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Open Forum – The anti-gender and gender-critical roots of the Italian anti-trans parent activism

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The anti-gender and gender-critical roots of the Italian anti-trans parent activism

Between 2020 and 2021, the fight against the hate crimes bill proposal on discrimination and violence based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability marked a pivotal moment in the ongoing mobilization against LGBTQ+ rights in Italy. Proposed by the main center-left party, the Bill proposal encountered a strong opposition both by right-wing and by MPs of the progressive area itself. In particular, the category of gender identity was targeted as a danger, a confused notion, a trojan horse of the ‘gender ideology’, etc. The Bill first adopted by the Lower House was later blocked at the Senate, thanks to the decisive action of Senator Simone Pillon, a founder and member of the Italian anti-gender movement, elected in 2018 with the radical right party of the League, led by Matteo Salvini. Anti-gender groups such as ProVita & Famiglia and Family Day, who had been campaigning against ‘gender theory’ and ‘LGBT ideology’ for over a decade, led this battle from outside the Parliament, online and in the streets, but also inside the Senate, during the parliamentary auditions to which they were massively invited to participate.

One target of this opposition during the parliamentary debate was the so-called ‘alias career’. This initiative, implemented several years ago in many Italian universities and more recently in schools, allows transgender and non-binary students to use their chosen names within universities and schools without affecting their official documents.

On December 6, 2022, ProVita & Famiglia warned 150 schools that had implemented the project, urging them to discontinue it and requesting intervention from the Minister of Education. On December 13, the Ministry received CitizenGo Italia and another anti-gender organization. They delivered the petition ‘Stop gender in schools’ and presented proposals for protecting children and young people against what they call ideological propaganda.

This new battle reveals the evolution of Italian anti-gender mobilization. It no longer solely involves religiously oriented pro-life movements; new actors have joined, shaping campaigns and discourses aimed at opposing, obstructing, and preventing the recognition of trans rights, especially when it comes to young people. The debate surrounding the Zan Bill provided a political opportunity to mediatize this new mobilization and establish an anti-trans coalition rooted in three distinct forms of activism.

The first form is the well-known anti-gender mobilization promoted by neo-Catholic movements. The second emerges from the international and transnational movement, advocating a radical feminist critique of gender concepts, gender identity, and trans lives (gender-critical). The third form, seemingly built upon the theoretical-political work produced by the first two, specializes in campaigns against the ‘trans lobby’, which they perceive as a powerful component of the contested ‘LGBT lobby’. The latter include professionals from various fields, experts in communication and scientific outreach, and parents of transgender children and adolescents who claim technical expertise based on their experiences as parents.

Anti-trans parent activism employs scientific language and references to legitimize and challenge scientific debates, organizations, and institutions, including academia. This activism has emerged in countries that have made advancements in LGBTQIA+ rights, where practices such as the alias career, simplified procedures for recognizing gender identities, and affirmative support for young transgender and non-binary individuals have become institutionalized.

In this context, organizations such as the British GenSpect, formed in 2021, play a significant role. GenSpect presents itself as an international alliance ‘professionals, trans people, detransitioners, and parent groups who work together to advocate for a non-medicalised approach to gender diversity’, as stated on their webpage, seeking care for young people experiencing gender distress while challenging the ‘gender-affirmative’ approach. Their primary purpose is to produce contentious counterknowledge that challenges the gender-affirmative paradigm. For instance, GenSpect has published nine pamphlets directed at various audiences (including parents, schools, universities, psychotherapists, etc.),

promoting an alternative, 'rational' perspective on the transgender experience based on the strategic use of studies published in contested scientific journals, often authored by individuals outside academic research. This approach can be seen as a pseudo-scientific discourse used to influence policymakers, institutions, and public discourse.

One notable example of such pseudo-scientific discourse is the concept of 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria' (ROGD). This hypothesis, developed by Lisa Littman (also advisor of GenSpect and president of the Institute for Comprehensive Gender Dysphoria Research, which she founded and to which some GenSpect members, including President Stella O'Malley, belong in a sort of closed circle), gained attention initially in 2016 and was later published in 2018.

In sum, the idea supported by the article, which later became the benchmark of this anti-trans discourse, is that the increase in trans and non-binary gender claims observed in recent years would not be related to 'true' gender dysphoria or to the emancipation of trans subjectivities, but rather the product of a form of 'social contagion' brought about by actions of indoctrination, plagiarism and predation (one of the categories used is that of 'grooming', precisely, which refers to cyber-manipulation strategies).

Littman's study, described as exploratory, relied on questionnaires circulated in online forums known for their opposition to 'trans ideology' and frequented by concerned parents of transgender youth already politicized in the 'anti-trans' movement. While the scientific community criticized the study's weaknesses and methodological flaws, it became the cornerstone of anti-trans discourse. Littman's second version of the article (requested by the journal) in 2019 makes it explicit that the article in no way proves the existence of a new form of 'rapid onset gender dysphoria' (ROGD), but only proposes the idea of it as a hypothesis, from a non-representative and non-generalizable study, partly due to sample selection bias.

As Florence Ashley, author of an analysis of Littman's study, points out, the hypothesis of 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria' is not a scientific theory, rather a discursive strategy that mobilizes scientific language to contend proposals, practices, or policies that challenge traditional gender and sexuality regimes. Such a pseudo-scientific strategy, Ashley explains, is quite similar to other largely invalidated 'theories' such as the 'parent alienation syndrome' mobilized by masculinist and anti-feminist interest groups.

Despite Littman's hypothesis being rejected by the scientific community, organizations such as GenSpect in Britain, Observatoire de la petite sirène in France, and even ProVita and Famiglia in Italy continue to use it to circulate and promote anti-trans narratives. The recent formation of the Italian group GenerAzione D (D Generation – D for Dysphoria) has introduced pseudo-scientific models in Italy, where anti-gender movements and gender-critical radical feminist groups have embraced them. In contrast to the affirmative model, the 'restorative' model they promote includes practices such as avoiding the use of chosen nouns or pronouns to prevent confirming trans identities, adhering to biologically determined sexed languages, maintaining gender-segregated spaces (including bathrooms), and possibly using neutral spaces only for single-use. The aim is to deter young people and adolescents from pursuing a trans identity.

Adopting these anti-trans claims by seemingly distinct groups is possible because they are presented in 'scientific', ostensibly neutral, and objective terms. This approach allows neo-Catholic activism, radical gender-critical feminist activism, and parent activism to remain theoretically distinct while politically converging against gender identity and trans and non-binary people's rights. To conclude, it is noteworthy that the current government, particularly the Minister for the Family – radical Catholic feminist Eugenia Roccella – seems to adhere to this anti-trans politics, considering her position against affirmative approach to gender identity (on behalf of her feminist commitment), or her fascination for detransition stories, which she shared on her Facebook page during the debate on the bill proposal on anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes. The warring question is whether and when those anti-trans discourses and views will eventually become anti-trans policies.