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# Fighting about (Sexual) Citizenship: Italy's "Nature or Culture" Dilemma

*A luta pela cidadania (sexual): o dilema italiano entre "natureza e cultura"*

*Le combat pour la citoyenneté (sexuelle): le dilemme italien entre "nature et culture"*

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## Fighting about (Sexual) Citizenship: Italy's "Nature or Culture" Dilemma

Recent public debate in Italy has been noteworthy for its renewed focus on issues of gender and sexual citizenship. The discussion is well summarized and symbolized by two opposing political discourses that have been engaged in a lengthy struggle. On one side stands a neo-conservative Catholic movement that opposes the recognition of LGBTQ relationships and defends "the natural family". On the other side there are the LGBTQ movements, which are claiming full civil, social and sexual citizenship. The present article analyzes this conflict, which was clearly illustrated by two public events held in Rome in June 2015 (Family Day and the Rome LGBTQ Pride). The paper, methodologically based on *Critical Discourse Analysis*, examines the most relevant political documents (manifestos and press releases) issued by the organizers of the two demonstrations, highlighting the existence of ambivalent discourses on the naturalization of sex and the universalization of social and sexual citizenship.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis; gender identity; Italy; LGBT movement; sexual citizenship.

### Introduction

Recent public debate in Italy has recently been noteworthy for its renewed focus on issues of gender and sexual citizenship. More specifically, in the past few years – and especially since 2013 – it has been fuelled by three draft laws that were intended to bring about recognition of partnerships and marriages between same-sex couples (the Cirinnà Bill, 2013),<sup>1</sup> educational programs on gender relations in schools (the Fedeli Bill, 2014) and the introduction of the crime of homophobia into the law (the Scalfarotto Bill, 2013).

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\* This article is an entirely collaborative effort by the three authors, whose names appear in alphabetical order. If, however, for academic reasons individual responsibility is to be assigned, Elisa Bellè wrote section 4, 6, and part of section 7, Caterina Peroni wrote section 1 and section 5; Elisa Rapetti wrote the introduction, section 2, 3, and part of section 7.

<sup>1</sup> In the Italian context, the surname attached to a law is that of its first signatory.

These three proposals were developed in the context of a peculiar and contradictory political context. It must first be observed that recognition of same-sex partnerships and marriages has reappeared on the political agenda in Italy following a relatively long series of unsuccessful attempts by the center-left parties – particularly between 2005 and 2008 – to put it there (for a detailed reconstruction of the political debate, see Ozzano and Giorgi, 2015). Secondly, the debate on the introduction of educational programs on gender relations, bullying and homophobia grew in intensity following the dissemination of a 2012 publication for primary and secondary schools, distributed to schools by a public body (the National Office against Racial Discrimination – UNAR)<sup>2</sup> and aimed at fighting sexual discrimination and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This publication generated considerable controversy and is still at the center of a significant political and cultural conflict, waged for the most part by Catholic associations and groups both in the media and in schools. Thirdly, despite institutional pressures from the European Union, Italy remains one of the few Western countries that have not adopted LGBT anti-discrimination policies and forms of legal recognition of same sex unions (di Feliciano, 2015). Indeed, even for heterosexual couples, the only form of public recognition is marriage.

In spite of this evident impasse in the institutional and political spheres, it is important to point out that public opinion has changed somewhat during this period; in fact, Italian society seems to be becoming increasingly open to recognizing the rights and legitimacy of LGBT identity and affectivity (ISTAT, 2012).

The current public position on gender and sexual citizenship therefore seems ambivalent, characterized as it is by both the emergence of a new openness and the persistence of conservative positions. This article seeks to deal with this complexity and ambivalence by focusing on an analysis of two specific public events relating to this debate. The first of these is the demonstration known as *Family Day* (held in Rome on 20 June 2015), promoted by conservative Catholic groups with two main aims: to safeguard marriage between a man and a woman as the only legitimate and “natural” solution, and to “protect” children from the dangers of *Gender Ideology*, which “confuses the natural complementarity of masculinity and femininity”. The second is Rome *LGBT Pride* (held on 13 June 2015), an event characterized by two main elements: the identity claim, which is historically a fundamental aspect of the Pride parades (to publicly declare and manifest

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<sup>2</sup> Accessed on 08.04.2016, at <http://www.istitutobeck.com/progetto-unar.html>.

pride in the individual and collective LGBT identity), and the rights-related claim for recognition of civil and social rights.

In order to explore these two events, we decided to focus our analysis on the official statements (press releases and political manifestos) issued by the organizing committees of the Family Day and Onda Pride. We adopted the general framework and methods of Critical Discourse Analysis – CDA (van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2001).

In the sections that follow, we first describe our theoretical framework, which is principally based on feminist literature dealing with security as a new regulatory paradigm (Simone, 2010; Pitch, 2013) in relation to a patriarchal, heteronormative social order that tends to criminalize non-heteronormative perspectives, behaviors and organizations as a public threat and as “folk devils” that cause sexual (and social) panic (Herdt, 2009). Next we present the research methodology, after which we provide a more detailed description of the Italian sociopolitical context and the genesis of the two public events, and reconstruct the complex composition of the organizing Committees.

We dedicate an empirical section to each event, focusing on the discursive strategies of the two sides. In the final section we compare the two discourses in order to illustrate the complex ways in which they intertwine and the mutual construction derived from a shared sociopolitical context, although with different forms of discursive power and social legitimization.

### **1. The Nature of Citizenship. Sexual Panics and Folk Devils Fighting Back**

In past decades, one feature of the Italian political and public debate has been a series of waves of moral panic. The consequence of these surges of rhetorical and normative social alarm has been the criminalizing of “deviant bodies” (the young, immigrants and sex workers) as “folk devils” who have disturbed the lives of normal Italian citizens (Pitch, 2013; Simone, 2010), and the construction of Italian women as victims (Woodcock, 2010). As a number of feminist and critical scholars have argued, the aim of the process of victimization of Italian women was to establish a clear model of the “respectable woman” (the good victim who does *not deserve* to be raped), and thus to control women’s sexuality and freedom (Peroni, 2014). In fact, in Italy’s Catholic culture this symbolic use of women’s bodies in the context of moral panic helps to affirm a “natural”, straight sexuality and consequently the heteronormative social order (Simone, 2010). The security rhetoric and populism used by political leaders (on both the left and right) have enforced a division between straight and deviant sexualities in the name of defending the normal, heteronormative family.

If the construction of respectable women as the “good” victims is used to reaffirm the heteronormative social order, the consequence of this is the blaming and criminalization of non-hetero-normative behaviors by women and LGBTQ people as deviant sexualities (Rubin, 1984; Peroni, 2015). In this context, the sexualization of scapegoats mobilizes public opinion (that is, respectable citizens) against deviant and non-conformist subjects, producing what Herdt (2009) calls “sexual panic”. According to Herdt (*ibidem*: 5), “sexual ‘folk devils’ – the sexual other, whether oversexed or undersexed – are stripped of their rights, and the cultural imagination becomes obsessed with anxieties over what this evil sexuality will do to warp society and future generations”. In this sexual panic, the symbolic and cultural exclusion of sexualized “others” involves specific exclusion from “universally” recognized citizenship rights (Seidman, 2001).

In other words, we are witnessing a new wave of conservative moral ideology whose aim is the social exclusion of non-conformist sexualities in order to defend the heterosexual family and social order. This brand of neoconservatism incites sexual panic at the civil, social and cultural level, which are tightly intertwined and deeply embedded in a political definition of the nature/culture, sex/gender dichotomies.

Nature lies at the core of the entire theoretical architecture of the contemporary neoconservative moral and sexual panic. The attack on so-called *Gender Ideology*, a label invented and used by French and Italian Catholic organizations in the late 1990s to discredit Gender and Women’s Studies, reflects the neoconservative opposition to the idea of gender as a social, cultural and heteronormative construction of sexed bodies (Garbagnoli, 2014). For these groups and their theorists, *Gender Ideology* is the distortion of the only true natural *scientific* definition of gender elaborated by Vatican theologians, for whom gender is “the transcendent dimension of human sexuality conforming to the natural order that is already present in the body” (Vollmer Coles *apud* Garbagnoli, 2014: 256).

The spectre of *Gender Ideology* is used to mobilize the most profound fears expressed by “straight” heterosexual and “traditional” families of the danger posed by gender and gender educational programs in primary and secondary schools. What needs to be defended is a supposed “childhood innocence” and a (heterosexual) parent’s natural right to decide on their children’s education (Robinson, 2008). The job of the contemporary family, according to Foucault (2003), is to preserve and control the “innocence” and “asexual nature” of children by limiting and supervising every intermediary in the education process, such as teachers, and to become the hub of childhood sexual and medical control. “This centralization of education

of and control over children in the nuclear family functions as a source of normalization” (*ibidem*: 254).

Indeed, the heteronormative family to which neoconservatives refer is also natural, meaning that it consists of a father, a mother and children. Here, “nature” is based on an essentialist perspective which fixes gender roles within a naturalizing process in binary sexed bodies – mother/woman, father/man – that in turn is viewed as the only possible, legitimate and proper form of reproductive relationship. The naturalization of the sexes also implies the deterministic fact that, for neo-conservatives, there is no social construction of roles, and that to be a mother or a father is respectively the lot of a woman and a man.

*Gender Ideology* is the ultimate expression of the Vatican’s attack on feminist and queer theories that deconstruct gender roles and stereotypes, the traditional family and the heteronormative social order in general. As Garbagnoli (2014: 256, translated by the authors) argues, “what disturbs the Vatican (and the guardians of the sexual order) is not gender itself – which can be (and often is) used as a synonym for “women” in the sense of a natural group – but the critical potential (the “critical edge”, in the words of Scott, 1986) of an analytical category that denaturalizes the sexual order, which is a part of the domination of social relationships”. The real target of the neoconservative attacks seems to be the process of emancipation and self-determination that these movements have made possible for the last thirty years. The neoconservative sexual panic in relation to *Gender Ideology* includes gender education in schools, the public debate on same-sex marriages and the legal criminalization of homo- and transphobia.

Despite the conflation of gender and feminist studies by neoconservatives, the fact is that feminist and queer theories offer different perspectives, due to the complexity of the approaches and strategies that have historically been adopted in their claims. These approaches and their strategies are closely associated with and depend on an immanent perspective based on the real social and political context in which they are developed. The first LGBT movements, which were born after the Stonewall riots, posed a radical challenge to the heteronormative order by criticizing the idea of “naturalization” and the biological origin of sexual orientation. Nature was seen as a deterministic and normative device that defined the distinction between sexual normality and deviance. Today, the strategic lexicon used by a part of the LGBTQ movements has shifted significantly, and is now directed towards the epistemic dimension of universality. This is a two-pronged strategy that seeks, on the one hand, to obtain recognition of the same rights of heteronormative individuals and, on the other,

to be socially accepted for a supposed “naturalness” of differences that is common to all human beings (Croce, 2015).

The question of human rights has become the main frame of reference for this area of the LGBTQ movements, with the result that the conflict potential of sexual orientation and identity differences that lay at the heart of early LGBTQ movements has been eclipsed and has led to a sort of “homo-normative” process, especially with regard to the recognition of same-sex marriage (Polikoff, 1993; Brandzel, 2005; Croce, 2015). Indeed, the term “human rights” belongs to the semantic field of universality, which has historically been used by positivist theorists to define the abstract subject of rights – and science – in Western societies since the 16th century. According to feminist theories, this ideal subject conceals the real nature of the Western secular subject (male, white, proprietor, and so on), thereby mystifying the structural asymmetries of power between men, women, and all gender subjectivities (Alcoff and Potter, 1993).

On the other hand, radical LGBTQ groups still criticize any demands for assimilation to heteronormative rights that exclude all forms of incompatibility with the nuclear, binary, monogamist couple and claim self-determination and civil and social rights for everyone, regardless of sexual orientation and identity (Seidman, 2001; Croce, 2015).

However, it is precisely on this issue between nature and culture and between universalization and difference that the conflict between neo-conservatives and the LGBTQ movements, as well as within the LGBTQ movements themselves, remains open. To quote McRobbie and Thornton (1995), folk devils do fight back, and are continuously challenging the heteronormative social order.

## 2. Research Methodology

This paper analyzes the political and public discourse of the actors who promoted two public events that exemplify the debate described above: *Family Day*, a demonstration promoted by groups associated with Catholic values that took place in Rome on 20 June 2015; and the Rome *LGBT Parade*,<sup>3</sup> which was held on 13 June 2015.<sup>4</sup> The *LGBT Onda Pride* rallies were held in fifteen northern and southern Italian cities: the first was in

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<sup>3</sup> We refer to the “Pride Parade” by the acronym “LGBTQ” because it represents the most inclusive concept. We decided to exclude the I (Intersexual) category because we do not discuss this issue in the present contribution. We are aware that the promoters, the mass media and common usage favor other terms, such as Gay Pride, and (since 2015) Human Pride. In the section 5 we use the extended acronym LGBTQI because we literary cite the official documents, which use this label.

<sup>4</sup> Accessed on 21.07.2015, at <http://ondapride.it/>.

Verona on 6 June 2015 and the last on 1 August 2015 in Reggio Emilia. From a methodological point of view, our analysis focuses on the *Rome Parade* for three reasons: 1) because of its national relevance in the Italian context – its particular significance in political, media and symbolic terms stemming from the fact that it is the Capital’s Pride parade (Mudu, 2002); 2) because in terms of location it allows comparison with the Family Day event (Family Day, as we have already noted, was also held in Rome), and 3) because of the national importance of both demonstrations.<sup>5</sup>

In order to explore the two events, after consulting the documents and materials available on their respective websites and newspapers of varying political orientations, we decided to focus our analysis on the official statements drafted by the organizing committees with the aim of getting people involved in the demonstrations and enhancing their claims in the public and political arenas. More specifically, we first focused on two press releases issued by the Family Day promoters (dated 8 and 18 June 2015). The Family Day organizing committee did not produce a political manifesto, but the press releases can be used as the principal support documents for the demonstration. We then analyzed the two manifestos prepared by the LGBT Pride organizers: the national one, which offers an overview of the Italian LGBT movement, and the local one – entitled “*Liberiamoci!*” (“Let’s Be Free!”) – which was issued by the local organizing committee and allowed us to contextualize the event in its local area while permitting the identification of the crucial elements needed to interpret the Rome demonstration. As the following sections will show, the LGBT Pride is made up of separate but interconnected positions, while the Family Day promoters – who have a diverse set of priorities – represent themselves from a more uniform standpoint. The decision to use direct sources has allowed us to study (self)representations in the discourses of the organizers and to ensure the methodological comparability of the sources under analysis.

According to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methodology, languages are “an integral element of the material social process” (Fairclough, 2001: 122) that permits a focus on the interaction (dialectical process) between structure and action. Therefore, “if the discourse is defined in terms of

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<sup>5</sup> Although numbers are not the most important criterion for defining the importance of a demonstration, we should mention that some hundreds of thousands of people participated to each of the two events. It has not been possible to find conclusive data on the number of participants: the Family Day organizers reported that there were a million attendees, while the Rome police said there were 400,000. The Rome Pride promoters first said that 200,000 people were in attendance, and at the end of the day 500,000. Data from the Rome police are not available on the web. Account should be taken of the fact that LGBTQ Pride parades took place in several Italian cities – although not all on the same day – and the participants were more widely spread around the various locations.



complex communicative events, access and control may be defined both for the *context* and for the *structures of text and talk themselves*” (van Dijk, 2001: 356). Using this perspective as our starting point, we present the context<sup>6</sup> in which meaning was first constructed. Later (in the following two sections) we give an account of the Italian public debate on LGBTQ rights and gender education (social problems) and analyze the social interaction and conflicts among the beliefs of different actors, focusing on two sample events. Our analysis centers on the self-representation strategy of the actors involved, their claims and argumentation strategies (including language). Finally we identify the frames of reference used and their respective dialectical process.

### 3. Research Context

In accordance with the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we start out by describing the social and cultural context of the public debate and the genealogy of the two selected events. Firstly, it is important to note that the Family Day and LGBTQ Parade have quite different histories. In fact, prior to 2015, *Family Day* had taken place on a national scale just once, in 2007. That particular event had been organized to protest against a draft law that recognized rights and duties in the partnerships of same-sex couples (the Bindi-Pollastrini Bill, 2007). The promoters of the 2007 Family Day (*Il Forum delle Associazioni Familiari* – the Forum of Family Associations) and their representatives made explicit reference to Catholic movements and values. None of the organizations that promoted the 2015 Family Day were among the associations that had participated in the event’s first edition.

By contrast, *LGBTQ Pride* has a longer tradition of demonstrating and more continuity as regards the groups that promote and take part in it. The Parade has been organized on an annual basis since 1994 in collaboration with the international LGBTQ movement. In addition, since 2013, the Italian Pride Parades, which are held in various cities across the country, have come together into what has been called “Onda Pride”, a series of demonstrations in a number of different cities that converge behind a single logo.

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<sup>6</sup> “Context is defined as the mentally represented structure of those properties of the social situation that are relevant for the production or comprehension of discourse. It consists of such categories as the overall definition of the situation, setting (time, place), ongoing actions (including discourses and discourse genres), participants in various communicative, social, or institutional roles, as well as their mental representations: goals, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and ideologies” (van Dijk, 2001: 356).

Moreover, as mentioned before, we decided to focus on these events because they can be considered as emblematic of the views held by a variety of collective subjects (associations and groups) in regards to three important issues in the public debate on the recognition of partnerships and marriages of same-sex couples, the institutionalization of gender education programs and the inclusion of the crime of homophobia into the national laws.

The organizing committee of Family Day, Defending Our Children (*Difendiamo i Nostri Figli*),<sup>7</sup> was formed on 2 June 2015 and is comprised of members of various Catholic organizations sharing the same or similar aims, claims and arguments. Its main objectives are the safeguarding of marriage between a man and a woman as the only possible solution, and the protection of children against the dangers of *Gender Ideology* and a society that confuses gender roles and fails to follow natural laws. More specifically, the eleven members of the organizing committee participate in the debates in their capacity as professionals (e.g., the committee's spokesperson is a neuropsychiatrist and its members include lawyers and teachers) and as journalists and/or members of various organizations involved in the public debate on LGBTQ rights and gender education programs for schools. The committee's website lists its members by name, but does not refer to the organizations in which, in the majority of cases, they play a significant role. It is unclear, therefore, whether they are only speaking in their own name or as representatives of their organizations.<sup>8</sup>

The organizing committee of *LGBTQ Pride* chose the name *Onda Pride*<sup>9</sup> (Pride Wave) to emphasize the spread of the event across a number of Italian cities, from the South to the North. Its national political manifesto – the main slogan of which was “It's Human Pride” – has been adapted by local parade committees to express specific purposes and claims linked to the features of each territory. As we will see in the following sections, if one compares the nuances of these documents – one of which was prepared nationally, the other one at the local (Rome) level –, interesting changes emerge (in comparison to previous years) in the political lexicon and the strategic claims adopted by the main LGBT groups at the national level, due in part to the domestic political, social and cultural context. The composition of the Pride Organizing Committee varies from the institutional,

<sup>7</sup> Accessed on 21.07.2015, at <http://www.difendiamoinostrifigli.it/>.

<sup>8</sup> The members of the organizing committee of “Defending Our Children” belong to five main organizations: *Non Si Tocca la Famiglia* (Hands off the Family), *La Manif pour Tous* (Demo for all), *Scienza e Vita* (Science and Life), *Giuristi per la Vita* (Lawyers for Life) and *Provita* (Pro-Life).

<sup>9</sup> Accessed on 21.07.2015, at <http://ondapride.it/>.

big associations such as ARCIGAY<sup>10</sup> and ARCILESBICA,<sup>11</sup> to informal LGBTQ groups or collectives active in the cities where Pride parades take place. Customarily, trade unions and local left-wing parties also take part.

After this brief description of the context and actors participating in the public debate, in the following section we focus on the rhetoric, the discourses and the communication strategies of each event's organizing committee.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. Family Day: Between *Gender Ideology* and the Naturalness of Science

In this section, we focus on the most significant discursive strategies adopted by the “Defending Our Children” Committee<sup>13</sup> in the promotion of the

<sup>10</sup> ARCIGAY was founded in 1985 and is Italy's foremost national gay rights organization. In 2007 its membership exceeded 160,000. It acts as an umbrella organization for 114 (50 political/cultural and 64 recreational) local centers across 48 Italian provinces, from Bolzano in the north to Catania in the south. Accessed on 31.08.2016, at: <http://www.arcigay.it/arcigay-in-english/>.

<sup>11</sup> ARCILESBICA (Associazione Nazionale) – established in 1996 – is an Italian voluntary body that has campaigned for the past twenty years to inform the general public, educate political policy and improve the physical, social and psychological conditions of Italian lesbian women, whilst contributing to both the Italian and international LGBTQ movement as a whole. ARCILESBICA is a national association with several local branches throughout Italy, which help to promote lesbian culture and visibility, give personal, legal and psychological support to lesbians, structure and present anti-homophobic bullying courses in schools as well as organize political initiatives and media campaigns at local level. Accessed on 31.08.2016, at: <http://www.arcilesbica.it/about%20us.php>.

<sup>12</sup> During the process of writing and revising this article, one of the bills mentioned in it (the Cirinnà Bill on the recognition of civil union for both homosexual and heterosexual couples) has been approved by the Italian Parliament (11 May 2016) with two relevant changes from the original proposal (presented to the Senate on 6 October 2015). These two crucial changes were the elimination: 1) of so-called stepchild adoption – i.e., the possibility of adopting the children of a partner; and 2) of the obligation of marital fidelity. During the institutional discussion, public debate was very intense and more and more participants joined in it. Moreover, two events, similar to those considered in our analysis, took place in the month of January, again within a short time period. A second Family Day took place in Rome on 30 January 2016. A LGBTQ demonstration, named “Sveglia Italia! È ora di essere civili” (Wake Up Italy! It's time to be civilized), took place in 99 cities simultaneously on 23 January 2016 (in Rome, a protest camp was organized from 28 to 30 January). Both events focused on the importance of the symbolic recognition of same sex couples, reproducing a debate similar to the one analyzed in these pages. It is interesting to note that, perhaps out of concern regarding society's wide consensus on the law, the Family Day organizing committee introduced a controversial element in the public debate that significantly affected/influenced the institutional discussion and led to the modification of the law. We allude to the so-called surrogate motherhood issue. The representatives of rightist parties argued that stepchild adoption was the first step towards the possibility of introducing this practice in Italy (where it is still illegal), and invited one of the promoters of the global petition against this practice, Jennifer Lahl, to speak during their demonstration. Finally, the Family Day Committee, the Catholic associations and institutions as well as several members of right-wing parties succeeded in eliminating the “marital” fidelity clause in order to avoid the possibility of any symbolic or real conflation between civic union (homo or hetero) and marriage.

<sup>13</sup> As pointed out in the previous sections, the “Defending Our Children” Committee organized and promoted the Family Day demonstration. In this section we are focusing exclusively on the texts produced by this Committee in order to promote Family Day.

Family Day demonstration. It should first be noted that the announcement of the demonstration was generic and “neutral”: in the press release announcing the event, the Committee describes itself as

non-partisan and non-denominational, made up of free citizens who, by giving a voice to millions of families in our country, wish to publicly reaffirm the right of parents to educate and instruct their sons and daughters freely, especially with regard to issues relating to affectivity and sexuality. (Committee press release, 8 June 2015)

Although the meeting was openly Catholic – which is a mere statement of fact, considering the participating groups, the network of associations represented on the Committee and the speeches made at the end of the demonstration – it was the Committee’s communication strategy to refuse precise religious identification. This has a dual purpose: on the one hand, to sidestep the problematic issue of institutional legitimization by the Vatican (which did not take an official position) in order to avoid political fractures; and on the other, to establish its independence as a social movement. It also enables a sort of interreligious appeal based on “universal” values that can be shared by different creeds. In addition, the non-partisan declaration reinforces the message that this is an autonomous entity, removed from (and uninfluenced by) partisan political debate.

Consequently, the speaker here is not the Catholic Church, nor is it a political party, but “free citizens” who are giving a voice to “millions of families [...] to the People of the Family, who are concerned about the future of our children and grandchildren”. In line with a typical populist approach, the Family Day demonstration establishes itself as a synecdoche – as a part representing the whole – a synthesis (Incisa di Camerana, 2000) of the people, the People of the Family. The most urgent concern afflicting the People of the Family, which encompasses profound emotional issues such as parental and family love and a commitment to protect “the innocence of children” against moral corruption in the world, is the defense of “our children”.

A less emotional, and more abstract, consequence of this appeal is educational freedom: the absolute centrality of the family and its supremacy over the public educational system is strongly affirmed. In this regard, it is interesting to note that establishing a connection between the protection of childhood and educational freedom is a “classic” conservative argument that is also used in other countries in public debates on the civil rights of LGBTQ persons and gender education in schools (Robinson, 2008; Garbagnoli, 2014).

Resorting to another typical populist strategy that constructs identities based on a “them and us” type of opposition (Mény and Surel, 2002), the People of the Family are counterposed to the “non-scientific lobbies” behind this “veritable invasion that is concealed within a *Gender ideology* that indoctrinates our children, confusing their psycho-affective growth”. The phrase “non-scientific lobbies” is a label that evokes a secretive, manipulative, almost eugenic dimension of science. Moreover, as pointed out in other contributions on the topic (Garbagnoli, 2014), the capitalized use of the English, non-translated word “Gender”, alludes to a type of ideological colonization carried out by foreign cultures and societies that are far removed from Catholic Mediterranean society (the allusion here is to North American “academic” culture in particular).

As a result of this discursive strategy, the sociopolitical fracture between those countries that have legislation on same sex unions and those that still do not (such as Italy), which is becoming increasingly evident in the shared context of the European Union, is resolved in terms of scientific delegitimization. It is important to stress the fact that this fissure between secularized and traditional countries and the consequent failure on the part of the Italian legislature to pass reforms, is one of the most powerful arguments used by the Italian LGBTQ movements. By framing the issue in terms of cultural colonization by foreign non-scientific lobbies, the Committee can take a position against the recognition of same sex unions while avoiding the potential danger of being defined in the public debate as an obscurantist, anti-modern movement. It is also important to point out that the Committee does not mention the issue of homophobia, nor does it take an explicit position in the public debate on the bill before the national legislature that would make homophobia a crime (although several members of the Committee have ties to s overtly involved in the struggle against this proposal). The Committee’s silence on the issue is both eloquent and strategic. As has already been noted in other contributions to discourse analysis, silence is as important as words in terms of the construction of discursive effects, i.e., of what is a part of discourse and what is absent in the final output of the process of discursive construction (Bacchi, 2009). By its silence, the Committee avoids the problem of being labelled as “homophobic” (a concept that is being increasingly accepted and used in public debate) and shifts attention on the development of a public threat while maintaining a public image of calmness and moderation.

The ambivalence of the Committee’s discourse on science is also worthy of note. On the one hand, it reduces the scientific context of gender studies to a homogeneous front that aims at the ideological colonization of children,

family and society under the cover of scientific legitimization. On the other hand, it has adopted a measured, sober communicative style, avoiding explicit religious references and direct critiques of the LGBTQ movement. Above all, the founding members of the Committee tend to be highly educated and use their professional status and skills to lend public support to their efforts. The Committee's spokesperson, for example, is a neuropsychiatrist, and his professional role and scientific interests are often emphasized in public pronouncements: his biographical note on the Committee's web page focuses largely on his education and professional activity as head physician at a public hospital.

It is precisely in relation to safeguarding the "psycho-affective growth of children" and the right to educate them freely that the second theme of the demonstration – that of same-sex unions – is introduced and developed. *Gender Ideologies* (in this case, in the plural) call into question the "foundations of the family as defined in our Constitution" (Committee press release, 8 June 2015).<sup>14</sup> These ideologies "are ready to sacrifice the natural right of children to grow up with their mums and dads" (*ibidem*) on the altar of civil rights. This discursive strategy connects two themes of the public debate in an extremely effective way: gender education in schools compromises children's growth by teaching them that they can "change their gender identity even several times in one day" (as we hear in a number of public declarations made by members of the Committee), and this educational program in turn legitimizes homosexual unions. This linking is an attempt to deal with the cultural and social changes that are occurring in the Italian context with regard to both issues: the spread of educational programs on gender and affectivity in public schools (which testifies to a new level of institutional attention to the topic of gender equality), and Italian society's increasingly positive opinion on the recognition of same sex-unions in our national laws.<sup>15</sup>

The discourse opposing these developments is as effective as it is ambiguous: on the one hand, it refers to the constitutional definition of the family as "a natural society founded on marriage" (Article 29 of the Italian Constitution), thereby evoking the broad, general horizon of a common democratic order. Once again, the subject and target of communication is the People of the Family, defined as a majoritarian, broad social force

<sup>14</sup> The Italian Constitution, which entered into force after the Second World War with the commencement of the new democratic, republican, system, defines the family as "a natural society founded on marriage" (Article 29), but does not explicitly specify the sex of the spouses.

<sup>15</sup> The first (and until now the only) national survey on the "Italian homosexual population", published by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2012, reports that 62.8% of the sample (which is statistically representative of the Italian population) agree with the sentence "It is right for a same-sex couple living together to have the same legal rights as a heterosexual married couple".

associated with a *constitutional* dimension. In this discursive context, the constitutional element is crucial: it is a polysemic concept that is legal and ontological and social and statutory at one and the same time. On the other hand, the strategy reduces the horizons of marriage (and, consequently, of the family), as it implicitly but invariably defines it as “heterosexual” by virtue of its connection with the argument of “nature”.

Moreover, in order to reinforce the populist “us vs. them” conflict, the People of the Family are construed as the victim of a public threat (*Gender Ideology*) that is directed in particular against the most vulnerable and innocent of targets: children. This is a common discursive strategy in the public debate on LGBTQ rights: public threat, moral corruption and moral panic, and the need to protect the innocence of children in a sort of “moral battle” against decadence (Robinson, 2008).

Finally, it should be noted that the main axis of the argument is constructed around the nature-culture dichotomy: this strategy admits a connection to be made between the topics of defending and educating children and same-sex unions. This association is made by reaffirming the existence of a clear separation between masculinity and femininity, which are conceived as “naturally” different and complementary dimensions generated by immeasurable physical and psychological differences (the most important of which is the “natural” feminine vocation for motherhood and care).<sup>16</sup>

### **5. The Rome Human Pride: Between the LGBTQI Revolution and Normalization**

The history of the Italian Pride Parade points to a series of shared general claims made by Italian LGBTQI movements, which can be briefly characterized as issues relating to the sphere of sexual and gender citizenship: self-determination, the freedom and dignity of all sexual identities and orientations, the recognition of same-sex unions and marriages and the struggle against homo- and transphobia and gender-based violence.

As we have mentioned, in recent years the Pride movement has changed its key message from “LGBTQI Pride” to “Onda Pride”, and in 2015 the movement converged in a series of demonstrations across the country using the slogan “It’s Human Pride!”. In analyzing the general manifesto, we noted an interesting change from previous Parades with regard to the political lexicon and the strategic claims adopted by the main LGBTQI groups at the national level.

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<sup>16</sup> This is the official position of the Catholic Church, expressed both in John Paul II’s *Theology of Women* and in the Pontifical Council’s *Lexicon* for the family, first published in 2003 (Pontifical Council for the Family, 2005).



The first significant change has been the introduction of the term “Human”, which involves a series of epistemic and pragmatic tangles that traditionally surround the controversial relationships between difference and equality, rights and the law, and nature and culture from LGBTQI theoretical and political perspectives. This originates a political and cognitive shift towards universality, which over the last few years has become the new rhetorical argument used to generalize the LGBTQI condition as that of the so-called “universal human being” (Onda Pride National Manifesto, June 2015).

This universalization of LGBTQI subjectivities and related civil and social rights has been described as a sort of strategic “normalization” (Croce, 2015) of gender and sexual differences, aimed at recognizing equal civil and social rights for every citizen, regardless of specificities of gender and sexual orientation. The claims for integration and equality that Croce (*ibidem*) has called “conditional acceptance” of a “homolingual’ rights jargon” are typical of the universal citizenship framework. The fundamental precondition for a request for acceptance within the bounds of citizens’ rights is acceptability itself, in the sense of a demonstration, by LGBTQI subjectivities, of respectability and compatibility with the main heteronormative system of rights (Seidman, 2001). In the national Human Pride document, this issue is described as a “common commitment and will to represent a resource for change and growth in the whole of society” (Onda Pride National Manifesto, June 2015).

Nevertheless, a considerable ambivalence emerges from an analysis of both these documents with regard to the very concept of citizenship rights: what is being claimed, indeed, is, on the one hand, an acknowledgement of LGBTQI differences and, on the other, the recognition and integration of LGBTQI issues as universal (or “human”).

This ambivalence between universalism (as a way of normalizing rights) and difference (in the form of a radical, revolutionary challenge to society) runs through both documents. It is associated with the lengthy debate within LGBTQI and feminist perspectives about equality and difference, in the sense of the relationship between subjectivity, rights and the law (Butler and Scott, 1992; Alcoff and Potter, 1993).

The “normalizing turn” of Human Pride coexists with a very radical perspective, which maintains the “subversive” challenge to the heteronormative social order associated with early LGBTQI movements. Indeed, a number of non-institutional LGBTQI groups have criticized the use of the “Human” label because it entails the disappearance of the potential for conflict that has historically been given voice by non-conformist gender differences in LGBTQI perspectives (Polikoff, 1993).



On the other hand, the document drafted by the Rome Pride organizing Committee, entitled “*Liberiamoci!*” (“Let’s Be Free!”), describes Pride Parades as “revolutionary acts” that aspire to a “deep and radical” change in society (Onda Pride Rome Manifesto, 13 June 2015). Pride is “liberation from stereotypes that limit social models, and impose precepts and unfair norms” that restrain the “multiplicity, non-conformity and dignity” of every “individual person” (*ibidem*); it criticizes the cultural construction of differences as deviance from the (hetero)norm. The document attributes these different identities to the nature factor, which is the only element that is considered to be common to “human beings”: “diversity is the true natural condition of every human being, and is thus what we have most in common, beyond any label or belonging” (*ibidem*). Despite decades of critical feminist and LGBTQI movements and theories deconstructing the naturalization of sex and bodies, nature is viewed here as the “authenticity” of individuals. While human nature is asserted to be the common condition of all human beings, it is also used to define and legitimize their intrinsic differences.

The Human Pride 2015 national document denounces a “radicalization” of the conflict carried out by “minority conservative groups” (i.e. neoconservatives) against LGBTQI people (*ibidem*). The document accuses *Sentinelle in Piedi* (“Vigil Keepers”), one of the most conservative and homophobic group affiliated to the Family Day organizing Committee, to fight against the legal recognition of LGBTQI people with “public demonstrations, parliamentary obstructionism, abuses of power and the sabotage of rights” (*ibidem*). These “attacks [...] are waged against the lives of LGBTQI people, undermining their safety and that of the places in which they live” (*ibidem*). It is also worth to notice that the document describes this conflict as a “trench warfare”.

The use of such war-related terminology reinforces the sense of an ongoing cultural and civil war, in which certain individuals (LGBTQI people) are attacked because of their different sexual identity and orientation and their lives are put at risk. The semantics of safety and security, and the risk to which LGBTQI people are exposed, run through the entire document, suggesting a dimension of victimization and criminalization. On the one hand, neoconservative and Catholic movements criminalize LGBTQI people because of their sexual orientation, while on the other, and as a consequence, LGBTQI people feel that they are being victimized, persecuted and excluded from civil and social citizenship.

The sphere of citizenship includes the civil and social rights and the recognition that are being contested by neoconservative forces in respect of education, same-sex unions and the fight against homo- and transphobia. Indeed, according to Human Pride organizers, an “obscurantist ideology”

is threatening Italian society, starting with the public education system, through a new law on the so-called *Buona Scuola* (“Good School”).<sup>17</sup> This is a centralizing piece of legislation that gives school principals decision-making powers in regards to programs and teacher selection, thus “increasing the risk of discrimination or pressure on teachers because of their sexual orientation” (Onda Pride National Manifesto, June 2015).

At the same time, education is being gravely damaged by the new law’s silence regarding gender education and the fight against bullying in public schools:

this situation is the consequence of fundamentalist and aggressive public pronouncements that, while accusing us of upsetting the foundations of civil cohabitation, the social structure, the family and educational models by fomenting the spread of a non-existent *Gender Ideology*, oppose any type of intervention against bullying and gender violence at school, the real aim being to revitalize gender stereotypes, prejudices and obscurantism that are typical of the most vulgar kinds of patriarchy and sexism. (*ibidem*)

The response of the Pride Parade to this accusation has been to defend a “secular public school system” within an “integrated vision of society built on dialogue and the valuing of differences and solidarity” (Onda Pride National Manifesto, June 2015). Once again the discursive strategy of this LGBTQI initiative is aimed at reinforcing the idea of implementing integrationist and inoffensive actions by denying the “phantom” of *Gender Ideology*. Conversely, some feminist/queer activists and scholars (Zappino and Ardilli, 2015; Lolli, 2015) claimed the subversive potential of their perspectives that actually question the heteronormative construction of gender and the naturalization of sex. Therefore, for radical feminist thinking, denying the critical epistemology of Gender Studies by presenting it as a neutral social science is a misleading and weak attempt to defend these fields of studies (and activism) from the neoconservative attacks (for a more extensive discussion of the topic in Italian language, see Bellè *et al.*, 2016).

This same reassuring and integrationist dynamic would seem to characterize the responses to neoconservative criticism of the recognition of same-sex marriage and unions, which keeps Italy “very distant from the civil progress made by other countries in Europe” (Onda Pride Rome Manifesto, June 2015). While the national Human Pride document refers to the claims for same-sex

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<sup>17</sup> The new law on schools was approved while this article was being written. It has been criticized by both teachers and students because of its authoritarian shift towards a situation where the selection of teachers and education programs are selected by school principals.

marriage, civil unions and LGBTQI parenthood only in general terms, the issue is addressed in more detail in the Rome Pride document. While the draft law on civil unions (the Cirinnà Bill) provides a positive response to LGBTQI claims for “an approximation to heterosexual couples”, it actually “ratifies unacceptable discrimination and results that have already been made obsolete in the social realm” (*ibidem*). Although here the claim is for a kind of homology with the heterosexual and normative right to marriage, the Rome Pride also asks for the recognition of “polyamorous relationships” and the “multiform reality of identities, relationships, families and childhood” contained in a final list of claims. Thus the Rome Pride document insists on the claim for the recognition of all LGBTQI relationships outside the heteronormative form of relationship (the monogamous couple) while remaining within the heteronormative and inclusionist framework of the “equalization of rights *and duties* through the affirmation of a culture of respect and inclusion” (*ibidem*). The ambivalence between a normalizing, integrationist position and a radical queer perspective is a political tangle that still remains unsolved within the LGBTQI debate and reflects the different positionings of the institutional and radical groups.

## 6. Discussion: A Shared Discursive Frame

As has been pointed out in the two previous paragraphs, devoted to the analysis of the official documents of the two demonstrations (Family Day and Onda Pride), the Italian public debate on gender issues and LGBTQ rights has two opposing “fronts”. We have analyzed these two positions through the prism of two events that took place in the same city (Rome) in the same month (June 2015), and that can be viewed as representative of the current debate (especially since 2013). At this point it is important to summarize briefly the main characteristics of these two discourses, paying particular attention to their interconnections and reciprocal influences.

In spite of the manifest political opposition of the LGBTQ and conservative-Catholic fronts, our analysis identified a common, hegemonic discourse within the debate (van Dijk, 1993), based on what we define as a process of “naturalization”. In fact, the concept of “nature” emerges as a common framework used by both “fronts”, although with a different purpose. The differing concepts of nature, and therefore the definition of gender that derives from them, lead to disparate understandings of what the family is and divergent opinions on the educative role of the family and schools. Finally, they also identify the legitimate content of education itself.

On the one hand, the promoters of the Family Day conceive “nature” as a regulatory parameter that identifies separate and complementary forms of

“masculinity” and “femininity”. The *Gender Ideology* lobbies are threatening this “natural order”, but they do not have a sufficiently solid scientific basis to do so (i.e., a critique of the constructivist approach in science, depicted as ideological). *True science*, instead, is represented by the professionals of the Family Day Committee (“hard scientists”, such as doctors and psychiatrists), who confirm the “natural order” and speak on the basis of solid scientific truth. It is important to notice that, according to this view, nature and culture are closely related and mutually supportive – or, to put it in other words, culture is “naturally determined”.

The positions of the LGBTQ Pride promoters, on the other hand, are more nuanced and ambivalent. They seem to share the “naturalization approach”, at least partially. According to their discursive construction, a person’s differences must be respected, because differences originate in the natural condition of every human being (therefore, differences are natural). Thus, it is only logical that LGBTQ rights are asserted within the general framework of human rights. However, the Onda Pride manifesto retains certain traces of a different argument, one that rejects nature as a framework. Following the influence of feminist and queer movements (which are also related to gender studies theories), the manifesto (re)affirms the sociocultural character of gender (Scott, 1986), defining it as a social process which cannot be reduced to a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. In this case there is no precise, traditional family model or heteronormative framework. In fact, they start out from a “critical approach”, questioning the existing social order and claiming recognition for the plurality of configurations of relationships, identity, parenthood and childhood. It is interesting to note that these two positions seem to reproduce, under different circumstances and conditions, the historical fracture that occurred within the feminist movement between the *equality* and *difference* approaches. The Onda Pride discourse is therefore faced with a well-known political and philosophical dilemma, shared by a number of other so-called minority movements.

As a final point in our comparison of the two discourses, mention should also be made of the most highly debated issue of the past few months, in which *Gender Ideology* was the main actor. Taking as their point of departure a discussion on the legitimization of gender education programs, the neoconservative Catholic movement has introduced and demonized the so-called *Gender Ideology* issue – and its “lobbies”.

In this case, it is possible to identify two clearly opposite opinions that correspond to those expressed by the promoters of the events. In this regard, the LGBTQ movement has not expressed a different point of view.

On the one hand, the Family Day promoters proclaim the supremacy of the educative role of the family, which must also have the opportunity to intervene in school teaching programs, thereby maintaining the family's absolute primacy over children's education. Using this belief as their starting point, the Catholic movements began a campaign – supported by the Family Day event organizers – against the dissemination and institutionalization of educational programs on gender and affectivity in Italian schools (because of the dangers presented by *Gender Ideology* to the heteronormative social model).

The Pride promoters, on the other hand, defend the importance of quality, secular, public schools, and support the dissemination and institutionalization of gender education programs, which they consider to be crucial for tackling gender-based violence, bullying and homophobia and overcoming gender and sexual orientation stereotypes and prejudices.

### **Concluding Remarks: The Dilemma of Contemporary Citizenship and the Siren Call of “Nature”**

By way of conclusion, it is important to identify the most profound and relevant core of the debate under analysis. This is a very significant and structural issue, having to do with the redefinition of the paradigm of citizenship, which is being radically contested by new claims for recognition. The debate we have analyzed above is indeed ultimately concerned with the access to social and civil rights by categories of people who have hitherto been excluded from them. What we have here, then, is the need for a redefinition of the general paradigm of gendered and sexual citizenship (what kinds of affective and family relationships should be recognized as being a part of the social system, citizenship and welfare). This claim for recognition encompasses not only emotional relationships (whether homosexual, heterosexual, or any other kind), but also the very concept of personal gender identity, the definition of masculinity and femininity, and whatever types of social gender practices are considered to be socially, politically and legally legitimate.

This point is crucial, firstly in terms of a transformation of our model of contemporary citizenship. Marriage and “the family” are, in fact, two fundamental elements of citizenship (which are still culturally hegemonic in Italy), because the status acquired through these institutions permits access to certain rights from which citizens are otherwise excluded. In addition, using the concept of citizenship as a conceptual lens for interpreting the debate allows a more profound understanding of the internal differences that have emerged in the LGBTQ movement. Pursuing a sort of “assimilative approach”, some LGBTQ groups are fighting for full access to marriage and

integration into the dominant model. In this regard it is worth noting that, although civil unions were officially approved by the Italian Parliament in May 2016 (11 months after we conducted our discourse analysis), they remain a sort of second-class partnership, not fully comparable, in terms of rights and duties, to civil heterosexual marriage. This qualitative distinction was one of the most controversial points in the parliamentary debate. Moreover, the final approval of same sex unions was possible only on the basis of this qualitative differentiation and hierarchization that, in sociological terms, can be interpreted as reparatory work. However, as was pointed out in our textual analysis, there is another faction within the LGBTQ movement that has shifted from a “critical approach” toward a claim of universal citizenship (in the sense of a guarantee of access to rights by virtue of citizenship). This part of the movement reaffirms a refusal to be incorporated into and to conform to the existing patriarchal, heteronormative social order (Josephson, 2005).

In conclusion, it is important to note how, in this recent phase of Italy’s long debate on same sex unions (Ozzano and Giorgi, 2015) and civil rights, the various opinions that marked public discourse have become increasingly radicalized. Until now, in fact, when similar proposals (draft bills on the recognition of same-sex couple partnerships) were discussed, the reaction of neoconservative groups within the Catholic movement had prevalently focused on rejection and denial. Nowadays, however, these groups have opted for a prevalent focus on the defense of the *status quo* by using the broader conceptual apparatus of gender relations and of masculinity and femininity. Thus the neoconservative Catholic movement has shifted the discursive focus from criticism of same-sex unions (which could be labelled as homophobic and therefore criticized in the public debate) to the “natural” status of masculinity and femininity. In this respect, the social model and the political perspective that make up their position might even be defined as reactionary. They have embarked on a shift to the right in their public discourse, and in some ways this has also influenced the LGBTQ movement, which has developed an ambivalent discourse that, although retaining traces of the constructivist approach, seems – at least partially – to have succumbed to the *siren call* of “nature”.

Revised by João Paulo Moreira

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### ***A luta pela cidadania (sexual): o dilema italiano entre “natureza e cultura”***

O debate público tem sido recentemente marcado em Itália por um renovado interesse pelas questões de género e cidadania sexual. Mais especificamente, destacam-se dois discursos políticos antagónicos envolvidos numa longa contenda que sintetizam e simbolizam claramente este debate. De um lado encontra-se o movimento católico neoconservador que se opõe ao reconhecimento das relações LGBTQ e defende a “família natural”. Do outro, os movimentos LGBT, que reivindicam a plena cidadania civil, social e sexual. No presente artigo analisa-se este conflito, que se manifestou muito claramente por ocasião de dois eventos públicos que tiveram lugar em Roma em junho de 2015: o Dia da Família e a Marcha do Orgulho LGBTQI. Através de uma metodologia baseada na Análise Crítica do Discurso, examinam-se os documentos políticos mais relevantes (manifestos e comunicados de imprensa)

### ***Le combat pour la citoyenneté (sexuelle): le dilemme italien entre “nature et culture”***

En Italie, le débat public a récemment été marqué par un regain d'intérêt envers les questions de genre et de citoyenneté sexuelle. Plus spécifiquement, il existe deux discours politiques antagoniques engagés dans une longue dispute qui synthétisent et symbolisent clairement ce débat. D'un côté, nous trouvons le mouvement catholique néoconservateur qui s'oppose à la reconnaissance des relations LGBTQ et défend la “famille naturelle”. De l'autre, il existe des mouvements LGBT, qui revendiquent la pleine citoyenneté civile, sociale et sexuelle. Dans cet article nous nous penchons sur l'analyse de ce conflit, qui s'est clairement manifesté à l'occasion de deux évènements publics qui eurent lieu à Rome en juin 2015: la Journée de la Famille et la Marche des Fiertés LGBTQI. En passant par une méthodologie qui repose sur l'Analyse Critique du Discours, nous examinons les documents

emitidos pelos organizadores dos dois eventos e destaca-se a presença de discursos ambivalentes sobre a naturalização do sexo e a universalização da cidadania social e sexual.

**Palavras-chave:** Análise Crítica do Discurso; cidadania sexual; identidade de gênero; Itália; movimento LGBT.

politiques les plus importants (manifestes et communiqués de presse) émis par les organisateurs des deux événements et nous soulignons la présence de discours ambigus sur la naturalisation du sexe et l'universalisation de la citoyenneté sociale et sexuelle.

**Mots-clés:** Analyse Critique du Discours; citoyenneté sexuelle; identité de genre; Italie; mouvement LGBTQ.

