella storia*. Rome: Laterza.
- Talvacchia, B. 1999. *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Togman, R. 2019. *Nationalizing Sex: Fertility, Fear, and Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tomassini, L. 1985. 'Fotografia, Pornografia e Polizia in Francia e Italia Tra Ottocento e Novecento'. *AFT Rivista Di Storia e Fotografia* 1985 (2): 46–67.
- Vörös, F. 2014. 'La régulation des effets de la pornographie'. *Hermès, La Revue* 69 (2): 124–28. <https://doi.org/10.3917/herm.069.0124>.
- Wanrooij, B.P.F. 1985. 'Fotografie Edificanti e Lotta Contro l'immoralità'. *AFT Rivista Di Storia e Fotografia* 1985 (2): 26–33.
- Wanrooij, B.P.F. 1990. *Storia Del Pudore. La Questione Sessuale in Italia 1860–1940*. Venice: Marsilio.
- Zannier, I., ed. 1993. *Segni di luce. La fotografia italiana dall'età del collodio al pittorialismo*. Vol. 2. Musica, cinema, immagine e teatro. Ravenna: Longo.

Claudio Monopoli holds a PhD in History from the University of Padua, the University Ca' Foscari of Venice and the University of Verona. His research interests include the history of sexuality, the history of photography, and visual and material culture. He has been visiting research student at the Photographic History Research Centre (PHRC), at the De Montfort University (Leicester, UK). He is currently editing, with Gil Pasternak, a double volume entitled *Censorship & Visual Culture. Ruling Images, Shaping Societies*, for Palgrave Macmillan, and developing his research on the social history of pornography in Italy.

Italian summary

Attraverso l'analisi del contesto italiano, questo articolo illustra come l'atteggiamento censorio abbia plasmato il significato moderno di pornografia tra gli ultimi due decenni dell'Ottocento e gli anni della Grande Guerra. La differenza tra l'idea di pornografia e quella di oscenità viene evidenziata sinteticamente attraverso i documenti d'archivio relativi alla censura nel Regno Lombardo-Veneto, nello Stato della Chiesa e nel Regno delle Due Sicilie, alla quale segue una

panoramica sul modo in cui la sessualità era intesa dai sessuologi e dagli intellettuali moralisti italiani durante il periodo di nation building dopo l'unificazione del 1861. Nei loro scritti, la pornografia viene descritta come una fonte di corruzione, soprattutto per i giovani, e una minaccia sociale da fermare. A partire dal 1891 si susseguirono mobilitazioni e lotte contro la pornografia da parte di associazioni e politici: queste attività e dibattiti, che portarono alla richiesta di una legislazione specifica per affrontare il fenomeno, sono qui ricostruiti attraverso articoli di giornale e documenti d'archivio fino al periodo della Grande Guerra, quando l'uso del termine pornografia diventò ancora più esteso, così come i dibattiti intorno ad esso e al suo significato sociale.

Cite this article: Monopoli C (2025). Shaped by censoring attitudes: pornography in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy. *Modern Italy* 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2024.61>