

## Report from Rome by Rosanna Impiccini

### The red light economic boom

*Italy has become the mecca of the pornography industry—one of the gifts of a thriving “informal economy.”*

**T**wenty years ago you could still see furtive-looking persons who whispered when they asked for a pornographic magazine at the newsstand. Today, even teenagers in Italy can ask out loud for pornographic publications. Articles 528 and 529 of the penal code, which punish “crimes against public decency,” are still on the books—but unlike in the 1960s and '70s, they are no longer enforced.

After a 15-year campaign, all pornographic publications are now regularly registered, get government subsidies like other publications, have a registered journalist as their responsible editor, and even sometimes have an ideological slant.

But ideology has little to do with a business which, in close linkage with the even more lucrative businesses of prostitution and the drug traffic (cocaine in particular), brings in billions of dollars to its management. Moreover, the porn businessmen are often in contact with parallel sectors of the secret services and contribute to building up “files” on the lives of “people who count”; therefore, they can occasionally influence important political decisions or waylay threatening investigations.

The Italian government agency ISPES, in its *Second Report on Pornography*, issued in February 1988, reports that Italy has become the mecca for world production of pornography. According to ISPES official Gian Maria Fara, “The peninsula is the reference point of foreign producers who in their own countries have to deal with watchful controls and severe sanctions.” In fact, it appears that var-

ious organizations for the production of obscene magazines, videotapes, and so forth, have moved to Italy because of the laxity of controls and the low cost of manpower.

The ISPES report states that there has been a quiet boom in videotape sales, which are shown at home or among friends. Of every 100 rented videotapes, 50 are hardcore pornography. In the wake of this lucrative market, there has also been created a magazine, which illustrates the bounty of porno videotapes.

Carlo Rocco, son of a well-known Communist Party journalist, Emanuele Rocco, and former editor of *Il Manifesto*—the leading left offshoot from the Communist Party in the 1960s—has created the masthead *X Eros in Video*, with a monthly run of 20,000, which reviews the latest pornographic videotapes.

Officially, 20 million pornographic magazines are sold in Italy each year, which means that 40% of the population buys such publications. One study shows that out of 60,000 movie houses in Italy, 600 to 900 of them project a porn film every day. This is so-called hard-core, without taking into consideration the supposedly non-pornographic “erotic” films, some of which have now been introduced into the schools as part of “sex education.”

The sociologists have busied themselves creating the artificial distinction between “eroticism” and pornography, arguing that eroticism is life-enhancing. So what working-class folks call porn, the yuppies call “eroticism,” perhaps seasoned with a pinch of cocaine, as recommended in one of

the first issues of *Penthouse* to come out in Italy.

Then we have “pink lights” pornography as it is called, promoted by high-class prostitutes such as the aristocrat Marina Ripa di Meana, alias Lante della Rovere, who go on the government-owned TV channel to explain the beauties of eroticism to the public.

How much pornography has taken hold of the Italian electorate, is demonstrated by the case of the election to Parliament last June of sex-film star Ilona Staller, “La Cicciolina,” on a Radical-Communist ticket. Staller says that she wants to bring sex education into the elementary schools, and that Art. 528 of the Penal Code must be abolished, in the name of individual freedom.

Riccardo Schicchi, the agent for Staller and other porn queens, justified the use of children in pornographic films to the newspaper *Il Giornale*, saying, “We must consider that children are habitually used, without anyone getting scandalized, to film obscene and violent scenes in so-called normal films. So I wonder what’s the difference, from any standpoint, in using a minor to film a scene of violence or to make a pornographic work.”

Now, prostitution, like pornography, is no longer to be treated as a “social evil.” In the first five months of the recent Goria government, five different political parties presented bills to revise the anti-prostitution law. The neofascist MSI called for reopening shut-down brothels. “Proletarian Democracy” wanted complete liberalization of prostitution. The Communist senator, Gianna Schelotto, who introduced her party’s bill, said, “Every citizen can do what he wants with his own sexuality, and whatever the choice is, it must not be criminalized.”