

*The purpose of sexuality is anything but genital discharge, it is the encounter with the other, as only by 'desiring' or 'feeling desired' I discover myself as a sexualised being.*  
(Sartre, 1943)

*For centuries people have mourned the death of Pan, but for less time and with less violence the gradual and silent murder of Eros has been perpetrated in the places where he had stayed for a long time: temples, gymnasia, places of the tense and somewhat morbid exercise of the restless quest, where one longs to seek and where the one who seeks, at the same time, desires.*  
(Mottana, 2008)

*Part I*

*Overcoming patriarchy and dominance relations*

# 1. *Sexuality in Gestalt therapy from its origins to now*

*From the Treccani dictionary, sexology is the science of sexuality, which encompasses all the knowledge relating to the dynamics between the sexes: gender identity, cultural determinants, couple and family relationships, sexuality in the narrow sense, pathology of the relationships and of the sexual functionality.*

*According to the World Health Organisation, sexual health is the integration of the somatic, affective, intellectual and social aspects in the sexual being in order to achieve an enrichment of human personality, communication and love.*

Sexology is the science of sexuality, but making sexuality the object of scientific investigation is a difficult operation, as it is a very complex phenomenon that does not easily lend itself to the inevitable scientific reductionism.

The effort that we are going to make in this book, like other Gestaltists before us who have dealt with sexuality (Amendt-Lyon, 2014; Brotto, 2019; O'Shea, 2000) or intimacy (Lee, 2008), is first of all to understand this phenomenon from the field perspective, linking the human being to his or her environment and explicating the different domains that influence this experience: social, psychological, physiological, historical-cultural, anthropological.

The modern era has seen, especially in the area we call Eurocentric (because it is influenced by a culture of European origin), enormous changes in sexuality and sexology.

A first major change was brought about by psychoanalysis, which radically changed the way sexuality was interpreted in psychology and medicine, considering it to be part of the development of the human being and also emphasising its close connection to the political and economic development of our society.

In Freud's work, Perls finds his own sexual difficulties 'taken seriously' for the first time. Freud, in fact, "stripped the sexual problem of its isolated and pathological character, describing it also as the result of the morals and culture of the time" (Bocian, 2012).

Before Freud, sexuality was basically the domain of the Christian churches, in particular, the Catholic one.

Although it was the Greek philosophy to define love and sexuality in the terms we still use today, it was the Christian church that appropriated sexuality as an aspect of human behaviour that was responsible for mankind's estrangement from God and its approach to the Devil.

The Church adopts the division of the ancient Greeks between *eros* (carnal love), *philia* (love pertaining to feelings and friendship), and *agape* (divine love). At the same time, however, carnal love is degraded to a lower, animalistic form that can only be practised for reproductive purposes, because if one indulges in it, it opens the door to the influence of the devil who becomes the true possessor of sexuality. Instead, *philia* and *agape* are united in the concept of love with a capital L, in which all the nuances of the Greek thought are to be found, such as *anteros* (reciprocated love), *storge* (love between blood relatives), *thelema* (the pleasure of doing something and the desire to want to do it). *Eros* will no longer be considered as an essential component of this 'love'.

Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox morals became the reference point for the control of sexuality on a social level, even conditioning the law systems of secular states, so much so that in Italy, for example, rape has been judged as a crime against the person and no longer as a crime against morality only for a few years.

Although psychiatry, and hence medicine, attempt to substitute the concept of disease for that of sin, the influence of the churches remains decisive in leading many sexual behaviours, that are condemned by current morality, to be read as pathological.

Various attempts were made to take sexology and sexuality out of the domain of the churches (see the works of Forel, Hellis, Bloch); however, we have to go as far as Freud's three *Essays on Sexuality* (1905) and his later works (Freud, 1912-1914; 1920) to come to a first real revolution.

*By placing libido, i.e. the dynamic expression of the sexual impulses, at the basis of human development and behaviour, Freud took sexuality out of the church influence and closer to the psychological and medical studies. Freud stripped sexuality of the characteristic of a 'private and improper event' of which it was forbidden to speak about in public, although he later came to regard the repression of sexuality as right and also promoted sublimation as the only healthy form of social adaptation.*

Thanks to the extraordinary spread of psychoanalysis among the upper middle classes of the Eurocentric bourgeoisie, sexuality ceased to be a dark, dangerously demonic force that only males could afford to experience, outside marriage, in the brothels – which were very popular and attended by all social classes.

The Eurocentric culture discovers that women have a sexual life, too. Moreover, since the Canonical Code states that ‘normal’ sexuality is ‘*immissio penis in vagina, eiaculatio spermatis in interpositum*’, the idea that each of us has a ‘perverse’ sexuality – that each of us experiences a sexual journey in which we discover our own tastes and pleasure in different ways of touching ourselves, touching others and being touched – begins to take hold. Thanks to Freud, sexual perversions become a part, with different degrees of development, of all neuroses, that is, of all of us.

A further important shift in the understanding of sexuality occurred thirty years later thanks to a heretic of psychoanalysis, Wilhelm Reich. His writings, in particular *The Function of the Orgasm* and *The Sexual Revolution*, besides exploring the function of sexuality and of the orgasm for the psycho-physical wellbeing and malaise of human beings, *took sexuality not only out of the ecclesiastical domain, but also out of the psychological and medical one, recognising its important social function and its powerful subversive force against those institutions that had made the sexual repression an instrument of social control*. His writings became reference points for the social movements of ‘67 in the USA and ‘68 in Europe.

Thanks to Reich and other heretical psychoanalysts such as Otto Gross and Erich Fromm, sexuality became a topic of social and political discussion.

Reich also began to make a distinction between genitality and sexuality and between *genital orgasm* and *sexual orgasm*. The healthy person with a ‘genital nature’ (Reich, 1933) is able to experience a genital orgasm effortlessly, involuntarily, simply by relying on the loved one and the love game, transcending control and rationality, in an almost animal-like way. In 1927, he published *The Function of the Orgasm*, describing the course of the sexual act and the orgasm in men and women, in a vision in which the woman is an active participant during the sexual act on an equal footing with the man<sup>1</sup>. This scandalised many psychoanalyst colleagues of the time, including Helen Deutsch, who had expanded the theory of the ‘penis envy’ in the female condition (Bocian, 2012). A different position was taken by Karen Horney, Perls’ therapist, who read this phenomenon as a result of a male-dominated culture.

On the other hand, the rise of a new matriarchy that could heal the wounds of millennia of dominant and violent patriarchy is a salient point in the vision of both Otto Rank and Wilhelm Reich (Onfray, 2007; 2020).

Reich’s outsider position also manifested itself in the positive evaluation of masturbation in adolescents and primarital sexual intercourses.

Again, Reich distanced himself from Freud with respect to his opposition between Eros and Thanatos, between libido and death drive. Reich rejected the idea of a death drive to explain destructiveness, believing that the only fundamental instinct is the vital one. The conflict and the internal tensions experienced by human beings do not depend on a biological conflict, but on a threat of punishment originally coming from the environment and then internalised. In these thoughts we can see the basis of Perls’ statements. He, while influenced by Reich’s rejection of the death drive, developed an original critique to the Freudian concept by giving a different role to aggression.

Gestalt therapy entered this really fervent cultural landscape in Europe and began to effect a further significant change in the view of sexuality.

Both in *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*, written by Perls in the 1940s, and in *Theory and Practice of Gestalt Therapy*, the founding text of Gestalt therapy, written in the 1950s (which, from now on, we will refer to as PHG), Perls and others clarified two fundamentals of Gestalt theory and therapy that contributed, among other things, to the breakaway from psychoanalysis:

1. sexuality and aggression are no longer seen as two antagonistic forces, but rather as complementary;
2. aggression, with its destructive component, is no longer linked to death, but it is an indispensable requirement for the transformation and assimilation of the environment by living beings and, therefore, a fundamental support for growth. Death itself is no longer defined as antithetical to life, but as part of life itself. An indispensable component to allow the perpetuation and the continuous evolution of life within the limited space of our planet.

Linking aggression to sexuality at the time was not an easy task, and neither is now. For example, the term ‘sexual aggression’, developed in the previous book (Pizzimenti, 2015), cannot currently be used on Google,

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<sup>1</sup> After him, Lowen, a patient and pupil of Reich, a psycho-analyst doctor, continued his psycho-bodily approach by founding bioenergetics, a discipline that intervenes on muscular tensions in order to enhance psychophysical well-being. In his various essays on sexuality and the orgasm, he emphasised how sexuality conditions the personality because it determines the individual’s relationships with the others and the world (Lowen, 1965; 1988).

under penalty of the deletion of the blog or site. This is because the moment one puts aggression and sexuality together, what immediately emerges in current thinking is rape, violence, or sexual harassment.

Yet, we find the complementarity of these two forces in a phenomenon that characterised the movements of '67 and '68: the protest.

Today, we consider challenging authority as our right, but before '67 and '68 it was not so. You could either kill authority, as in the French and Russian revolutions, or you endured it. Protesting was not possible.

What changed society and also the method of therapy were the movements of the 1960s, with their great sexual drive: 'make love, not war', 'free love' combined with the contestation of the authority carried out with the tools of irony, satire, strikes, 'confrontation' and encounter.

Let us take the famous session of Perls and Gloria in 1965. This never-repeated experiment of a patient who had three individual sessions with three different therapists precisely to compare their three theoretical approaches. Well, if you look at this session and contextualise it, you can appreciate the new wind that was about to sweep the US and Europe.

Perls is aggressive, incorrect, but he supports Gloria in challenging him, in rejecting him. There is never a moment when he tries to dominate Gloria by elevating himself on the throne of his knowledge. On the contrary, there is a moment when he is about to do so and starts explaining something to her, but then he stops and defines what he was saying as *bullshit*.

Gloria is a much younger and less learned woman, yet she challenges the great man, who is a professor and psychotherapist of great reputation. She rejects him several times and insults him. Perls welcomes this aggression with satisfaction, at times with joy, while rejecting and scorning her attempts to make him the big man who can save her, as small and defenceless as she is.

For the first time, in a psychotherapy setting, we see a confrontation taking place which, as it unfolds, becomes more and more equal. Perls' aggression is sustained by sexuality and aims at a closeness and an encounter within the session, there and then: "What would you tell me if I were your age?", "What are you doing to me?", "Tell me how ugly and disgusting I am!", "Wonderful! You were wonderfully authentic". Gloria's aggressiveness is destructive, but it is also tenacious and willing to encounter. She never gives up on Perls, she does not give in, she does not suffer, she fights to meet him and to be seen and appreciated. Feminism was about to spread its wings.

Certainly, if we decontextualise the session and imagine it taking place nowadays, Perls seems irritating and excessive. But in those years, excesses were necessary to break fixed and overwhelming structures.

However, the revolution started by the founders of Gestalt therapy is not yet over. In this respect, Goodman writes that the sexual revolution is one of the many sadly interrupted revolutions (Goodman, 1964). In order to promote their thinking, we need to explore the links between aggression and sexuality, and it is necessary to carry out certain procedures, as well as develop some concepts that we will explain in the course of the book:

- take sexuality out of the control of morality, recognising its status of a self-regulating relational dynamic, whose only prerequisite and limitation is the equality in terms of social power and capacity for self-determination of all the subjects involved;
- affirm a profound critique of patriarchal systems, which are primarily responsible for a society based on the values of force, domination and power. Besides an ideological condemnation, they feed the delinquent and criminal culture, which is solely responsible for the various risks attributed to sexuality;
- separate the responsible/irresponsible social behaviour from the delinquent and/or criminal social behaviour;
- study all possible forms of expression of sexuality and pleasure that are expressed within responsible and/or irresponsible social behaviours and valuing them as possible developments of love.

In chapters 4, 5 and 8, we are going to take an overview of how sexuality is changing in the world for all age groups and of the small or large revolutions that men and women are carrying on, through their aggressive and transformative power.