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From Verona, with love: “anti-gender” mobilizations and transfeminist (re)actions

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Mobilisierungen gegen Feminismus und ‚Gender'

Erscheinungsformen, Erklärungsversuche und Gegenstrategien

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From Verona, with love: "anti-gender" mobilizations and transfeminist (re)actions

Zusammenfassung

From Verona, with love: „Anti-Gender"-Mobilisierungen und transfeministische (Re-) Aktionen

In diesem Artikel nehmen wir Verona als Ausgangspunkt, um „Anti-Gender"-Mobilisierungen in Italien und transfeministische Reaktionen zu analysieren. Wir geben einen Überblick über die italienische „Anti-Gender"-Kampagne, wobei wir die Rolle der Katholiken und der politischen Rechten beschreiben. Wir untersuchen die verschiedenen Formen, die diese Mobilisierungen insbesondere zwischen 2013 und 2017 angenommen haben, sowie einige Reaktionen von AktivistInnen und AkademikerInnen in diesen Jahren. Dann analysieren wir einige Fälle sowohl von „Anti-Gender"-Mobilisierungen als auch von transfeministischen Reaktionen, die zwischen 2018 und 2019 auftraten. Insbesondere analysieren wir den Pillon-Gesetzesentwurf, der die Verbindung zwischen „Anti-Gender"-Bewegungen und gesetzgeberischen Initiativen aufzeigt, den Zelger-Antrag gegen Abtreibung, der im Stadtrat von Verona vorgelegt wurde, und den 13. Weltkongress der Familien, der in Verona stattfand. Ausgehend davon werden die Reaktionen – die Bewegung „Verona transfeministische Stadt" und die Schaffung eines Netzwerkes für Gender Studies (GIFTS) – analysiert, um die Stärke der Gegenbewegung aufzuzeigen.

Schlüsselwörter
„Anti-Gender", Rechte Bewegungen, Katholizismus, Transfeminismus, Frauen- und LGBTQI+-Rechte

Summary

In this article, we take Verona as an entry point to analyse "anti-gender" mobilizations in Italy and transfeminist reactions. We provide an overview of the Italian "anti-gender" campaign by describing the role of Catholic actors and the political Right. We therefore examine the many forms these mobilizations have taken, especially between 2013 and 2017, and some of the responses by activists and academics during those years. We then consider some exemplary cases of both "anti-gender" attacks and transfeminist reactions that took place between 2018 and 2019. In particular, we focus on the so-called Pillon decree, which displays the link between "anti-gender" movements and legislative initiatives, on the Zelger motion against abortion presented by the Verona City Council, and on the 13th World Congress of Families that took place in Verona. We conclude with an examination of the reactions to these events – the "Verona transfeminist city" demonstration and the creation of GIFTS, the Italian network of gender studies – in order to show the strength of the counterattack.

Keywords
"anti-gender", right-wing movements, Catholicism, transfeminism, women's and LGBTQI+ rights

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1 Introduction

Verona is widely known as the "city of love" for being the setting of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*. What is less known is the city's long political right-wing and far-right history, especially when it comes to issues related to sexuality and gender (Siviero 2018). Mayor Flavio Tosi of the Northern League party (2007–2017)[1] was succeeded by the current mayor, Federico Sboarina, located even further right on the political spectrum. With them, the city has become a hub for Italian "anti-gender" activists, at least since 21 September 2013, when the town hosted the first two "anti-gender" conferences in the country (Prearo/De Guerre 2016). Whereas one conference was promoted by the provincial and municipal councils (led by the Northern League), the other one was meant as a polemical alternative by neo-fascists and intransigent Catholics, who held the former to be all too moderate for their taste.[2] In a place where the "anti-gender" Right is challenged by an even more radical Right, it comes with little surprise that, in 2018, the city council passed a motion to declare Verona "città per la vita" (pro-life city), thereby sanctioning its leading role in campaigns against women's, LGBTQI+, and other minorities' rights. Such role has been confirmed by the decision to host there the 13th edition of the World Congress of Families in March 2019: an international gathering of pro-life, antifeminist, and "anti-gender" actors organised with the support of the city and province of Verona, the Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia regions, and the Italian Ministry for Family and Disability.

However, Verona is also the place where new forms of resistance to right-wing groups and fundamentalist Catholics are tested. This article aims to put the political situation of Verona in the broader context of the Italian "anti-gender" movements and politics. Conversely, we also argue that this very context is shaped around a combination of Catholicism, right-wing politics, and neo-fascism, which found fertile ground in Verona. In the first section, we provide an overview of the Italian "anti-gender" campaign, delineating the role played by certain groups within Catholicism, the political (far) Right, and, to a lesser extent, some segments of the Left. There, we explore the many forms that these mobilizations have taken between 2013 and 2017, as well as some responses by activists and academics in those peaking years. The second section focuses on a few cases of both "anti-gender" attacks and transfeminist reactions, which occurred between 2018 and 2019 and recentred Verona at the core of national sexual politics. We thus conclude by recounting two events that happened on the stage of Shakespeare's "city of love": the successful counter-demonstration by a transfeminist collective and the creation of the national network of gender, intersex, feminist, transfeminist, and sexuality studies.

1 On 21 December 2017, this party changed its name into League, to signify its national dimension. We thus refer to it as Northern League for its activities before 2018, and as League from 2018 onwards.

2 On the internal divisions of the far Right as they played out on 21 September 2013, in Verona, see the 9th entry of Yàdad De Guerre's report series "Di chi parliamo quando parlano di gender?" (De Guerre 2015) included in his online blog *Playing the Gender Card*, one of the most accurate sources on the recent history and transnational connections of "anti-gender" movements and politics in Italy.

2 Contextualizing Verona, "Veronizing" context

When looking at "anti-gender" mobilizations from an Italian perspective, one must first look at its Catholic specificity. Not only is the Catholic Church one of the most influential institutions in the country, it is also the originator of the discourse against gender. As Paternotte and Kuhar recount, from Cardinal Ratzinger's and Pope John Paul II's texts on the status of men and women in the 1980s to the positions that the Vatican's delegates held at the UN conferences on Population and Development (Cairo) and on Women (Beijing) in the mid-1990s, the Catholic Church constructed the signifier gender as something evil (Paternotte/Kuhar 2017: 9ff.). This enterprise culminated with the publication of *Lexicon: ambiguous and debatable terms regarding family life and ethical questions* (Pontifical Council for the Family 2003), a milestone in the production of the militant vocabulary of "anti-gender" actors. While waging this "war on gender" in particular and on feminism and on LGBTQI+ constituencies in general, the Vatican set out to revise its own position with respect to women and sexuality (Garbagnoli/Prearo 2017: 30ff.). Not (explicitly) relegating women to the household any longer or conceiving them as inferior, the Church's new doctrine began to praise them in their role as mothers, that is, in their 'difference-yet-complementarity' with respect to men (Case 2016).

The Catholic Church has been, and still is, highly influential in the Italian public and political spheres. Not only does the majority of Italians identify as Catholic at present, but the Vatican itself has entertained special relations with the Italian State, at least since the Lateran Treaty ratified under Fascism in 1929. There are schools of all levels (from kindergarten to university), clinics, elderly centres, hospitals, movie theatres, bars, and sport facilities in the premises of parishes, which are owned or managed by the Catholic Church. This creates a huge web of services that often complement – and supplement – the state welfare system wherever it is lacking or absent. As a result, the Catholic Church is configured as "an important but controversial ingredient in the Italian 'welfare mix'" (Frisina 2010: 147): it is thus unsurprising that the discourse it promotes against reproductive and LGBTQI+ rights, egalitarian education, gender studies, and feminist theories has such an enormous outreach throughout the country.

Yet, the Church is not as univocal and hierarchical in structure as one may think. This is not only due to the fact that not all religious currents within Catholic Church or common believers support the war on so-called "gender ideology" (Prearo 2019: 35ff.), but also because this fight is mostly waged by fundamentalist minorities. The Neocatechumenal Way, as Garbagnoli and Prearo point out, is possibly the main actor in spreading antifeminist sentiments in Italy (Garbagnoli/Prearo 2017: 96ff.). Neocatechumenal communities, usually made of families with numerous offspring, tend to gather in a few local parishes where they invite such alleged 'experts' on 'gender theory/ideology' as Costanza Miriano and Massimo Gandolfini. These people (used to) deliver – the phenomenon is now declining – pep talks in which they instruct people on the insidiousness of "gender ideology" and on the dangers of such things as same-sex partnerships and the right to abortion (Avanza 2015; Garbagnoli 2017). Neocatechumenal actors were also the main force behind the success of the 2015 Family Day in Rome: an "anti-gender", pro-life rally attended by hundred thousands of people, most of whom were waiting for their spiritual leader, Kiko Argüello, to appear on stage.

As argued by Prearo (2019), this fundamentalist group within Catholicism and its spokespeople – neuropsychiatrist Massimo Gandolfini being the most prominent – are fighting for hegemony within the Church and striving to re-politizise religion. In fact, while Catholics used to have their own Christian-Democratic party from the 1940s until the end of the 1980s, in the 1990s Catholicism spread, as it were, throughout the political spectrum. Gandolfini adopted the fruitful strategy of, in his own words, 'contaminating' politics, against the unsuccessful attempt to reconstitute a Catholic party by Mario Adinolfi and Gianfranco Amato. This new intertwinement between (some) Catholic currents and secular politics is what Prearo (2020) calls a "neo-Catholic" project, i.e., a new secular alignment of fundamentalist religious actors with populist and nationalist parties to push forward their political demands. "Anti-gender" actors, far from cultivating their condition of marginality, do not fear seizing the institutions to change politics from within.

The situation was different in 2013, when Italian "anti-genderists", inspired by their French *cousins* of the Manif Pour Tous (activists countering the Taubira law, which opened marriage to same-sex couples in France), started to take the streets against the centre-left government in power. The majority party back then, Partito Democratico, put forward three bills: on same-sex unions, against homo- and transphobia, and on gender equality and gender-sensitive education in schools. Initial demonstrations included street performances such as those of the Sentinelle in Piedi (standing vigils), consisting of people reading – or pretending to read – in public squares to signify freedom of speech, which in their view was hindered if such things as an anti-homophobic legislation passed. Other kinds of activities included the above-mentioned pep talks and mass rallies such as Family Days and Marcia per la Vita (march for life). The outcome of these mobilizations was astonishingly effective: same-sex unions got approved in 2016 yet with no parental rights or other characteristics comparing to heterosexual marriage (same-sex families are now called "specific social formations" according to legislation); the draft bill against homo- and transphobia was put on hold for more than five years;[3] and the draft bill on gender equality education morphed into a watered-down paragraph of the general decree on education.[4]

Curiously, initial support to the "anti-gender" campaign came not only from the political Right, but also from segments of the Left. This included, as Lorenzo Bernini

3 In July 2020, the Parliament accepted to discuss the so-called Zan bill which aims to amend the articles of the Italian penal code on propaganda and incitement to crime on the grounds of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination. It does so by adding discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation or gender identity. "Anti-gender" groups and right-wing parties consider this a measure restricting freedom of expression. But also some feminists and lesbians oppose it, because, in their view, it introduces the notion of gender into the penal code, thereby contributing to make the category of women invisible. Many feminist, transfeminist, and other lesbian groups have responded to these criticisms, effectively reclaiming the concept of gender (Torrisi 2020).

4 Paragraph 16 of the 2015 education bill states that schools of all levels must provide an educational plan to "ensure the enactment of equal opportunity principles by promoting […] the teaching of parity among sexes, the prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination" (Gazzetta ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana 2015: n. p., translation C. C. & A. J. H.). Unsurprisingly, the notion of "parity among sexes" (Articolo 26 2017: n. p., translation C. C. & A. J. H.) with its implicit recognition of sexual difference between men and women was rather satisfactory for "anti-gender" activists.

recalls, such figures as the president of the Gramsci Foundation, Giuseppe Vacca, who took a stance against stepchild adoption for same-sex couples, and sexual difference feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro, who repeatedly charged "gender theory" with being "aberrant" for denying the "natural fact [of] sexual difference" (Bernini 2016: 370, translation C. C. & A. J. H.). Muraro is among the founders of Diotima, the major Italian community of sexual difference feminist philosophers still active nowadays and based in Verona. Her intervention – in line with the position of Diotima as a whole – is interesting, as it displays an ambiguity among Italian feminists: one that is rooted in the long-standing intellectual dissatisfaction of sexual difference feminism, relatively more visible in Italy than other feminisms, with the category of gender.[5]

Yet, the support of the Left and of sexual difference feminists to the "anti-gender" discourse plays a minor role compared to the Right – not least because the impact of Italian sexual difference feminism is increasingly less significant. As Yàdad De Guerre (2016) has shown, it is the flirtatious relation (and financial help) of right-wing forces with the "anti-gender" movement, both on a national and on a transnational scale, what secures the success of the Italian phenomenon. The movement has benefited from the political (far) Right, not just because members of the neo-fascist party Forza Nuova have always been present at mass rallies, but also because the very leader of this party, Roberto Fiore (who is additionally the president of the European political party Alliance for Peace and Freedom), keeps supporting the cause (De Guerre 2017). To this, we shall add the affinities and sympathies raised among members of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Matteo Salvini's League parties. In sum, it is mostly the Right that backs the "anti-gender" movement; however, left-wing support should not be glossed over, for it can help to problematize any easy equivalence between "anti-genderism" and the global Right, as recent analyses suggest.[6]

At the same time, and on a more optimistic note, such attacks have sparked intellectual and activist responses alike. One such response was the creation of a Verona-based committee, Comitata[7] Giordana Bruna. Gathering individuals and groups actively involved in local LGBTQI+ and feminist politics, the Comitata's activities took place mostly between 2015 and 2016, and consisted of a number of conferences aimed to counter the work of misinformation carried out by "anti-gender" actors. The Comitata managed to summon psychologists, gender studies scholars, researchers, and educators committed to explain gender equality, homo- and transphobia, and women's and LGBTQI+ rights to an audience concerned about a monstrous "gender ideology" purported to corrupt their children. Another example of productive debate emerging from the "war

5 Philosopher Rosi Braidotti adamantly expressed such dissatisfaction in the early 1990s, when interviewed by Judith Butler: "[T]he notion of 'gender' is a vicissitude of the English language, one which bears little or no relevance to theoretical traditions in the Romance languages. […] The imported nature of the notion of gender also means that the sex/gender distinction […] makes neither epistemological nor political sense in many non-English, western European contexts, where the notions of 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' are currently used instead" (Braidotti 1994: 37f.).

6 We refer to the special issue of Signs edited by Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur, and Suzanna Danuta Walters (2018), "Gender and the Rise of the Global Right". By no means do we intend to downplay the global success of the political Right in recent years. What we suggest is that gender and sexual conservatism does not come only from the Right.

7 The gender reversal performed by the word "comitata" (correctly spelled "comitato" (masculine form) in the Italian language) should be noted.

on gender" is that on the ideological status of feminist and queer knowledge. While most scholars and intellectuals insist that such thing as 'gender theory/ideology' does not exist, Federico Zappino and Deborah Ardilli (2015) argue, on the contrary, that we as feminists and queers shall appropriate the label 'ideology': if our knowledge is aimed at dismantling heteropatriarchy, then it is in fact both revolutionary and ideological. But as Lorenzo Bernini observes, there is a plethora of different feminist and queer traditions that are more critical than unequivocally ideological (Bernini 2016: 378). What is worth noting is the intellectual turmoil activated in the effort to most effectively counter the "anti-gender" propaganda. As Gianmaria Colpani points out, the discussion that sparked among queer and feminist academics and activists calls into question not only the status of gender and queer studies, but also the relation between the field of knowledge production and that of activism and politics (Colpani 2017: 219ff.).

Most of the events presented thus far happened at the high spot of the Italian "anti-gender" campaign between 2013 and 2016. But what about the past few years? As we have seen, the movement has slowly abandoned the streets and entered institutional politics. In March 2018, national elections were held, which resulted in the coalitional government between the League and the 5 Stars Movement (supported by Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, a smaller – but growing – far-right party). While the 5 Stars Movement, whose populist character is undoubted (Almagisti/Graziano 2017), is not clearly positioned with respect to either "anti-genderism" or LGBTQI+ and women's rights, both the League and Fratelli d'Italia side strongly with "anti-gender" and pro-life activism, welcoming its demands and deploying its rhetoric. This coalition ended in September 2018, when the League and Fratelli d'Italia withdrew from power and were replaced by the Democratic Party.[8] Yet one shall not forget that "anti-genderists" have (in their own words) "contaminated" politics at all levels – state institutions as much as regional and municipal administrations. Thus, even when the "anti-gender" cause may not be part of the majority in Parliament, its effectiveness in local politics, where state laws cannot be changed but can be hindered and made ineffective, may remain unchallenged.

3 Abortion, family, gender studies: attacks and counter-attacks

Let us start this section by focusing on the so-called Pillon decree, a clear example of the connection between "anti-gender" movements and the Parliament, as it shows how the demands of the former are translated into legislative measures (Pavan 2019: 336). League Senator Simone Pillon proposed a decree in August 2018 titled "Norme in materia di affido condiviso, mantenimento diretto e garanzia di bigenitorialità" (Rules on shared custody, direct maintenance, and guarantee of double parenting). This decree aimed to promote the so-called natural family and to make divorce more complicated for parents of underage children. Three of its declared objectives were: a) compulsory civil mediation in matters involving minor children; b) balance between parental figures and

8 The coalitional government between 5 Stars Movement and the Democratic Party was in place from September 2018 to February 2021. Currently, we are faced with a new government – perhaps the Großte coalition in Italian history – under the leadership of Mario Draghi.

equal time for shared custody; c) contrasting the so-called parental alienation syndrome. The intent of the Pillon decree was clearly to intervene in matters of family legislation to oppose women's rights. It was strongly pushed by groups like the Association of Separated Fathers, which has denounced since 1991 what in its opinion is a form of discrimination: namely, the courts' decision to grant women child support and custody allowances in case of divorce. These associations combine their claims both with a rhetoric in which women appear to be guilty of excessive power and with a critique of feminism as the main cause of inequality (Deriu 2007). This rhetoric is the same as that used by the League and the 5 Stars Movement, presenting the bill as a measure of social justice.

The dark sides of this bill emerge even more blatantly when we take a closer look at each point. The first one (a) aims to make family mediation – by a mediator listed in a special register – mandatory for a period of six months in all cases where minor children are involved, even when divorce is due to domestic violence and abuse. Regardless of the fact that Pillon himself owns a mediation agency (and that family mediation should be paid by the divorcing couple), this point is openly in contrast with the Istanbul Convention, ratified by Italy in 2013, yet never fully applied. Article 48 of the Convention calls for a prohibition of mandatory alternative dispute resolution processes (Council of Europe 2011), for mediation processes endanger women and children victims of abuse, lengthen separation procedures, and do not sanction violence. This bill, therefore, considers the heterosexual family as an institution to be protected even in most dramatic cases. In 2014, the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) estimated 2 800 000 women across the country to have suffered physical, psychological, or sexual violence at the hands of their partners (ISTAT 2014). The rhetoric agitated by the Northern League and by "anti-gender" movements, however, prefers to look at women as perpetrators rather than victims.

Similar prejudices inform the second point of the bill (b), which is presented as a way of guaranteeing the bond of children with both parents but ends up interfering with the lives of all. The Pillon decree is designed to allow for perfectly equal and symmetrical custody, arithmetically dividing the child's week in half so that s/he could spend the same amount of time in two perfectly interchangeable houses. In addition, parents are asked to present a plan that would detail all school/sports activities and holidays of their child up to the age of majority.

The most problematic point is perhaps (c), i.e., the introduction of the Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) into the text of the proposed law. This syndrome, outlined in the 1980s (Gardner 1987) and often criticized by subsequent scholarship (e.g. Bond 2008), advances the idea that the reason for a child to refuse to see one parent lies in the pressure exercised on her/him by the other parent. The underlying assumption is that the child's accounts of abuse are nothing but the result of one parent's – most often the mother's – irritation and anger. In Italian courts this syndrome has already been used (Pignotti 2013), but only with Pillon does it enter parliamentary discussions. Article 17 of the decree introduces a new and *sui generis* procedure, according to which it is possible to forcibly separate a child from the allegedly alienating parent "even when – in the absence of obvious conduct of one parent – the minor child manifests refusal, alienation or estrangement towards one of them" (Senato della Repubblica 2018: 28, translation

C. C. & A. J. H.). In other words, without the slightest evidence, a child can be taken away from the parent with whom s/he lives and be entrusted either to the parent at whom s/he is distressed or to a foster home. This means for a child to be separated not only from her/his parents, but also from her/his world.

After the fall of the League and 5 Stars Movement government, this bill was shelved, but the issues it addressed have entered the public debate, making it legitimate to talk about civil mediation in cases of violence, to minimize abuse as the result of manipulation by the mother, or to consider PAS as an existing syndrome. At the same time, the idea that the heterosexual and nuclear family needs to be protected and valued has been reconfirmed.[9] The Pillon decree, as we have seen, is based on the need to protect children: a similar rhetoric has been deployed on the occasion of another law, proposed at a municipal rather than national level. On 4 October 2018, the Verona city council approved motion 434, titled "Iniziative per la prevenzione dell'aborto e il sostegno alla maternità nel 40° anniversario della Legge n. 194/1978" (Initiatives for the prevention of abortion and the support of motherhood on the 40th anniversary of Law 194/1978). State law 194/1978 regulates abortion and its access. With reference to the first article of the law, which asserts "the social value of maternity" and protects "human life from the very beginning", city councillor Alberto Zelger of the League party designed a motion meant not only to declare Verona "pro-life city", but also to include in the city budget substantial funding for anti-abortion counselling centres (Centri di aiuto alla vita), allowed by law in clinics and hospitals. Zelger's motion 434 has been copied and proposed in many Italian municipalities (Rome, Milan, Alessandria, Ferrara, and others), not always successfully.

Verona is thus clearly at the forefront of pro-life and "anti-gender" initiatives, particularly when it comes to the right to abortion sanctioned by law 194/178. In Italy, such right is also challenged by a conscientious objection rate of 70 percent of gynaecologists, with peaks of 90 percent in some regions, as well as by the difficulty to access pharmacological abortion (Lalli 2011). This problem is even greater in regions traditionally governed by the League, such as Veneto – Verona's region –, where pharmacological abortion is only possible through a three-day hospitalization procedure (as opposed to the day hospital surgical abortion usually performed), and where Catholic counselling centres that refuse to provide the necessary medical certificates for abortion are funded. Motion 434, in this sense, is almost paradoxical, as it depicts abortion as easily accessible and restricts it by virtue of its own fiction.

One of the main risks of a public debate conditioned by the "anti-gender" discourse is that the reactions to it use only a defence strategy, accepting its agenda and terms as baseline assumptions. This risk has fortunately been avoided, also thanks to the feminist and transfeminist movement *Non una di meno* (NUDM; Not One Less). NUDM emerged in Italy in 2016, in the wake of the Argentinian grassroots demonstrations by *Ni una menos*. The occasion presented itself after the femicide of Sara Di Pietrantonio in Rome, when NUDM activists started protesting gender violence (Pavan/Mainardi 2018;

9 Yet not only the League and the 5 Stars Movement mobilized the family for nationalist purposes. During the Democratic Party's government (2013–2018), Minister of Health Beatrice Lorenzin proposed a National Fertility Plan in 2015 and launched a Fertility Day in 2016, inviting women to have more children in order to feel more complete by leveraging the "biological clock". Once again, the only family referenced is the heterosexual one (Balzano/Zappino 2016).

Zambelli/Mainardi/Hajek 2018; Montella/Picchi/Fiorletta 2019). In 2017, NUDM published the feminist plan against male violence on women and gender violence (Non una di meno 2017), which analyzes how this kind of violence is structural, and therefore how the responses to it should be structural too and not just follow a logic of emergency. Since 2016, NUDM brings hundreds of thousands of people to the streets on 25 November, International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, as well as on 8 March, International Women's Day, when a feminist strike takes place.[10]

NUDM is organized in local chapters, and the Verona one has been able to fiercely oppose the discussion of motion 434. Dressed as handmaids, as in the TV show *The Handmaid's Tale*, NUDM activists silently entered the city council, thereby complying with the rules for accession, but their silence marked their presence even more strongly. The handmaid's costume had been used before to defend the right to abortion (Cossutta 2019), but after Verona it has become the hallmark of all mobilizations against similar motions throughout the country and beyond (Boyle 2020). The figure of the handmaid not only signals a possible dystopia, but also highlights the dystopian elements already present in society, functioning as a warning and as an admonition at once. Moreover, against the attacks on the Law 194/1978 regulating access to abortion, NUDM mobilizations have relaunched the slogan #moltopiùdi194 (#muchmorethan194), suggesting the will not only to defend existing rights vis-à-vis the current backlash, but also to reimagine new struggles, strategies, and objectives.

The same ability to be both on the defensive and on the attacking side has been deployed by NUDM to challenge the 13th World Congress of Families, held in Verona on 29–31 March 2019. The World Congress of Families (WCF) is an institution that emerged in the mid-1990s from the encounter between American and Russian conservatives committed to defend the family as the cell of society and to guide political figures to achieve this goal (De Guerre 2019). Despite bringing together exponents of different faiths, the WCF has a strong Christian matrix, both Catholic and Orthodox (Moss 2017: 204). Since its first edition in Prague in 1997, the WCF has taken place at many different venues, but it is not until the 13th edition that the gathering was held in a Western European country. Verona as a location of the WCF was chosen because of the city's affinity with the political views promoted by the organisers as well as the presence of the League in government. The 13th WCF hosted some of the most vocal actors of the so-called "war on gender" in Italy and internationally. These include the National Organisation for Marriage, the platform *CitizenGo, Comitato Difendiamo i nostri figli* (Let's Defend our Children Committee), the association *Pro Vita onlus, Manif Pour Tous-Italia*, and the *Family Day*, just to name a few. The WCF depicts itself as a gathering for famil*ies* in the plural, but its goal is clearly to support only one model of family: heterosexual, married, and with children. Marriage is presented once again as the only possible form of union and the role of women as wives and mothers is uncontested.

In addition to a more attractive design, the 13th WCF and its organizers have borrowed (and twisted) part of their vocabulary from feminism. In particular, they have overturned the idea of self-determination by putting forward the argument that the real ambition of women, naturally inclined to care work, is to take care of their children, as Maria Rachele Ruiu said on stage at the congress (Family Day 2019). This high, noble,

10 With the notable exception of 8 March 2020, due to Covid-19.

and desirable task, according to Ruiu, has been stripped off women by feminism, the rhetoric of equal opportunities, and the lack of support that forces them to work outside the home. Another forceful promoter of such argument is Italian journalist Costanza Miriano, author of two books on marriage, *Sposati e sii sottomessa* (Get Married and Be Submissive) and *Sposala e muori per lei* (Marry Her and Die for Her), and of a very popular blog (https://costanzamiriano.com). In her texts, Miriano reworks the doctrine of the Church to present submission as the most natural position for women, and therefore as the happiest of achievements. This kind of rhetoric, significantly, does not use feminist texts, but resonates with a trivialized version of sexual difference feminism. Difference, in her view, is a biological given that structures social hierarchies and promotes the status quo. Miriano was not among the speakers of the 13th WCF, but she joined the pro-life march that took place on the last day of the congress (Miriano 2019).

NUDM responded to this massive propaganda by launching a mobilization on the same days of the WCF under the slogan "Verona città transfemminista" (Verona transfeminist city). It consisted of three days of meetings, debates, and public assemblies attended by Italian and international activists, and culminated with a demonstration on 30 March 2019, across the streets of the city. This parade, whose opening banner read "Transfemministe rovinafamiglie" (Transfeminists ruin families), gathered more than 100 000 people: something exceptional in such a conservative location. Both the street demonstration and the indoor events embodied in an unprecedented way the idea that either a feminist mobilization is transfeminist or it is nothing. This means that the task of building alliances, of crossing borders, and of questioning binaries can be performed only by questioning feminism itself and by adopting a transfeminist perspective. As Emi Koyama (2003) points out in *The Transfeminist Manifesto*, transfeminism is primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. Transfeminism is not about taking over existing feminist institutions; instead, it extends and advances feminism as a whole through our own liberation and coalition work with all others.

The two concomitant events taking place in Verona – the WCF and "Verona città transfemminista" – showed two opposite modes of activism, as Alessandra Montalbano points out: "one that seeks alliances with governments and politicians to create legislations and regulations in accordance with religious views; and one that aims to radically transform society through a permanent state of mobilization and by awakening public opinion" (Montalbano 2019: 148). In this sense, NUDM offered a mode of action alternative to the single vision of society promoted by the organizers of the WCF. For transfeminist activists, political action is nourished by plurality and grounded in intersectionality.[11]

We close with a final vignette coming from the academic sphere, yet showing a similar ability to act in concert and to create something new. The setting, once again, is Verona, and more precisely the Research Centre on Politics and Theories of Sexuality

11 The idea of intersectionality, famously coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to designate overlapping forms of exclusion along racial, gendered, and classed lines, particularly in legal cases of discrimination, has travelled to the Italian context both in its original meaning and, oftentimes, in the sense of a political stance able to fight racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and other systems of oppression at once ("intersezionalità delle lotte"). NUDM has taken up and reworked both meanings of the word (Non una di meno 2017: 35).

(PoliTeSse), based at the local University, to which we are both affiliated. Our centre is "an inter-disciplinary pole of advanced research […] in Gender Studies (Women Studies, Men Studies, Transgender Studies), Queer Theories (Gay and Lesbian Studies), [and] Postcolonial Theories as well as Disability Studies" (PoliTeSse n. d.: n. p.), and belongs to the Department of Human Sciences – the same where Diotima is based since 1983. The more recent PoliTeSse, established in 2012, has been from the very beginning the target of such neo-fascist groups as Forza Nuova and Casa Pound, both active in the city. In May 2018, Forza Nuova launched a campaign against a workshop organized by PoliTeSse, titled "Asylum Applicants. Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity" and aimed at presenting the results of a project funded by the Italian Ministry of Education. The forceful campaign against this event, but especially the violent threats of Forza Nuova to prevent it from happening, led the Dean of the University to cancel the workshop. According to the Dean,

> "the event has gone beyond the scientific sphere to become a field of contention and especially a quest for visibility for various activists from different backgrounds. The University cannot lend itself to instrumentalization by people extraneous to the scientific world" (reported in Berizzi 2018: n. p., translation C. C. & A. J. H.).[12]

These words not only produce a clear-cut divide between academia and civil society, but also conflate all the non-academic entities into the same signifier, regardless of their specificities. Indeed, next to university affiliates, the workshop included such non-academic speakers as one representative of the UNHCR, two lawyers from the Italian Network of the Legal Profession for LGBTI Rights (Rete Lenford) and the Italian Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration (ASGI), and several representatives of local organisations (Sportello Migranti LGBT-Arcigay, Circolo Pink-Pink Refugees, and others). The Dean seems to equate these organizations with the far-right political groups campaigning against the workshop by gathering them all under the label "various activists from different backgrounds". In our view, this opinion is not unrelated to the status of gender, sexuality, and women's studies in the Italian academy. On the one hand, all studies involving marginal groups are necessarily in dialogue with civil society, as they analyze, critically discuss, and eventually promote social change. Moreover, a significant amount of knowledge in the field is produced outside academia by groups and actors involved in social struggles. Yet on the other hand, this intertwinement between knowledge and civil society is interpreted not just as partisanship, but also as a sign of little or no scientificity. Such prejudice is partly rooted in the lack of institutionalization of the field, for there are no departments and chairs of gender, sexuality, or women's studies in Italy – a condition, to be sure, stemming from a vigorous debate among feminists in the 1980s (Di Cori 2013). The situation is further complicated by an institutional framework that hardly allows for the introduction of new disciplines and courses (Saraceno 2010: 270f.). Within an academic system that holds disciplines in high regard, gender, sexuality, and women's studies end up being carried out within one's own disciplinary field, often causing fragmentation and penalizing researchers' evaluations.

12 The workshop was held anyway a few weeks later than scheduled, but outside the University premises.

PoliTeSse did not remain silent or immobile in front of the backlash against its workshop. In June 2018, the conference "Studying Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Academia" was organised, in which more than forty groups and research centres from all over Italy participated. This conference addressed the issues of teaching, doing research, and relating with the public; after two days of intense exchanges, the idea to create a national network of individuals and groups working on gender and sexuality issues emerged. This project was formalized in Bari in March 2019 with the name GIFTS: Gender, Intersex, Feminist, Transfeminist, and Sexuality Studies Network. Aim of the network is to support and disseminate these studies inside and outside academia; to promote cooperative and mutualist exchanges among the practitioners of such fields; to make the university a welcoming institution by combating precariousness, sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and lesbian-gay-trans-bi-pan-intersex-exclusion; and to remove barriers that undermine the right to education or the possibility of an academic career.[13] The network currently gathers more than 200 individuals and groups in different disciplinary fields. While being at the centre of a harsh right-wing reaction, Verona has once again proved capable to relaunch and expand the spaces of freedom, building links of solidarity and of mutual support.

4 Conclusion

We narrated this story to sketch a composite picture of Italian "anti-gender" politics and movements – one that has the city of Verona at its core. Borrowing Emanuele del Medico's (2004) words, we can go as far as to argue that Italy has witnessed a "Veronization" of politics in recent years. Modes of political action and strategies of alliance carried out both at a state and at local level, particularly between 2018 and 2019, seem to be modelled around the example of Verona: the city where "reactionary Catholicism tied to neofascist movements has managed for quite some time to influence institutional choices" (Bernini 2017: xi). At the same time, Verona displays an incredible capacity to resist and to fight back by politicizing the love it supposedly represents as a city. While the League and other far-right parties understand love in exclusionary terms with the purpose of redrawing the national body within the boundaries of straightness and whiteness, as Bernini convincingly demonstrates (Bernini 2020: 9ff.), transfeminist social movements and gender, sexuality, and women's studies scholars strive to offer an alternative grammar for myriad types of love. The force of such collective as NUDM to offer a powerful alternative to the "anti-gender" campaign, or that of a group of researchers to build a national network of gender, intersex, feminist, transfeminist, and sexuality studies out of neo-fascist threats, shows that the Right is now reacting (if not retracting) vis-à-vis the freedom achieved by feminist and LGBTQI+ subjects. Activists and scholars know how to use a critical moment in their favor, not only to defend themselves, their discipline, and their rights, but also to envisage new forms of community, liberation, and love.

13 All information on GIFTS can be found on the website https://retegifts.wordpress.com.

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