


# Family Problems: Debates over Coupling, Marriage, and Family within the Italian Lesbian Community, 1990s

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∴ Elena Biagini

In the European context, Italy is currently an anomaly. It has no legislative instrument with which to regulate same sex relationships,<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that in the last twenty-five years the Italian LGBTIQ movement (at least in its *mainstream* manifestation) has continued to call for a law on the subject (civil partnerships, regulation of de facto cohabitation, PACS, and marriage, are a handful of the solutions that have been proposed). At the end of the 1980s Arci Gay,<sup>2</sup> the then recently founded national association, had drafted a proposal to this effect,<sup>3</sup> that is, to create a law allowing for same-sex and opposite-sex *civil unions*. Recently, after most European nations, North America and even so-called non-Western nations passed laws regulating same sex marriages, this struggle also gained large media attention in Italy. In particular, the new social formations that we could call *gay/lesbian families* or *rainbow* (*arcobaleno*; if we choose to adopt the term used by the most well-known Italian organization that works on this issue)<sup>4</sup> *families* have drawn significant media coverage. In the last decade, in the end, we could almost say that the call for gay marriage in specific – now adopted even by more cautious organizations such as Arcigay which for years had preferred to pursue civil union legislation rather than directly demanding marriage – has become the primary goal of the movement to the point that it often obscures other political requests and considerations produced in other segments of the LGBTIQ movement, and the lesbian sector in specific. Currently, the fight to open marriage to include same-sex couples seems to be the undisputed terrain of lesbian and gay struggles worldwide and in Italy. However, even though social mores have certainly changed in Italy, rendering this goal plausible, there has not been any legislative change. Despite the fact that the subjective variety that makes up the LGBTIQ acronym has acquired new manifestations, realities, and cultures (in particular *queer* has also become part of the Italian context), no other issue has gained the visibility that the demand for gay marriage has. No one seems to question the idea that gays and lesbians want to institutionalize their families. In the political elaboration of certain radical sectors of the movement there has been an attempt to critique, or at least question, the imaginaries produced by the investment in the gay family. I myself, in 2008, noting the almost monotone nature of this request, found myself questioning “whether by institutionally and mediatically acting almost exclusively for this purpose, the LGBTIQ movement, rather than undermining the repressive control of the family, and emphasizing that the family conceals violence and oppression of women, gays, lesbians and trans and in any case is a cultural construct and, as such, can

change or even be destroyed, has ended up instead helping to strengthen the family-oriented rhetoric in which the catholic national culture is saturated (even beyond the Tiber)".<sup>5</sup> In fact, today, if we look at the Italian LGBTIQ movement, not only have thematic organizations for the protection of *homosexual families* formed (Rainbow Families and Rainbow Parent Network), but even the focus of Pride, the objectives of gay and/or lesbian associations, and the requests expressed in the media, all seem to suggest that the entire LGBT policy revolves around the expansion of the concept of the family, and the request for the inclusion of gays and/or lesbians with or without children into the concept of family. Yet the fight against familism, or even the destruction of the family seen as the backbone of the hetero-patriarchal system, was one of the positions of both the revolutionary homosexual movement in the 1970s and the lesbian feminist movement that had its "legendary" decade in the eighties. There is also a more complex reality that is hidden by the media noise. There has never been a stage of the Italian LGBTIQ movement in which positions regarding the concept of the family were homogeneous. Instead often it was precisely regarding this issue that the radical or reformist dialectic contrasted.

In the seventies, in the broad context of the movement, the family was seen as one of the institution to be destroyed. Writing by Laing<sup>6</sup> and Cooper,<sup>7</sup> as well as the pamphlet *Contro la famiglia* [Against the Family], "written by thousands of young people, mostly minors", published by Stampa Alternativa,<sup>8</sup> were well known. The fight against the family, associated with anti-bourgeoisie rhetoric and the lifestyle imposed by the dominant social class, was part of the radical movement's rhetoric. It also became a catch phrases in the homosexual movement that used it as a tool in the fight *against normality*. In fact, in the French group Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire's "Report against normality" that was printed in Italy in 1972, we read: "We want to destroy the family and this society because they have always oppressed us".<sup>9</sup> Mariasilvia Spolato,<sup>10</sup> in her pioneering anthology *I movimenti omosessuali di liberazione*, also writes, "there is a basic contradiction in wanting to destroy the middle class while accepting and promoting bourgeois forms and values. Which? For example, the paternalistic values such as the family and hierarchical structures".<sup>11</sup> Criticizing, mocking, and destroying the family was one of the battle cries of the homosexual group F.U.O.R.I. (in english: OUT!) and autonomous collectives of the seventies. In short, one of the notable battle cries of the French activist Françoise d'Eaubonne was "You say that society has to integrate homosexuals, I say that homosexuals should disintegrate society".<sup>12</sup> However, these strong positions were quickly muddled. In fact Mario Mieli anticipated: "The heterosexual status quo, through its 'progressive' wing, is working for a total integration of homosexuality, its re-entry into the structure of the family, by the back door – of course".<sup>13</sup> Moreover, F.U.O.R.I. in 1980, at the close of the era, "convened a conference on same-sex marriage that debated the issue of seeking access to such an institution that was so strongly opposed by feminists"<sup>14</sup> even though the majority decide in favor of civil unions, "rejecting equating it with marriage".<sup>15</sup>

In the developments of lesbian-feminism, that in Italy began to take shape in the form of autonomous organizations at the end of the seventies, positions on the family are similarly oppositional like those of F.U.O.R.I. and the autonomous collectives, yet their analysis was based on different assumptions. At the core of *lesbian feminist* reasoning was the strong connection between patriarchy and the family, as well as between the family and "Compulsory Heterosexuality", the foundations of a system that was defined heterosexist.

The lesbian feminists pointed out that the root of oppression, not only for lesbians but for all women, was the social and economic centrality of the heterosexual contract. Heterosexuality is constructed and presented as the primary, unique and natural option, the family is its home, the field of its implementation. Adrienne Rich clarified this position by identifying “the diversity of the forms in which compulsory heterosexuality presents itself. In the mystique of overpowering all-conquering male sex drive, the penis-with-a-life-of-its-own, is rooted the law of the male sex right to women, which justifies prostitution as an universal cultural assumption on the one hand, while defending sexual slavery within the family on the basis of ‘family privacy and cultural uniqueness’”.<sup>16</sup> That which transcended the imperatives of heterosexuality was banned from sex. Rich defines this as “compulsory heterosexuality”. Heterosexuality is therefore configured as a hegemonic cultural paradigm, “a relationship whose characteristic is ineluctability in culture, as well as in nature, and which is the heterosexual relationship”. “The straight mind cannot conceive of a culture, a society where heterosexuality would not order not only all human relationships”<sup>17</sup> which must remain focused on “the *outdated heterosexual order*”<sup>18</sup> based on the monoculture of the heterosexual family”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore the struggle against compulsory heterosexuality was closely linked to the criticism of the family, the unveiling of the ideology underlying the naturalization of the institution and the fight against familism.

And therefore the question arises regarding what happened in the space between the struggles that animated the gay and lesbian movements of the seventies and eighties and current Italian LGBTIQ political platforms with respect to the concept of family. Lesbian separatism maintained an undeniable continuity in Italy both regarding its placements and organizations. Instead within the “mixed” movement, the eighties represented a break with the organizations, requests, and cultures of reference that we will not investigate here. This article intends, instead, to investigate how the transition from a critical view of the family to the request for inclusion was embraced by all members of the movement that we now call LGBTIQ, yet this dissent did not obtain particular visibility. In particular, it aims to highlight how even in the lesbian component of the mixed movement of the nineties (in the Arci galaxy), the fight for the recognition of same-sex couples was criticized as a validation of the dominant social model. These positions of dissident were often obscured due to the mechanism, that Wittig stresses, in which the “straight mind” tends to reduce what stands out to what is similar to itself. The mainstream press and institutions do not “see” the less integrationist positions, in Italy in the nineties and 2000s, and elsewhere. Trujillo Barbadillo<sup>20</sup> explains how in Spain, lesbian, feminist, and *queer* collectives were critical when the Zapatero government approved the law permitting same sex marriage (2005). This dissent, he said, found no media coverage and these groups’ positions were not part of the public debate on the subject. Also in France, Hollande’s *mariage pour tous* [marriage for everyone] provoked lesbian criticism. Marie-Jo Bonnet,<sup>21</sup> historical militant in the radical group Gouines rouges published *Adieu les rebelles!* [Farewell rebels!] which questioned whether gay marriage is social progress or rather a victory for the patriarchal order. The interview found in *Libération* explains:

I am against marriage in general. For the feminist that I am, marriage is historically an instrument for the domination of women. We could say that now the rights of spouses are equal, yet it is nevertheless a form inherited from the Napoleonic code, which has long served to protect women. To have a social status, a woman must be married, unmarried women were spinsters, a sub-woman. Yes, it has changed, but one must realize which forms of association we are inheriting: liberating or alienating. In our society, individual rights are the basis of the Constitution, not the rights of the couple. Basing rights on marriage means going back in time<sup>22</sup>

Returning to Italy in the 1990s, we find the years in which we perceive (at least from mainstream sources) that the legislation of gay marriage became the desire and goal of all of the LGBTIQ subjectivities.

In May 1993, the Arci Gay Donna (the lesbian faction within the national group Arci Gay founded in 1989<sup>23</sup>) Convention was held in Verona. It was titled “A new generation on the move” where it began “to assert its own policy with respect to the issue of civil unions, regarding which the association [Arci Gay] held a position that was not fully shared by the lesbian component”.<sup>24</sup> During the meeting in Verona, most of the speeches emphasized how “the male gay movement had discussed these issues for a long time, and how instead the lesbian women’s perspective was missing, who instead feel the need to work on this issue ‘seeing as lesbian women are particularly affected by the issue since they live in couples more than often then men and are often mothers’”.<sup>25</sup>

On closer inspection, up until the conference in Verona, Arci Gay Donna’s position on the issue had been similar to that of the whole of Arci Gay, although lukewarmly expressed. For example, the *Charter of lesbian women’s rights*, presented by Arci Gay Donna in 1990, in paragraph 3 states “Every lesbian woman has the right to freely choose their partners and to the legal and social recognition of this choice”.<sup>26</sup> In «Considerazioni in margine alla convention nazionale Arci Gay Donna: “Una nuova generazione in movimento” [Reflections on the fringes of the convention in Verona]”,<sup>27</sup> Graziella Bertozzo<sup>28</sup> writes that during the meeting a desire to work on the theme of “cohabitation or rather civil unions”<sup>29</sup> had been expressed. She pointed out that the subject had been addressed in sphere of civil liberties and general social changes, rather than coming directly from lesbian desires. On a practical level, however, Arci Gay had developed the legal tools. Bertozzo emphasizes the “young age” of the participants in the meeting in Verona, “which confirmed that the title had guessed correctly”.<sup>30</sup> This new generation would bring *surprises* in terms of elaborating and positioning themselves regarding the subject of the family. The mainstream press, in any case, tied the desire for weddings and motherhood to the lesbian meeting without any *nuances*. The Bolognese newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* published the headline “The gays want to get married”.<sup>31</sup> The Veronese newspaper *La Cronaca* wrote “Lesbians, raise your head” accompanied by the blurb “Convention: ‘Recognizing same-sex couples’”<sup>32</sup> and the summery “[...] ‘Adoption, one of our rights’”. Again, what is outside of the heterosexual order, Wittig would say, cannot be thought or said.

In November of the same year there was another national meeting of Arci Gay Donna, in Florence, organized by the local association, that is, the *new generation on the move* that had met in Verona. The Florentine gay and lesbian group, had used the name Arci Gay – Arci Gay Donna since its inception as part of the occupation of the Pantera.<sup>33</sup> It was made

up of “young lesbians, more or less influenced by lesbian feminist and lesbian separatist theory”<sup>34</sup> who gave life to a “mixed centre, that was born mixed, and did not become mixed later, a centre where we began to discuss gender from the beginning”.<sup>35</sup>

The program of the meeting again scheduled a discussion on civil unions beginning with documents produced by Arci Gay. This choice was explained in the context of national leadership on the grounds that “women feel the need to deliberate the need to pass a legislation that socially legitimates the existence of families that are not considered by traditional marriage and the presence of a male figure, but which have equal importance and legal recognition”.<sup>36</sup> In the words of the Florentine organizer, shifts in interest, positioning and lexicon are immediately noticeable. The flyer that promotes the meeting does not mention couples or its institutionalization, but does include the “presentation and distribution of a questionnaire on the lesbian condition” and discussions about “the political situation and minorities”. On the issue of civil unions, however, it was written that it would be addressed seeing as “an autonomous debate [is needed], because the proposals that have been drawn up so far [...] are characterized by the male perspective (made by men for men) and ignore women’s realities and needs”.<sup>37</sup>

During the conference, a document written by Arci Gay Donna of Florence is presented, “which moves the discussion that previously focused only on the development of new legislation and therefore limited to the rights of the couple, to a view that is instead based on the rights of the individual”.<sup>38</sup> In fact, during the preparation of two days in Florence, the women of the centre had met every week to organize the event, but also to exchange views on what contributions they were interested in proposing, in particular regarding the issue of civil unions, the battle-horse of Arci Gay.

The analysis that emerges from this document,<sup>39</sup> acknowledges that “civil unions undoubtedly offer lesbians and gay men an extension of rights, as it allows one to accompany marriage with the structure of a couple that is liberated from the Catholic composition and no longer only reserved for heterosexuals”, but is still based on the assumption that the dominant culture of “institutionalized marriage, and [...] considers – as indeed art. 29 of the Italian Constitution states – the family as the natural society”. In this manner gays and lesbians who call for the legislation of the couple, actually propose “a kind of homosexual marriage, that is a repetition of a structure, that in any case is convenient for this society that is so strongly based on homogenisation [...] because [...] the stable and standardized couple is a means to pigeonhole people. To return them to an orderly pattern that limits the freedom of thought and action, and therefore eventual deviations from control”.<sup>40</sup> The main criticism is the reduction of diversity to normality. Therefore, also creating a division between: good normalized gays and lesbians in stable couples, with upper-middle socio-economic levels, in which “heterosexuals can even forgive the deficit of their sexual inclinations because after all they don’t bother people too much”; and others who don’t live in the stable couples and remain “bearers of objective disorder. Because by changing partners every two years or every month one obstinately remains depraved, refusing to accept the so dear order based on the stable couple”.<sup>41</sup>

The analysis therefore, more or less deliberately, utilizes the rhetoric of the gay movement in the seventies that criticized *normality* and defended deviance and revolutionary subjectivity with pride yet it also moves from within the reflections of the radical lesbian separatist. The lesbian-feminist critical tools exist due to the “cultural transmission that was available to the lesbian centre thanks to relationships with lesbian feminists, particularly from Florence and Rome. This inheritance was fully put into practice in the mixed centre (albeit long characterized by separate spaces for lesbians)”.<sup>42</sup> This brought Arci Gay Donna Florence to probe, and therefore criticize the civil union proposal beginning from themselves, from the analysis of their own relationship and their way of life outside the boundaries of “compulsory heterosexuality”. They clarified how lesbians in their relationships do not “resemble members of a straight family in any way”,<sup>43</sup> emphasizing that “lesbian relationships that have no parallel in the family, [...] the bonds between lesbians that the term ‘family’ can not describe – the relationship a lesbian has with her first lover, the relationship she has with her ex, or the relationship she has with former lovers of her current lover”, not to mention friendships. This reading does not frame the family as a neutral institution, instead it is seen as “an institution created by men to control women and children”.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, years later, in a document that draws on the Arci Gay Donna Florence document from 1993, Valeria Santini summarizes, “Most lesbians know from personal experience that romantic relationships are much more complex than the simple structure of couple” for which “identifying the couple, constituted and sanctioned in a legal equivalent to marriage, as our maximum aspiration, perhaps is only a way [...] to annihilate ourselves and not being true to ourselves”?<sup>45</sup>

And what if it is the concept of couples itself that we should question? And the same principle of rights and family duties? And if I preferred to go to the funeral of a friend rather than that of my father, would I be entitled to leave work? And if I do not live with my lover, are we considered a couple? And if I have numerous lovers, which one is entitled to my dental insurance, for example, all of them? And if I my lover doesn't need it, can an another loved one use it? And if I'm in the hospital and I am not able to make a decision, do I have the right to decide to WHOM I delegate this responsibility without a certificate of ineptitude?<sup>46</sup>

Wrote Bouvette, in the same period, in Quebec's radical lesbian context. She expressed the same concerns regarding the *reductio ad unum*, of lesbian relationships to the heterosexual model. The family keeps its members connected through an invisible social contract – the political regime of heterosexuality – founded on the need for different sexes. This is contained in the “myth of the family” which is presented as a harmonic cell at the base of society. It is not specified that we are dealing with a patriarchal model, which is routed in a male model of inheritance, the power of the father and implies a heterosexual monogamous and permanent marriage.<sup>47</sup> Yet even before the specific reasoning behind this radical lesbian position, is the idea that using the law implies recognizing “this particular judicial system – and the discourse that underpins it – as the sole proprietor of the development of the principles of freedom that apply to all”<sup>48</sup> despite the fact that “the legal system is based on the argument developed by a man's world that is assumed to be universal and assimilates all that exists to itself. It does not consider diversity. At the peak of its democratic expression it invented equality, namely the reduction of differences to one [the white male middle-class heterosexual]. Starting from sex”.<sup>49</sup> In this respect, the reasoning of the militants from Arci Gay Donna Florence in 1993 is in keeping with the

mixed movement of the nineties in which Arci Gay is the most visible subject. This movement that has a contact person in the institutions and aims at changing the law, but also moves from the assumption that rights are privileges if they are not universal. We can deduce that the privileges reserved for married couples, even if they were extended to registered same-sex couples, would remain privileges because those who make other life choices would still be excluded. The necessity to refute the family-centred mentality is therefore re-affirmed. This family-centred position is also imbued in the Italian Constitution, which defines the family a “natural” component of society. In this manner acknowledging its roots in a “rigid patriarchal structure that still expects a family formed of ‘father – mother – children’, even better if they are white and Catholic. A standard family, which is considered so normal as to want to define it natural”.<sup>50</sup> This line of opposition to the fight for the legal recognition of the same-sex couple can be found in other lesbian political affinities outside of Italy, even in different periods that were also characterized by an institutional political agenda and public debate that included gay marriage or similar legal arrangements. On numerous occasions these lesbian paths crossed, albeit distant in time and space. In 2002, the Lesbian Feminist Group from Barcelona brought the document “Beyond Marriage”<sup>51</sup> to the European Social Forum in Florence,<sup>52</sup> which summarizes years of reflection. Marriage, even if could be used to make the existence of lesbians visible, helps hide other relationships such as support networks. In any case, it also reduces lesbian relationships to a “heterosexual, patriarchal and matrimonial logic”. If marriage grants certain social conditions to married people, marriage becomes an obligation in order to take advantage of these social arrangements. Accordingly, the Barcelona group highlights that requesting marriage would lead to a division between good and bad lesbians, and therefore sees the solution in the transformation of couples’ rights to individual rights and, therefore, the abolition of civil marriage.

Danielle Charest,<sup>53</sup> in a speech developed in the late nineties when France was debating PACS (pacte civil de solidarité), claimed that “recognition, couple, integration and equality, these are the key words of a vision whose ultimate goal is marriage and parenthood, in brief: the adherence to the concept of the family”<sup>54</sup> and therefore the defence of privileges that strengthen the system. This is not a *neutral* choice in the moment that this membership, for example, is connected to the access of social assistance for those without a job, or the sponsorship of a migrant person for a residence permit. It raises the need to ask “why does the integrationist movement consider the hetero-social system as the only desirable option?”. For Charest, the answer begins with the observation that this choice is essentially an objective thought of and claimed by gay men.

The Florentine proposal in 1993, in substance and tone, is located in an articulated lesbian reflection. If it is to be considered “revolutionary” in terms of what it offers, abandoning the heterosexist, or “hetero-social” system (to use Charest’s words) and reflecting the *French materialist* feminist<sup>55</sup> position, it is based on, however, individual subjectivity, regardless of the social formations in which one decides to live, or ones lifestyle. It is “reformist”, instead, in its choice of instruments: the proposal to change the legal system of the State. The idea is, in fact, to remove certain rights from the couple and render them available to the individual. In addition, some specific rights would need to be universalized, derived from a system that is still based on permanent employment and complex social status, that were traditional reserved for members of institutionalized couples such as: the right to choose a

representative in the event of disability, inability to understand and act, or imprisonment; designation of an heir; to join another and compete for public housing; give or receive a survivor's pension. In addition, in the opposite direction, only those with dependents or who is disabled or ill would have higher public ranking, deleting administrative rules such as those of spouse reunification.

Returning to the narrative, Arci Gay Donna Florence's proposal gained attention and aroused enthusiasm among the two hundred lesbians who attended the conference in Florence in 1993, but it did not produce "any shift in the national policy of Arci Gay – Arci Gay Donna".<sup>56</sup> However it stimulated a wider debate within the association, a debate that began immediately and continued for a several years. Even the press reports on the conference indicated some part of the change. Milly Moscardini published an article in the newspaper *Il Tirreno* titled "Lesbians, which union? Marriage divides gay women".<sup>57</sup> In any case, this article represents an exception among the newspapers that for the most part, despite everything, promoted the supposed *desire for family* of the lesbians at the conference.

The debate opened inside the movement, and despite the fact that there was no shift in Arci Gay's policy, in the summary of the opening speech of the Sixth Congress of the Association held the following year, Graziella Bertozzo presented the Florentine document as "particularly significant" offering "a consideration of how it is, especially for women, important to guarantee the rights of the individual".<sup>58</sup> In the summary, she further notes, "the victory of a certain Italian political faction led to an attempt to validate the family, the 'perfect' family that imprisons many young gays and lesbians" concluding that "the worst enemy of the gay movement, and even more so for the lesbian movement is familism". After Florence, therefore, the regulation of same-sex couples remained the primary goal (and to this day) of the overall movement. Yet, the lesbian component began to criticise the family institution, to analyze domestic violence, to see family values as negative values to be destroyed, and the concepts of resistance to the standardization and appreciation of diversity were re-introduced.

The following years would profoundly modify the national association Arci Gay, as well as the context in which the LGBT movement worked. "1994 was an important year for Arci Gay Donna: on the proposal of the Ferrara group, the National Congress in the spring of that year voted to change the name of the association to Arcigay – Arcilesbica [...]. This change was also proof of the political maturity achieved by the lesbian component that continued its development of their own political demands at the same time".<sup>59</sup> It was also the year of the first national pride in Italy, the first mass lesbian, gay and transgender march in Italian history. On July 2, 1994 around ten thousand people marched in Rome. At an institutional level, as early as December 1993, a group of left-wing representatives has submitted the bill *Provisions for Civil Unions*<sup>60</sup> to the House of Representatives, drafted at the legal centre of Arcigay Naples. "But the Legislature was winding down [the eleventh legislature ended in April 1994], and no one noticed. The same text would be re-proposed to the new parliament in the autumn of 1994".<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, on February 8, 1994 the European Parliament adopted the Resolution on Equal Rights for Homosexuals in the Community, written by Claudia Roth of the German Green party. It called on the Member States to erase any difference in treatment between heterosexuals and homosexuals, to



campaign against prejudice and violence, to remove any discriminatory laws. Yet the Italian media almost exclusively emphasized the invitation from the European Parliament to the Member States to allow marriage or similar institutions between people of the same sex, as well as the adoption of children. At this point “the indignant Catholic reaction” erupted. Pope Wojtyla devoted part of his speech to the crowd gathered in St. Peter’s Square on February 20, 1994 to the issue of such “deviant behaviour that does not conform to God’s plan”. Among the salient passages:

What is morally unacceptable is the legal approval of homosexual practice [...] with the resolution of the European Parliament asks one to justify a moral disorder. [...] The bond between two men or two women cannot be a real family, and even less can to such a union be attributed the right to adopt children without family.<sup>62</sup>

The three most influential Italian Catholic newspapers adopted the same position: *L’Osservatore Romano*, the official newspaper of the Vatican State; *Avvenire* the newspaper of the Italian bishops’ Conference, with the special issue “The Europarliament under attack”<sup>63</sup>; and *Famiglia Cristiana*, one of the most widespread Italian magazines, with the editorial “Don’t call them families” in which we read:

Individual rights must be reconciled with the general interest of the community. It to equate ‘gay couples’ and families based on marriage would in fact encourage (or at least not discourage) forms of relationship between persons that objectively do not correspond to the common meaning and the common good. So, for clarity and intellectual honesty, let’s start with not calling these unions ‘marriages’ and ‘families’: they are not in law or in fact.<sup>64</sup>

“Opposition to gay and lesbian couples become one of the pope’s battle cries. Behind him the bishops, cardinals and theologians were let loose. The substance of the condemnation was always the same: homosexuality is moral disorder. But the tone became harder, the church rang the warning bells for the active defence of traditional values”.<sup>65</sup> In this climate, the issue of same sex unions, which became the theme of the *gay family* for its detractors, found its way to the front pages of the *mainstream* media. It becomes a widespread and popular debate. On one side the Catholic church and the right-wing, on the other the LGBT movement with the often lukewarm support of the parliamentary left. And in this context, the debate within the LGBT movement disappeared. The positions that were critical of the proposed institutionalization of same-sex couples were obscured, while within the movement these voices were often accused of playing into the hands of the enemies of lesbians and gay men. In the end the battle for the gay family takes on radical connotations in opposition to the Vatican attacks.

Among the lesbian organizations, resistance to the family, family values, and normalization nevertheless continued to be productive. In fact it was debated during the Second Lesbian Week, in Bologna in June 1996, organized by fifteen groups from both the lesbian separatist and Arci movements as well as some independent individuals. As part of the week, the debate *Free from the family. From Strasbourg for a multitude of choices* was planned, organized by Coordinamento Lesbiche Milanesi (a Milan lesbian group) and Florence’s Arcilesbica (in the meantime, the national association had changed name and thus the local centres, including Florence’s Arci Gay Donna). In one direction, the tools provided by the European Parliament Resolution were analyzed, and the other developed a

critique of the family and resumed Arci Gay Donna's 1993 proposal stating "civil unions, the fixation on the relationship of the couple [...] does not reflect the lives of many lesbians"<sup>66</sup> who often have a "*lesbian family*, a number of friends and former lovers who accompany them throughout their lives". It is assumed, therefore, that "perhaps it would be more suited to the desires, more respectful of the relationships of these lesbians to indicate who should be their heir, who should assist them in the hospital ... and might be different people"<sup>67</sup>. The Second Week was an event that celebrated the coming together of lesbian separatist and non-separatist based on common projectuality. It was structured in a manner that on the subject of the family, in the same field, CLI (Collegamento Lesbiche Italiane, a historical Roman separatist group) organized a debate called *S-families: Daily life and love and friendship relationships*.<sup>68</sup> This approach is in line with the other meeting, even though the starting point is different. The discussion started from the question "Who is your family?", and developed a framework. In this context, "the identikit of our families proved to be unique, and yet very common: various couples surrounded by exs, families formed by two former lovers and the current, or instead of four friends who were not lovers, etc"<sup>69</sup>. The difference between the two debates was the culture it was based on, rights for the first, and reflections on the relationships for the second, consistent with lesbian separatist analysis. The common ground was the criticism of the family and the refusal of being equated with the heterosexual couple.

In December 1996, after a turbulent phase of in the life of Arcigay-Arcilesbica, Arcigay and Arcilesbica split into two separate entities. As a number of local centres left the groups, Arcilesbica was born as an independent national association. The debate regarding the demands with respect to the family continued within this organization, although the position regarding the regulation of same-sex couples was clear from the beginning. "Arcilesbica in its first congressional theses after having placed the goal of achieving full citizenship for lesbians as singles, as couples, and as members of the association on the level of civil rights, stated: *we need to construct the possibility to access institutions such as for example, adoption and civil unions for the lesbians that want it, while opposing any privilege attached to this civil union or to heterosexual marriage that necessarily act to the detriment of the individual and in our case of individual women*"<sup>70</sup>.

This position became part of their political agenda, and elicited conflict within and outside the association, particularly during the conference "The world to make. On the political role of the lesbian movements", held in Rome in 1997.<sup>71</sup> The conference, as we see in the call for papers, intends to "start from the issues that have helped build an autonomous lesbian movement, identity and the rights of citizenship, addressing identity not only as an object of discussion but also as a means of change for a political movement, and reconsidering the importance of the discourse surrounding rights because the lesbian movement, as well as the women's movement, has often declined to discuss about what it means to be a subject of law. For some, the policy of the demands [for legal rights] is a useful tool for the transformation of society and the achievement of full citizenship, while others consider it a dangerous integration and normalization in line with the hetero-patriarchal model"<sup>72</sup>.

During the two days of the conference, the lesbian separatist and the Arci components (which in previous year has mostly been part of the national association Arcilesbica) fought without any compromises, precisely on the issue of legislating same sex couples. One side

believed that civil unions represented a necessary part in the struggle for visibility, freedom and protection. The other faction believed, instead, that this legal arrangement would only further reinforce the familist hetero-patriarchal structure, and therefore preferred to put in the rights of the individual in the centre, as seen in Article 3 of the Italian Constitution,<sup>73</sup> re-proposing, to find common ground, the content and form of the Florentine proposal from 1993. Even though this political faction nurtured a distrust, if not opposition, to the legislative battle, seeing as they preferred the cultural approach.

“An apparently modular difference formed, which destroyed the previous understanding. The lesbo-feminist area, that had until recently been willing to cooperate with the non-separatist lesbians, now proved hostile to the political project of a national association of only lesbians. The separatist, who do not want to be confused with those who in their eyes made assimilationist claims and normative political practices, felt the need to mark their difference and choose the theme of civil unions as a symbol. Who claimed civil unions was seen as compromising themselves to the patriarchy. Arcilesbica did not intend to give up the claim for civil rights, but was interested in looking for another point to create a unified lesbian platform, that however could not be found”,<sup>74</sup> Cristina Gramolini (one of the founders of Arcilesbica) later wrote while tracing the history of the association. Moira Ferrari, another of the founders of Arcilesbica, traces the major cause of the rupture of the “collaboration between separatist and non-separatist, and therefore the end of the [Second Lesbian] Week experience [...] in their irreconcilable respective positions, outlined in the convention *The world to make*, [...], in which the rights of the individual (old battle cry of Arcigay Donna) were opposed, probably without much understanding of the political opportunity and battle priorities, to the request for the legal recognition of homosexual unions, which was then inserted in the parliamentary agenda”.<sup>75</sup> Giovanna Olivieri, member of the lesbian separatist association CLI, points out that the battle over civil unions was underlay by a series of unresolved binary oppositions, “the point of views regarding civil unions imply, although in a very simplified manner, very complex strategies and tactics regarding the ‘world to make’, and the political role of the lesbian movements: integration and/or opposition, legal and/or cultural battles, delegation and/or authority, community and/or movement, (etc) in contradiction, almost as much as rights for the individual and/or the family, and not locate-able in the well-defined areas of separatist and/or non-separatist”.<sup>76</sup> Lucilla Ciambotti, activist in the Coordinamento Lesbiche Romane (CLR), the other group that was part of the Roman Feminist Separatist Centre, explains the roots of the conflict, “this world as it is was not invented, let alone organized by lesbians and women; trying to fix some little glitch matters little if it is only understood in a narrow manner. I am referring, obviously, to how many people think that changing some articles of the law will allow us to live better and influence current mentality [...] I understand that it is hard to think up a world from scratch, especially because it is so difficult to do so from a perspective different from ones own. Sometimes it is impossible ‘to focus on’ what we like and what is useful when one is constantly disturbed by the patriarchal culture that renders compulsory heterosexuality a law of nature [...]. ‘The best way to destabilize it is instead to try to use the tools already exist that prove we are Subjects of law, and not to ask for new ones in order to be better tolerated by a world of which we already a part’ (CLR paper presented at the conference)”.<sup>77</sup>

In short, a journey of nearly two years in which “the debate and collaboration between Arcilesbica and separatist lesbians within the organizing committee of the Second Lesbian Week showed that a shared lesbian politic is possible, and they enriched with passion and content the [...] movement”,<sup>78</sup> finds its breaking point or, at least, the indication of irreconcilable differences in the approach to the institution of the family: reformable; or, conversely, to be destroyed. Reading the names, political biographies, and genealogies of the participants at the conference, however, shifts in the political positionings that are often referenced in the discussions act clearly. Lesbians with a political background in separatist groups within Arcilesbica take on civil rights politics by putting the defence of the de facto couple at the centre. Others, despite coming from or remaining in the mixed-politics, found constructive common ground with the lesbian separatist groups who continued the long cultural battle against familism and the institution of the family seen as one of the foundations underpinning compulsory heterosexuality.

## Notes

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1. Italian literature on the subject, from sociological, legal and educational ambients, is very wide. As an example see: Francesco Bilotta, 2008 *Le unioni fra persone dello stesso sesso: profili di diritto civile, comunitario e comparato*, Milano: Mimesis. Chiara Saraceno, 2002 *Coppie e famiglie. Non è questione di natura*, Milano: Feltrinelli. Piergiorgio Paterlini, 2006 *Matrimoni gay. Dieci storie di famiglie omosessuali*, Torino: Einaudi.
2. The first Arci Gay centre was founded in Palermo in 1980, in 1985 they formed other centres and acquired a national structure. So this is a national association that was established under the umbrella of Arci, a large social-cultural association that identifies with democratic values, on the left-wing. In a later moment, changing bureaucratic relations within the Arci Confederation, Arci Gay changed its name to Arcigay.
3. Arci Gay Nazionale (eds.) 1987 «Omosessuali e Stato», *Quaderni di critica omosessuale*, n. 3 Bologna, Centro di documentazione Il Cassero: self-published, November 1987; p. 70.
4. Famiglie Arcobaleno is an Italian association founded in 2005 using the French *Association des Parents Gays et lesbiens* as a model to promote the public debate on gay-parenting and the protection of these social formations that contributed unequivocally to the visibility of same-sex couples with children or, at least, built on the heterosexual model, therefore destined to procreate.
5. Elena Biagini 2008 «Praticamente normali? Un sogno dannoso, riscopriamo l'utopia» in *Queer, Liberazione*, n. 160, 1 giugno 2008.
6. Ronald D. Laing, 1971 *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays*, London: Tavistock Publications.
7. David Cooper, 1971 *The Death of the Family*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
8. 1975 *Contro la famiglia*, Roma: Stampa Alternativa.
9. FHAR, 1971 *Rapport contre la normalité*, Paris, Champ libre (published in Italian in 1972 by the publishing house Guaraldi with the title *Il problema dei «diversi»*. *Rapporto contro la normalità*). FHAR, Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire, is a movement founded in Paris in 1971, that brought lesbian feminists and radical gay activists together, part of a wider revolutionary movement that started in May 1968.

10. On the role of Spolato, her political choices, from FOURI! to separatism, and on its biographical events such as teachers fired for being lesbian see Rina Macrelli 1982 "Per una storia del lesbismo: la mia" in *Effe*, anno X, marzo 1982, pp. 40 – 42. Here it can suffice to say that Spolato was perhaps the first lesbian in Italy to come out, in 1970.
11. Mariasilvia Spolato, 1972 *I movimenti omosessuali di liberazione*, Roma: Samonà e Savelli; p. 17.
12. Daniela Danna, 2008 «Lesbiche usciamo FUORI!» in Monia Dragone, Cristina Gramolini, Paola Guazzo, Helen Ibry, Eva Mamini, Lilia Mulas, 2008 *Il movimento delle lesbiche in Italia*, Milano: Il dito e la luna; p. 30.
13. Mario Mieli, 1980, *Homosexuality and liberation: elements of a gay critique*, London: Gay Men's Press [Mario Mieli, 1977 *Elementi di critica omosessuale*, Torino: Einaudi] p. 105.
14. Daniela Danna, 2008, p. 31.
15. Daniela Danna, 2008, p. 33.
16. Adrienne Rich, 1980, «Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence» in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Summer 1980, p. 134.
17. «The straight mind» by Monique Wittig, read for the first time in New York at the Modern Language Association Convention in 1978, published in *Feminist Issues* n. 1, summer 1980.
18. The authoress coined the term 'veterosessuale' as a play on the Italian words 'vetero' that means outdated/no longer cool and hetero.
19. Nicoletta Poidimani, 2007 «Divenire-lesbica e divenire-gay. Appunti sulle cittadinanze possibili» in Paolo Pedote e Nicoletta Poidimani (edited by) *We will survive. Lesbiche, gay e trans in Italia*, Milano: Mimesis.
20. Gracia Trujillo Barbadillo 2008 *Deseo y resistencia. Treinta años de movilizaciòn lesbiana en el Estado español (1977 – 2007)*, Barcelona – Madrid: Editorial Eguales.
21. Marie Jo Bonnet is a historian who specializes in women's history and lesbism. She was part of the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF), and is one of the founders of Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire and Gouines rouges. We would especially like to point out her work: *Les relations amoureuses entre les femmes du XVIe au XXe siècle*.
22. Available at: [http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2014/02/07/le-mariage-est-devenu-de-gauche-un-paradoxe-incroyable\\_978617](http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2014/02/07/le-mariage-est-devenu-de-gauche-un-paradoxe-incroyable_978617).
23. Arci Gay was an association made up of men and women, although the male presence was the absolutely majority, and only in 1989 a lesbian faction began to take life within it. Later in 1990 lesbians represented 50% of the seats in the national organism. In the national Secretariat, Graziella Bertozzo took the role of secretary. She belonged to the first official group of lesbians in Arci Gay, started in Verona in 1988, under the name of Arci Gay Donna. In 1994, the National Association took on the name Arcigay-Arcilesbica, and in 1996 it formed two separate associations, Arcigay and Arcilesbica, that are still active.
24. Valeria Santostefano, 2008 «Voci di donne lesbiche in Arcigay: tra il 1989 e il 1996» in Monia Dragone *et aliae*; pp. 79 – 93.
25. Sara Sajetti e Anna Ciarletta 1993 «A Verona la convention dell'Arci Gay Donna» in *Babilonia*, n. 113, luglio – agosto 1993; p. 16.

26. *Ibidem*, p. 17.
27. Graziella Bertozzo, 1993 «Considerazioni in margine alla convention nazionale Arci Gay Donna: “Una nuova generazione in movimento” – Verona 15-16 maggio 1993» in *Azione gay e lesbica* (edited by) 1999 *Arci Gay Donna 1988- 1994. Alcuni documenti del percorso*, Firenze: self-published. The pages are not numbered.
28. Graziella Bertozzo, militant lesbian, came from the '77 movement, was the organizer of the first lesbian presence in Arci Gay, of which she holds the second executive position from 1989 to 1994 (see note no. 23), working mainly on lesbian visibility. After her resignation from the national organization, she was part of various experiences of radical areas of the LGBTIQ movement: *Alziamo la testa* [Lets be proud; literally 'raise our heads'] committee from Verona; the European Social Forum in Florence; the *Facciamo Breccia* Coordination [Lets break with/separate from the church].
29. Graziella Bertozzo, 1993.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Il Resto del Carlino*, 16 may 1993, article written by Umberto Marchesini.
32. *La Cronaca*, 16 may 1993, p. 15.
33. The name “Pantera” [Panther] refers to a broad student movement that animated Italian universities between 1989 and 1990. See Marco Capitelli, 1990 *La pantera siamo noi. Cronache, immagini, documenti e storie delle occupazioni universitarie del '90*, Roma: Instant Books CIDS and Micaela Arcidiacono, Francesca Battisti, Sonia Di Loreto, Carlo Martinez, Alessandro Portelli, Elena Spandri, 1995 *L'aeroplano e le stelle. Storia orale di una realtà studentesca prima e dopo la pantera*, Roma: Manifestolibri.
34. Marco Ravaioli 2011 «L'inizio» in Elena Biagini(edited by) *Una ribellione necessaria. Lesbiche, gay e trans: 40, 30, 20 anni di movimento*. Atti del convegno, Firenze: Azione gay e lesbica; p. 134.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Letter sent to the centres by the National Arci Gay Donna.
37. Letter presentating the conference, signed Arci Gay Donna Firenze.
38. Valeria Santini «Anche le lesbiche nel loro piccolo s'incazzano. Convegno nazionale di Arci Gay Donna a Firenze» in *Quir. Il mensile fiorentino di cultura e vita lesbica e gay e non solo...*, n. 7, gennaio 1994, Firenze, pp. 25 – 26.
39. Arci Gay Donna Firenze 1994 «Unioni civili: il documento presentato da Arci Gay Donna di Firenze» in *Quir. Il mensile fiorentino di cultura e vita lesbica e gay e non solo...*, n. 7, gennaio 1994, Firenze, pp. 27 – 30.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Valeria Santini, 1994.
42. Elena Biagini 2011 «Introduzione» in Biagini, Elena (edited by), 2011; p. 10.
43. Betzy Brown, 2002 [1994] «La Sfamiglia» in *Memoria irregolare. Vent'anni di testi lesbici selezionati da Bollettina del CLI*, Firenze – Roma: BLI, 2002; p. 116. The Italian traslation was referenced due to the impossibility of obtaining the orignal.
44. *Ibidem*, p. 114.
45. Valeria Santini1998 «Unioni civili: una reale priorità per le lesbiche o un obiettivo fittizio?» in Forum delle lesbiche 1998 *Il mondo da fare. Sul ruolo politico del movimento delle lesbiche*. Atti del convegno. Roma, 20 – 22 giugno 1997, Roma:

- self-published; pp. 133 – 138.
46. Brigitte Bouvette “Le chaînon marquant” in *Contestation de la famille, Amazones d’hier lesbiennes d’aujourd’hui*, n. 24, october 1996, p. 38.
  47. Frederick Engels, 1884 *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*, Hottingen-Zurich, cap. I – II.
  48. Simonetta Spinelli, 1998 «Riflessioni fuori luogo» in *Forum delle lesbiche* 1998; pp. 143 – 148.
  49. *Ibid*, pp. 146 – 147.
  50. Arci Gay Donna Firenze 1994, p. 28.
  51. Proceedings of the workshop, Firenze 8 November 2002, *Gay lesbiche trans e neoliberalismo*, Firenze: Azione gay e lesbica, pp. 73 – 77.
  52. Specifically, the document was presented at the *Gay, lesbian, trans and neo-liberalism* workshop organized by Azione gay e lesbica, that is, the same centre that (as seen in this article) was called Arci Gay Arci Gay Donna in the early ’90s and later from 1994, Arcigay Arcilesbica Florence, which, at the end of the decade, left the National Association taking on this new name.
  53. Daniele Charest «Les contrats apparentés au mariage: une fuite en arrière» in Natacha Chetcuti, Claire Michard, *Lesbianisme et féminisme. Histoires politiques*, Paris : L’Harmattan, 2003. The article was also distributed in Italian, thanks to Marta Bencich’s translation for the conference *Soggetto lesbica. Sovvertire il pensiero egemone per una ri-scrittura del simbolico*, [Lesbian subject. Subvert the dominant thought to re-write the symbolic] Roma, 14/15 may 2005, organized by CLR, Coordinamento Lesbiche Romane, Desiderandae Bari, Fuoricampo Bologna, Centro Femminista Separatista Roma.
  54. *Ibid*.
  55. This term refers to a theoretical group whose work tried to investigate the cultural, historical and ideological dimensions of hierarchical and dichotomous divisions through which gender (male/female), sexuality (hetero/homo) and race (whites/blacks) are organized. The feminist materialism in particular developed through the journal *Questions féministes* starting in 1977, Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Paola Tabet and Monique Wittig were part of this group.
  56. Valeria Santini, 2011; p. 156.
  57. *Il Tirreno*, 28 November 1993.
  58. Graziella Bertozzo, 1994 “Sintesi della relazione di apertura” in *Azione gay e lesbica* (edited by) 1999.
  59. Valeria Santostefano 2008, in Monia Dragone et al.; p. 86.
  60. For the first time, a bill on homosexual cohabitation was presented to the House in 1988 by Socialist MP Alma Cappiello.
  61. Gianni Rossi Barilli, 1999 *Il movimento gay in Italia*, Milano: Feltrinelli; p. 215. Luigi Manconi (Verdi) and Graziano Cioni (PDS) in the Senate, and Nichi Vendola (Rifondazione Comunista) and Fulvia Bandoli (PDS) in the House, signed the proposal.
  62. Daniela Danna, 1997 *Matrimonio omosessuale*, Roma: Erre Emme Edizioni; p. 200.
  63. 22 February 1994.
  64. *Avvenire* n. 8 of February 1994

65. Gianni Rossi Barilli, 1999; p. 213 – 214.
66. «Libere dalla famiglia. Da Strasburgo per una pluralità delle scelte» in Comitato promotore della seconda settimana lesbica, 1997 Comunità lesbica. Libertà di movimento. Atti della seconda settimana lesbica, Roma: self-published; 129 – 138.
67. *Ibid*, p. 133.
68. In Italian adding an 's' before a word negates the meaning of the word in the same manner as 'non', 'in' or 'un'.
69. «S-famiglie. Vita quotidiana e relazioni d'amore e di amicizia» in Comitato promotore della seconda settimana lesbica, 1997; pp. 171 – 180.
70. Daniela Danna 1997 *Matrimonio omosessuale*, Roma: Erre Emme Edizioni; p. 143.
71. The conference took place 20-22 june 1997, at the Centro Femminista Separatista , organized by the Comitato organizzatore della Seconda Settimana Lesbica [Organizing Committee of the Second Week,] a structure that connected the different lesbian realities, formed to create the Second Lesbian Week and later became permanent.
72. Forum delle lesbiche 1998 *Il mondo da fare. Sul ruolo politico del movimento delle lesbiche*. Atti del Convegno. Roma, 20-22 giugno 1997, Roma: self-published; pp. 5 – 6.
73. Paragraph 1 of the third Article of the Italian Constitution states "All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions".
74. Cristina Gramolini, 2008 «Salva con nome: dieci anni di ArciLesbica» in Monia Dragone *et aliae*; pp. 95 – 119.
75. Moira Ferrari 2008 «Due settimane e mezzo» in Monia Dragone *et aliae*; pp. 69 – 78.
76. Giovanna Olivieri 1997 «Convegno Il mondo da fare» in *Bollettina del CLI*, anno XVI, n. 142, july – august 1997.
77. Lucilla Ciambotti 1997 «Un mondo da inventare» in *Towanda!* Anno 1, n. 3, september – october/Ottobre 1997.
78. Forum delle lesbiche 1998; p. 5.