

## QUEERING KINSHIP, OVERCOMING HETERONORMS

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**Abstract:** Although same-sex couples and their offspring have been legitimised in many European countries, heteronormativity is still embedded in institutions and practices, thereby continuing to affect the daily lives of LGBT individuals. Italy represents a clear example of the hegemonic power of heteronormativity because of the fierce opposition to recognising lesbian and gay parenthood among many parts of society. This paper focuses on the peculiarities of the Italian scenario with the aim of highlighting how heteronormativity works in contemporary neoliberal contexts. By drawing on queer and feminist perspectives, the article also analyses how LGBT equal rights demands can contribute, to some extent, to reinforcing heteronormativity. Implications concerning strategies for challenging the regime of normality and queering kinship are discussed.

**Key words:** heteronormativity; gender order; homonormativity; queer politics

### Exiled from kinship

Recent years have been marked by important changes in the civic recognition of same-sex couples and their offspring in Europe. Some European countries have now begun to recognise same-sex couples and in many cases lesbian and gay parenthood has been legitimised as well. In Europe, several countries have passed laws on same-sex marriages or civil partnerships and lesbian and gay parenthood, and countries with a stronger legacy of Catholicism have introduced important legislative changes regarding marriage and kinship.

Among the last countries in Europe, Italy legislated on same-sex couples in May 2016. This was an issue that had already been considered at the end of the 1980s, thanks to a bill presented by the socialist parliamentarian Agata Alma Cappiello (Camera dei Deputati, 1988), and in 2007 when a bill was presented by the centre-left government led by Romano Prodi (Senato della Repubblica, 2007). As had already happened during Prodi's government, and during Matteo Renzi's government, which presented the new bill no. 2081 in 2013 (Senato della Repubblica, 2015), the recognition of same-sex couples and their offspring was the source of strong divergences between the ruling parties. Specifically, the draft law caused serious conflicts between the Democratic Party, which was the majority party, and the centre-right allies in the government parties rooted in the Christian democratic tradition.

Moreover, significant disagreements arose within the Democratic Party as its large Catholic component opposed the bill. Additionally, there was strong opposition to the proposed law among lay and religious civil society organisations in the country favouring a conservative interpretation of gender, sexualities and kinship.

Law 76/2016 (*Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 2016) recognised same-sex civil unions, extending most of the provisions relating to heterosexual married couples to them, such as widow(er)'s pension, inheritance, right to visit one's partner in hospital, decisions about medical treatment. Although same-sex civil unions were almost completely assimilated with heterosexual marriages, the section of the draft law allowing a partner to adopt their partner's biological children (so-called stepchild adoption) was so controversial that it had to be removed so the law could pass. Many commentators stated that denying the right of a partner to adopt the children of their partner could be interpreted as normal and predictable resistance typical of countries taking the first step towards homonormalisation and that this would be soon resolved, just as it had been in other countries.

However, in spite of the increasingly widespread norm of homotolerance (Roseneil et al., 2013), and the enthusiasm to which this gave rise, it is evident that heteronormativity (Kitzinger, 2005; Warner, 1993) continues to be hegemonic, influencing the daily life and intimate projects of individuals falling outside the heteronorm (Gusmano & Motterle, 2019; Scandurra et al., 2019).

Furthermore, heteronormativity is embedded in every social and civic institution and acts as a cultural hegemonic force, which can lead subordinate groups to consent to those dominant worldviews that are the source of their oppression (Gramsci, 1975; Lasio, Serri, Ibba, & Oliveira, 2019a; Lopes, Oliveira, Nogueira, & Grave, 2017; Ludwig, 2011). The power of heteronormativity consists of condemning to invisibility what does not conform to the hegemonic order, making it the only possible vision of the world and manipulating perceptions, beliefs and values. It does not require forceful actions or punitive and coercive control for the ideology of dominant groups to prevail; rather, they exert their power by ensuring their worldviews become universally valid social norms. Therefore, the social and political status quo may seem natural, inevitable, immutable and beneficial to everyone, even to those who are victims of oppression. The liberal order does not simply impose its rules; it does not merely say what is forbidden; it does not oppress in a direct way. Rather, it normalises, makes individuals responsible, disciplines. The state does not need to be coercive: it can be assured that its subjects will make their choices in the "sacrosanct private sphere of personal freedom" (Halperin, 1995, p. 9). LGBT<sup>1</sup> individuals may continue to be exiled from kinship (Weston, 1991) both because they lack state legitimacy and because of their own adherence to the heteronorms. Heteronormativity may be upheld by LGBT individuals who perceive transgressions of heteronorms as a cost and therefore adhere to homonormativity (Oliveira, Costa, & Nogueira, 2013).

In Italy, the strong opposition against recognising lesbian and gay parents and their children attests to the fact that heteronormativity, together with xenophobia and racism towards migrants (Castro, Carnassale, 2019), is still widespread in the country.

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans.

The state and the Catholic Church play an important role in preserving the heteronormative view of intimacy and kinship in the country (Bertone, 2017; Bertone & Franchi, 2014) and they contribute to the fostering of conservative beliefs about the family, with the result that many individuals still consider gay and lesbian parenthood as a threat to children (e.g. Baiocco et al., 2019; Pistella et al., 2018).

Recent studies (e.g. Pacilli, Taurino, Jost & Toorn, 2011) have highlighted that Italian lesbian and gay individuals frequently share the same negative attitude as heterosexual individuals to the parental competences of same-sex couples. Moreover, forms of discrimination against sexual minorities persist in social organisations that are drawing attention to social exclusion and marginalisation (e.g. Priola, Lasio, Serri, & De Simone, 2018).

The present paper, drawing on a poststructuralist framework influenced by Foucauldian work comprising queer theory and feminist theory, has the aim of highlighting the practices of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1978) that contribute to maintaining kinship within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). Since the notion of heteronormativity is dependent on specific political and cultural narratives (Eng, 2010) and it cannot be discriminately applied across different contexts, this work focuses attention on the Italian peculiarities, thus providing insights into how heteronormativity works in a particular neoliberal context. Moreover, in the final section, the paper discusses how LGBT equal rights demands can contribute to the substantiation of heteronormativity, thus depoliticising them.

In order to scrutinise the social and institutional practices that reinforce the normative models of sexuality and kinship, and give origin to sexuality-based discriminations, the section that follows explains how in Italy the resistance to sexual democracy relies on discourses that naturalise gender and sexuality and support the traditional heterosexual nuclear family model.

## **Defending the gender order in contemporary Italy**

Italy represents a paradigmatic example of the way in which sexuality can be controlled through a regime of truth that maintains the notion of one ‘dominant’ sexuality (heterosexuality) and ‘other’ “peripheral sexualities” (Foucault, 1978, p. 38). In Italy, hegemonic heteronormativity has been reinforced by establishing clear restrictions on sexualities, not so much through explicit prohibitions or persecutions, but by distinguishing what is normal and what lies beyond the linkage between gender, generativity and parenthood (Franchi & Selmi, 2018).

The relationship with the Catholic Church is very important in Italian civic discourse on sexualities because of the cooperation between the Italian State and the Church in “promoting the human being (‘*persona humana*’) and the sake of the Nation” (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 1985), which to some extent means the same thing as condemning non-heterosexualities. In fact, the Catholic archives reveal discursive traces (Foucault, 1972) of a deeply rooted condemnation of non-normative sexualities and, even today, Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis), often perceived as progressive with regards to sexual minorities, holds a position that is consistent with tradition. For example, in proposition number 64 of the apostolic exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*”, Bergoglio (2013) refers to the “Pastoral care

of persons with homosexual inclination”, written by the Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States, where homosexuality is defined as “not in accord with God’s purpose and plan for human sexuality”. Moreover, the document affirms that “God created human beings in his own image, meaning that the complementary sexuality of man and woman is a gift from God and ought to be respected as such.”

The debate that took place in Italy between 2013 and 2016 on the recognition of same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood offers us a valuable opportunity to examine how contemporary heteronormative power opposes attempts to subvert the gender order (Connell, 1987). Not surprisingly, the opposition to the recognition of sexual minorities has taken the path of reaffirming the well-established gender order of society and the traditional female and male roles by adopting “the various institutionalised routines for preserving men’s power over women and over men who deviate from masculine ideals” (Segal, 2007, p. 132). One example is the following excerpt from the interventions of Antonio Azzollini, senator of the centre-right wing party “Nuovo Centrodestra”, during a debate on the bill no. 2081: “We must preserve motherhood and fatherhood, which are distinct and different in their characteristics, emotions, affections and social functions, and this diversity must be maintained. It is nature, after all, that needs men and women” (Senato della Repubblica, 2016).

Essentialist views of gender, which are embedded in Western culture and to which many theoretical models in social sciences still refer (Nogueira, 2001), naturalise differences between women and men, thus construing a symbolic system that underestimates the role of historical, political and social conditions and justifies the inequities that characterise the relationship between men and women (Lasio, Putzu, Serri, & De Simone, 2017). Heteronormativity construes gender and sexuality as pre-cultural facts, and power relations between the heterosexual majority and “alternative” sexualities are normalised and taken for granted. As Butler (1990) asserts, the heterosexualisation of desire needs the production of distinct and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine,” and this implies that gender is understood as an authentic and expressive attribute of the individual, thus identifying who is not suitable through binary gender divisions and the normative heterosexual model (Butler, 1997).

The division of roles and responsibilities is based on the belief that men and women differ greatly in psychology, attitudes and skills, which contributes to maintaining the gender asymmetry at the source of women’s invisibility as active citizens (Amâncio & Oliveira, 2006).

Masculinity and femininity are construed as opposite categories and their differences are reified by inscribing them into concepts such as nature, personality or individuality which fail to recognise the role of social, cultural and political factors in determining their differences (Oliveira, Costa & Carneiro, 2014). Male social supremacy is justified through the alleged connection between the social order and the biological difference between women and men. Being constructed as opposite categories, men and women are positioned within an order defined by their gender, and this gender order (Connell, 1987) implies that they assume a different position in the social hierarchy, with women being subordinated to men.

The debate about same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood has occurred in close connection with a mobilisation against so-called “gender ideology” or “gender theory” (Bernini, 2016; Garbagnoli, 2014; Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018). Different conservative groups

and institutions used these syntagmas to designate numerous initiatives intended to overcome discrimination based on gender or sexuality. These initiatives have been accused of being part of a project to subvert the gender order. This was affirmed by Francesco Aracri, senator of the centre-right party Forza Italia during a parliamentary debate on the bill on same-sex civil unions: “The attempt is to redesign our society through ‘womb for rent’, through adoptions and gay marriages, a society where there is no mother and father, but ‘parent 1’ and ‘parent 2’, in which, through the gender pseudoculture, you want to create men without a soul, without a face or identity” (Senato della Repubblica, 2016).

As Robcis (2015) has already pointed out with regard to France, in Italy one of the peculiarities of the opposition to recognising lesbian and gay couples and their children was the focus on the need to preserve sexual differentiation and complementarity, which were described as the very foundation of human identity. As a result, when opposing a bill that would protect the rights and duties of lesbian and gay couples and their children, the debate inside and outside Parliament supported positioning parenthood within the patriarchal order and strengthening the normative standards on the practices of motherhood.

Research (Lasio & Serri, 2019) on the discussions that occurred in Italy while the bill no. 2081 (Senato della Repubblica, 2015) on same-sex couples was being debated in Parliament revealed the discursive strategies used by the heteronormative power to exclude non-heterosexual subjectivities from kinship and to reinforce the hegemonic model of gender intelligibility. These discursive strategies were firmly anchored in the cultural background that has historically prevented sexual minorities from expressing themselves in the Italian context. Today’s rhetoric may not deny the existence of homosexuality as in the past (Dall’Orto, 1988), but in the recent debate lesbian and gay couples were constructed as foreign subjectivities in a symbolic system of kinship, with a clear distinction being made between heterosexual married couples and “specific social formations”, as lesbian and gay civil unions are defined by Law 76/2016 (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2016) in order to distinguish them from the “natural family” founded on marriage between a man and woman.

In the debate on the proposed legislation, issues related not just to same-sex unions and lesbian and gay parenthood were forcefully discussed as well; evoking unanswered questions on the connection between biological differences and identity, sexuality, parenting and kinship. The natural order discourses have been central to maintaining the heteronormative view of the family, which on one side grants access to reproduction and kinship only to heterosexual individuals and, on the other side, reinforces the gender order of society by constructing as natural the differences between men and women and their roles in childrearing.

Various forces contributed to reinforcing the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of kinship by relying on the need to guarantee the social order founded on the alleged natural expression of human intimacy and reproduction.

The Catholic Church played a crucial role in the opposition to recognising same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood, taking part in the debate in defence of the “natural family” while, the bill no. 2081 was being debated in the Italian parliament. The Vatican’s hierarchies and citizens’ organisations following Catholic thinking contested the bill on the supposed grounds that it was aimed at subverting the “natural” order of the family. Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, President of the Italian Episcopal Conference from 2007 to 2017, took

part in the political debate on the recognition of same-sex couples once the newly elected prime minister, Matteo Renzi, announced the government would legislate for recognition of same-sex couples. On May 2014 Cardinal Bagnasco called for a “crusade for the family”: “The only family is where parents are a man and a woman. How can society be sure of its future, of its stability, without a father and a mother who create the new generations in the womb of love and educate them in the complementarity of roles, talents and sensibilities?” (Il Secolo XIX, 2014).

Between 2013 and 2016, the Church had an important influence on the political scene, causing interruptions to the parliamentary course of the bill and providing arguments against its approval. This was reflected in the fact that Parliament’s opposition to recognising lesbian and gay parenthood was almost unanimous: the opposition to stepchild adoption came not only from centre-right politicians, but from a large number of members of the Democratic Party, mainly parliamentarians of Catholic extraction, leading to a profound rift within the party (Lasio, Congiargiu, De Simone, & Serri, 2019b).

Moreover, the relationships between gender, sexuality and reproduction were reinforced during the parliamentary debate as heterosexuality was placed in linear continuity with affections and sexual practices. MPs’ speeches constructed relations between same-sex individuals as erotic but not procreative, thus further excluding LGBT individuals from kinship. Senator Maurizio Gasparri of the centre-right party Forza Italia reaffirmed the “natural alienation” of same-sex couples from kinship during the parliamentary debate on the section of the bill that would allow a partner to adopt their partner’s biological children: “There is no right to parenthood, it is the child who is entitled to a family. If a person cannot have children, he/she shouldn’t have them [...]. It must be accepted that children are born from an encounter between a man and a woman” (Senato della Repubblica, 2016).

Lesbian and gay families have been considered abnormal because they might challenge expectations about common heterosexual family roles (Hicks, 2013), and variations in kinship from the normative model of heterosexual family have been defined as a threat to the natural laws which are supposed to prevail over human intelligibility. Discourses on the natural family not only reinforced the exclusion of lesbian and gay individuals from kinship, but they also contributed to reaffirmation of the hegemonic model of gender, which considers women to be naturally disposed to care. The gender fundamentalism embedded in parliamentarians’ speeches was similar to the discourses advocated by the Vatican since the 1990s against the denaturalisation of sexual norms (Buss & Herman, 2003), and the opposition to the recognition of gay and lesbian parents reaffirmed limits for women and their contribution to childrearing, which is constrained within the framework of the patriarchal order.

## **Queering kinship**

The recent debate in Italy on the recognition of same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood has a value that goes beyond the law itself. The very controversial discussion touched on teleological questions, which raised issues such as the ultimate goal of sexuality, the conditions that make kinship possible and the links between biology and kinship. With regard to these points, heteronormative power prevailed, reaffirming the connection between

sexual binarism, heterosexual coitus and reproduction, thus decreeing that the only form of acceptable and generative sexuality is the heterosexual one.

That the law was approved indicates that something is changing, because it recognises the existence of lesbian and gay couples and grants them most of the rights and duties of heterosexual married couples, bringing them out of hiding (at least partly). However, the opponents to the bill were able to reiterate the heteronormative model of kinship, using different arguments on the need to protect the social status quo and its balance with the natural order. As a result, the law continues to exclude lesbian and gay individuals from kinship, thereby revealing that heteronormative imperatives still resist and exert a decisive influence on the understanding of kinship.

Those opposed to recognising lesbian and gay parenthood relied on discourses that maintained the inscription of intimacy and reproduction on the gender order, which was depicted as crucial for childrearing and, more broadly, for the preservation of the foundations of human civilisation. As a result, the debate on the bill not only further alienated LGBT individuals from kinship, but also confirmed the patriarchal order of the family and the unbalanced distribution of responsibilities and power between men and women. Discourses on lesbian and gay parenthood have become a site for reaffirming the traditional division of gender roles, thus supporting the capitalist gendered mode of social production and reproduction. This is consistent with the meaning of gender constructed within the frame of neoliberalism, which is contradictory because on the one hand it requires women to be competitive, autonomous individuals, while on the other it reinforces their subordination to men (Drucker, 2015).

Within the framework of queer theory, Drucker (2015) pointed out how proponents of LGBT politics can succumb to the temptation of seeking assimilation within the dominant culture, while radical movements can fail to propose compelling alternative models. Homonormativity (Duggan, 2003; Drucker, 2015; Oliveira, Costa, & Nogueira, 2013; Richardson, 2000) leads LGBT individuals to support the social order by colluding with the hegemonic views of gender, sexuality, reproduction and kinship. This may be the case with political claims for equal rights for LGBT individuals, which can result in complicity with heteronormative institutions, such as marriage, privatising functions that should belong to the state by recognising only the fundamental rights (parenthood, inheritance) of those who adhere to them. For queer theorists (e.g. Duggan, 2003; Eng, 2010; Warner, 1993), it is through the demands for marriage that LGBT social movements express their complicity with a model of kinship that normalises the dominant model of gender and sexuality and marginalises those who do not identify with it. As Judith Butler (2002, p. 17) states: “to be legitimised by the state means to enter into the terms of the legitimation offered there and to find out that one’s public and recognisable sense of personhood is dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation”.

Alternative models of intimacy and family forms that queer communities promoted in the past have been disowned, for embracing a model of marriage grounded in white, middle-class imperatives, thus marginalising poor, people of colour, transgender subjectivities and any others who reject the hegemonic model.

Discourses around same-sex rights to marry and to lesbian and gay parenthood are often imbued with the rhetoric of “no differences” between lesbian and gay families and heterosexual ones, as an argument for demanding equal rights. Although it can seem

counterintuitive, claiming the right to marriage or for lesbian and gay parenthood to be recognised may support those heteronormative assumptions that form the basis of the marginalisation of sexual minorities, and legitimise them through the pursuit for inclusion in heteronormative institutions.

Seemingly gender-neutral institutions, which succeed in camouflaging the male domination of women, require citizens to respect heteronormative assumptions that give order to gender and sexualities, offering, in return, access to the realm of kinship. Assimilationism makes evident the power of heteronorms: while restoring individual rights, it legitimises social institutions based on heteronormativity. In fact, homonormativity is a facet of the inclusion of LGBT individuals within heteronorms, through assimilationism.

However, being at odds with heteronorms does not necessarily mean being for or against the legal recognition of lesbian and gay couples or their right to adopt. Rather, it is necessary to shed light on the fact that the power of heteronormativity is accrued through a reliance on assumptions that are taken for granted, such as the role of the mother in childrearing, so that the subversive potential of non-heterosexual sexualities can be enhanced. Relying exclusively on monogamous marriage to access kinship and family rights is a way of legitimising marriage as a central institution in contemporary societies. At the same time, there is no guarantee that LGBT equal rights politics challenge the heteronormative assumptions that underpin the unequal social status quo. Drucker (2015) suggests resistance to the privatisation of care and the encouragement of flexible and queer forms of intimate relationship, among others, are ways of resisting heteronormativity, in conjunction with trans-respect policies.

In Italy, access to kinship still seems to rely on a condition defined through comparison with naturalised “biological families”, as shown by Lasio, Serri, Ibba, & Oliveira (2019a), with LGBT activists agreeing with such contentions. The project of questioning heteronormativity will need alliances and articulation among different groups in order to foster a coalitional logic (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). To find our way out of this conundrum, we should be thinking simultaneously about a heteronormative and gendered social order that regulates intimacy and kinship.

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