

Dear Minister

We are writing to You as Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities in Italy and as former Editor in Chief of the Encyclopaedia Treccani.

We are a group of scholars and we would like to submit to Your attention some entries included in the on-line Dictionary of Medicine (2010) and Encyclopaedia, freely available at the internet site "Treccani.it".

More specifically, these entries are: "transgender", "homosexuality", "lesbianism", "intersexuality", "gender". In our opinion, in all of them moral judgment systematically prevails on objective scientific information: indeed, when we first found out about the above-quoted entries, our reactions ranged from astonishment to indignation.

Our astonishment is due to the lack of proper bibliographic data in the above-quoted entries: their authors appear in fact to ignore the consistent amount of essays on these topics published within the last thirty years, in the fields of medical, social and juridical sciences.

Our indignation is due to the lexical carelessness of the above-quoted entries along with their stigmatizing contents. This appears to be particularly striking when expressed by such an influential and prestigious cultural institution as Encyclopaedia Treccani, widely renowned for its lead role in the popularization of science.

We would like to point out that both language and contents of the above-mentioned entries do in fact undermine the everyday work of activists and scholars who against sexist and trans/homophobic prejudice and violence, and could ultimately result in an actual authoritative legitimization that prejudice and violence.

In order to give convincing evidence of what we are saying, we would like to submit to Your attention some of the inaccurate and/or untrue statements included in the above-quoted entries. In the entry "transsexual", among others, You can read:

*Mostly, transsexuals abhor homosexuality and try to correct in their bodies what they consider as a mistake of nature. Accordingly to the different social, economic and legislative conditions, transsexuals look for a solution using hormones and medications, and turning to cosmetic surgery and to the so-called sex reassignment surgery. But sex reassignment surgery is not effective: it gives just the appearance of the coveted gender, irreparably destroying the anatomy of the original one.*

The author seems here to ignore that sexual orientation, for transsexual and transgender people as for anybody else, is totally independent from gender identity. It is in fact not true that transsexual and transgender people "abhor" homosexuality. Moreover, stating that sex reassignment surgery is not a "solution", the author simply expresses his or her personal perspective, not only stigmatizing sex reassignment surgery but also seeming to ignore both the testimonies of transsexual people and the contents of scientific literature on this topic.

In the above-quote entries, we also find an ideological and distorted representation of non-heterosexual sexuality, as it appears, for example, in the "gender" entry. Here, we expected to find a complete and object survey on the analytic category of "gender" and its cultural and political meanings, including, as it should be, both approving and disapproving opinions on the uses of "gender". We can read instead:

*Some anthropologic studies point out the urgency of regaining the complete perspective on the individual, in which all the dimensions are collected: an ontological equality and a biological and*

*psychic peculiarity, that is the uniqueness of being a man or a woman. The fulfilment of sexual identity shows itself in being a man or a woman and in the purposes of sexuality (reproduction and generational continuity) and it centres on a clear corporeal dimension: the individual can only develop a psychic identity based on the latter, in order to understand the importance of sexual diversity and to confront himself/herself with it.*

The entries stick to an essentialist perspective on sexuality, which, according to the authors, must be heterosexual and generative, in order to provide an “healthy” psychic identity. Although the vast majority of recent and distinguished scientific studies contests this latter statement, the author of the entry “homosexuality” writes:

*Given the evident bipolarity male/female, nowadays we can surely state that heterosexual orientation is innate, in-naturae, however some peculiar interactions with familial and social environment can cause a homosexual orientation in the subject.*

Scholars dealing with gender and sexuality issues know that there is not an explanation for the sexual orientation: stating that heterosexual desire is something innate is in fact a mere rhetorical choice made, in our opinion, in order to depict homosexual desire as something basically wrong. Moreover, in the above-quoted entries, “sexual diversity” is reduced to an “evident bipolarity male/female”, when, on the contrary, in the last decades, scientific studies have abundantly shown how sexual dimorphism is not a cultural universal. Human physiology presents in fact many variations in sex characteristics (including chromosomes, gonads, and/or genitals), that are the different forms of the so-called intersexuality or DSD (differences of sex development).

Finally, the entry “lesbianism” also raises doubts about the competences of the author:

*The psychosocial behaviour of the homosexual women does not differ from the heterosexuals’, and the pseudo-masculinity in their life-style is quite rare; generally speaking, lesbians adapt their experiences to heterosexual role-models: we see a masculine, dominant partner and a substitute for the wife, which often change their roles.*

In facts here the author represents lesbian couples in a heteronormative, sexist manner: he or she uses here a non-scientific language (i.e. “substitute for the wife”), representing lesbian couples as a mock of a traditional, asymmetric heterosexual couple, in which a “dominant partner” prevails on the other.

Due to space limitations, we are forced to limit examples, and, in the interest of saving Your time, we omit to quote other entries which are unbecoming of an Encyclopaedia edited by Treccani.

As readers, scholars and researchers, we are asking You to invite the Editor in Chief of the Encyclopaedia Treccani to amend the above-quoted entries, basing them on scientific and up-to-date bibliographic data, which we are in case likely to provide, suggesting the most recent and distinguished studies on these topics.

We are sure You want to pursue an objective and complete scientific information, free from prejudice and respectful of the diversity of readers, honouring in this manner the history of the Encyclopaedia Treccani, Your former role of Editor in Chief of the Encyclopaedia Treccani, and Your actual role of Minister of the Italian Republic.