

## Against the Heresy of Immanence: Vatican's 'Gender' as a New Rhetorical Device Against the Denaturalization of the Sexual Order

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### Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, the Vatican contests the concept of gender as forged by feminists to study social arrangements through which the sexual order is naturalised. This contestation came with the distortion of the analyses and claims formulated by feminists and LGBTQ scholars and social movements. This article understands the Vatican's invention of 'gender ideology' as a new rhetorical device produced both to delegitimise feminist and LGBTQ studies and struggles and to reaffirm that sexual norms transcend historical and political arrangements. It also investigates how the transnationality of this discursive construct relates to the specific features it has taken in two different national contexts – France and Italy. The article is structured as follows: it first highlights the logic and structure of the anti-gender discourse. Then, it analyses how the same argumentative device is performed in anti-gender demonstrations. Finally, it scrutinises the rhetorical and performative strategies through which anti-gender actors have formulated their views and argues that 'gender ideology' can be understood as a political reaction against the entry of minorities into the fields of politics and theory.

### Keywords

Gender; feminism; theology of the woman; anthropology; homosexuality; Vatican.

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Thus becoming an *objet* in theory  
was the result of becoming a subject in history.  
Colette Guillaumin, *Women and theories about society:  
the effects on theory of the anger of the oppressed* (1995)

## Catholic Social Doctrine: From Social to Sexual

Since 2009, the Cardinal Van Thuân International Observatory, instituted in 2004 to spread the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, has published an annual report that includes a discussion of what it considers to be the issue of the year. An analysis of some of the questions and arguments in these reports – for example the ‘colonisation of human nature’ produced by gender, the juridical crisis induced by ‘relativism’, and feminism as a new totalitarianism – highlights three significant recent changes in the Vatican’s public discourse on the sexual order (CVTIO 2012, 2013, 2014). First, the core of the social doctrine has shifted from economy to what the Vatican calls anthropology, that is, to sexuality, given that, in the Vatican’s terms, anthropology refers to the nature of the human person as intrinsically sexuated (Benedict XVI 2008 and 2009a).

Second, the meaning and the centrality Joseph Ratzinger gave to the Thomistic notion of *lex naturalis* – in which the definition of natural moral law is problematically entangled with the laws of nature as studied by natural sciences (Fassin 2010; Fillod 2014) – has produced a shift in the Vatican’s position on the relationships between theology, natural sciences, and social sciences. Theology and natural sciences are understood as two different languages that express the same meaning: the precepts of natural law defining the structure of reality as created by God and known by human beings through the faculty of the reason. In Ratzinger’s view, natural law concerns the nature of the human person as such and its foundation is the ontological complementarity between men and women, which becomes a synonym of ‘humanity’ in the Vatican’s discourse. In this view the production of men and women as two different and complementary natural groups is determined both by anthropology and biology, and hence the Vatican simultaneously draws upon theology and biology to reaffirm the transcendent nature of the sexual order.<sup>1</sup> When social sciences, and notably feminist, LGBTQ, gender, and sexuality studies, challenge this ‘immutable basis of anthropology’ (Ratzinger 2004), these are subsequently defined as an ideology that threatens the ‘order of creation’ and the stability of social reproduction (Benedict XVI 2008).

Third, the social doctrine of the Catholic Church has progressively become the central tool to fuel what Pope John-Paul II has called a new form of evangelization. Its main purpose is to counter what the Vatican perceives as an increasingly aggressive and relativist secularist culture epitomized by ‘gender’. This explains why, since its foundation in 2010, the Vatican has placed the counteroffensive against gender at the core of the pastoral challenges of the Pontifical Council

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of these two different registers of intervention – theological and scientific – employed by Vatican’s experts, see the biblical references in Margron’s intervention (Fassin and Margron 2011) and the scientific sources used by Jutta Burggraf (PCF 2005: 575–583). Odile Fillod has demonstrated Burggraf’s misuse of scientific arguments and sources (Fillod 2014).

for Promoting New Evangelization. This counteroffensive remains one of the Vatican's main pastoral challenges (Synod of Bishops 2014).

How can we account for this change in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church? What is at stake in what the Vatican has constituted since the beginning of 2000 as a 'controversy on gender' (Pontifical Council for the Family 2011)? How can one explain the political salience of this anti-gender discourse in public discourses ten years after the Vatican invented it? To explore such questions, I proceed with a twofold analysis. In the first part of this article, I investigate the origins, the logics, and the scope of 'gender ideology' as a new rhetorical device created by the Vatican to contest the denaturalization of the sexual order that ensued from the claims, analysis, and theories of sexual minorities' movements. In the second part, I examine how this argumentative construction travelled from the Vatican's texts to the so-called anti-gender demonstrations in France and Italy, and I assess their political purpose.

## 'Gender' According to the Vatican, from Beijing to Paris: When a Label Becomes a Rallying Cry

### *The Emergence of the 'New Feminism' vs. 'Gender Feminists' Cleavage*

Since its emergence in the mid-90s, the Vatican's anti-gender discourse was created in reaction to the denaturalization of the sexual order produced by feminist theorists and activists. Although not all meanings of the term gender are equally disruptive – a point upon which the Vatican and many feminists agree (Mathieu 1991; PCF 2005; Scott 2013) – the Vatican has chosen 'gender' as the emblem, the metonymy, and the keystone of theories that affirm that masculinity and femininity are social constructions, or, worse, as in feminist materialist analysis, that men and women are not natural groups but social antagonist classes (Delphy 2001; Wittig 1992). According to the Vatican, this deconstruction of the sexual order destroys the social order. In fostering the belief that a fluid and polymorphous sexuality would be the origin of individual identity, gender would lead to the 'self-destruction of humankind' (Benedict XVI 2009b). This nightmarish vision of gender, which reformulates catastrophist topics typical of homophobic rhetoric, was elaborated after the U.N. International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing the following year (Case 2011). The Vatican understood the issues discussed during these meetings – the centrality of reproductive and health rights as well as women's empowerment and gender equality – as the warning signals of this ideology's growing influence on international institutions (Buss 1998, 2004). Since then, the Vatican refers to 'gender feminists' to identify those scholars or activists adopting an 'ideological perspective' affirming that sex norms are socially constructed and naturalized (O'Leary 1997).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Coined by Christina Hoff Sommers in a pamphlet published with the support of conservative U.S. think tanks in 1994, the expression 'gender feminists' was popularised since 1995 in anti-abortion *milieus* by the essayist Dale O'Leary. The same year, O'Leary presented her analysis to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

But 1995 was not only the year of the condemnation of so-called gender feminists. A few months before Beijing, Pope John-Paul II called for the creation of a 'new feminism' that has to 'acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of life in society' and to promote 'woman's dignity' (John Paul II 1995). This new feminism is grounded in a system of different and complementary dispositions – which the Vatican calls 'masculine' and 'feminine genius' – that links two groups which are understood as natural ones. This system is taken to reflect 'the natural order' which is already written upon differently 'sexuated bodies'. Hence, sex is considered as the natural origin of different and supposed complementary places that men and women hold within social structure.

Although this 'gender feminism' vs. 'new feminism' cleavage is new in its specific terms, meaning, and political relevance, it prolongs an older distinction between 'good' and 'bad' feminism already established by the Vatican and dating back to the post-WWII period. From the papacy of Pius XII (1939–1958) to John Paul II (1978–2005), the Vatican produced a radical renewal of its discourse on women's nature in response to feminist movements and the social, political, and juridical changes they fostered. In this new view, men and women are seen as 'equal in dignity' but different and complementary in nature. This 'equality within difference' argument gradually replaced the Vatican's previous vision on women's submission to men. Consequently, the Vatican started distinguishing and opposing 'true' and 'false emancipation' (Pius XII), as well as 'authentic' and 'intemperate' feminism (Paul VI). The former celebrates the ontological difference between the sexes and their harmonious complementarity; the latter analyses sex relationships in antagonistic terms. As Denise Couture argues, the 'differentialist symmetrization' of the sexes operated by the Vatican when adopting the 'equality in dignity' argument has to be understood as a deep reformulation of its previous discourse on the asymmetry between the sexes (Couture 2012). It points to a rhetorical shift John Paul II achieved with his 'theology of the woman' which, inspired by Edith Stein's thought, understands human nature as intrinsically binary and the social order as based on this ontological dichotomy (Snyder 1999). This supposed irrevocable and inescapable division, moreover, manifests itself in bodies and souls: in anatomical differences between men and women and in their complementary dispositions (Stein 2008). Since women's destiny and habits would be inscribed in women's anatomy, this new view supports a long-established belief according to which maternity is understood as women's natural vocation and mission (John Paul II 1988). During John Paul II's papacy, while Karol Wojtyła was promoting the emergence of a 'new feminism' and supporting the achievement of a 'true theology of the woman', the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, carried on the fight against 'bad' feminisms, and notably their conceptual foundation in the notion of oppression and their political target of eradicating sexual difference. Already in 1985, ten years before the Beijing Conference, Ratzinger stigmatized 'the "trivialization" of sexual specificity making every role interchangeable between man and woman' that 'radical feminism' produces (Ratzinger 1985). The denial of sexual difference as the ontological ground of what is human goes against 'the language of nature and of the moral' and produces the eradication of sexuality from 'anthropology' (Ratzinger 1985). This argument will become one of the main tenets of the anti-gender rhetoric to come.

In sum, the opposition to 'gender feminism' and the elaboration of a 'new feminism' as they emerged in the mid-1990s need to be considered together. They are complementary discursive patterns within the same rhetorical device, which is the outcome of a process of conceptual re-elaboration whose purpose was to reaffirm the transcendent nature of the sexual order as a 'truth of reason' that legislators and politicians have to respect.

### **'Gender' as 'Ideological Colonization': the Invention of a New Discursive Device**

When the Beijing Conference took place in 1995 and both the cultural 'war' against gender and the promotion of 'new feminism' were launched, the Vatican had already elaborated its discourse on the sexual order based on the idea of the complementarity between the sexes as humanity's natural ground. This explains why the Vatican reacted immediately to the Beijing Platform for Action in which the term gender was used, even if put into inverted commas as the Vatican's Permanent Delegation at the U.N. requested and obtained. Since then, the Vatican's reaction against gender has been deployed by means of a double strategy. On the one hand, the Vatican has elaborated a new definition of gender seeking to renaturalize the concept. Gender is considered to be acceptable when it is defined as 'grounded in biological sexual identity, male or female' (Holy See's Delegation 1995; PCF 2005). On the other hand, the Vatican has developed a new rhetorical device to oppose gender when it is used as a denaturalizing analytical category and, more broadly, to delegitimize analyses and claims affirming the immanence of the sexual order.

Conceived by Pontifical Councils' consultants and experts chosen by the Vatican among scholars teaching in Catholic Universities and Academies, this construct makes use of two syntagmas – 'gender ideology' and 'gender theory' – in which the terms 'theory' and 'ideology' are programmatically used as synonyms. In this view, theories and analysis produced by gender studies scholars to denaturalize the sexual order are considered as not scientific and represent a 'conceptual storm' that breaks the connection between reality and language (PCF 2005). Relying on a theory of language in which words should reflect the structures defining what is real, true, and moral, such as the complementarity between the sexes, the Vatican produced a 'sacred philology' in order to generate 'linguistic clarification' (PCF 2005). This concern, which the Vatican understands as both philological and anthropological, resulted in an encyclopaedic dictionary published in 2003 under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Family. The *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* consists of more or less a hundred articles on sexual and bioethical issues, written by more than seventy authors. The entire project was supervised by the President of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, who is known as a fervent critic of what he calls 'contraceptive colonialism'. The interrelated opposition to gender and the condemnation of the 'culture of the death' are key issues of the book.

Since the *Lexicon*, the Vatican's experts use 'gender ideology' and 'gender theory' as labels to identify analyses and claims affirming that sexual norms are historically determined. 'Gender ideology' differs from more traditional discursive

repertoires affirming the transcendence of the sexual order through its explicit target of a feminist concept, the mix of the arguments adopted (gender as the Trojan horse of 'ideological colonization' denying a biological truth and produced by a powerful lobby), and its goals. More precisely, this rhetorical device seeks to serve three main purposes. It constitutes a single and frightening enemy, it assembles religious and non-religious actors to form a large front of mobilization in the name of the defence of 'what is human' and, finally, it produces moral panic in the public sphere that subsequently allows to influence legislators and block juridical and social reforms on sexual and reproductive health and rights and LGBTQ issues.

In order to create a single enemy, Vatican's notion of gender is designed to refer to three different but interwoven historical processes affirming that the sexual order is not transcendent. First, it reacts to the emergence of feminist and LGBTQ studies analysing the social arrangements through which sexual norms are naturalized (Guillaumin 1995). Here the Vatican uses 'gender' to refer to a combination and deformation of different and often antagonist theories, which moreover do not necessarily refer to the term gender. The main authors it refers to are Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Adrienne Rich, Monica (*sic*) Wittig and notably Judith Butler, considered as 'the Papesse of gender'. Second, it responds to the claims of feminist and LGBTQ movements fighting against the system of arrangements oppressing women and non-straight people (Eleftheriadis 2015). Finally, it opposes the legal reforms and public policies aiming at reducing discriminations against women or LGBTQ people. By lumping together heterogeneous social agents, such as scholars, activists, and politicians, who differ not only in their field of action but also in terms of resources, analyses, and strategies, 'gender ideology' constructs its adversary as homogeneous. This enemy, moreover, is also a dangerous and thrilling one (Case 2011). These processes of homogenization and anathemization have significant effects, also upon the field of gender and sexuality studies. In countries where this rhetoric has been successful, it polarises the field of studies by triggering a defence strategy among some scholars who seek to soften or deny the radical project of denaturalizing the sexual order that lies at the heart of radical feminist theories and queer studies.

'Gender ideology' is produced by means of what linguists call the techniques of deforming the enemy's position (Périès 1997). That is to say, it is formulated on the basis of distorting and homogenizing the multiple theories, analytical tools, and insights that have come out of gender and sexuality studies or feminist and LGBTQ movements. As this deformation weaves together both accurate and inaccurate elements and claims about gender, this rhetorical device operates as a protean and very adaptable discourse to which it is difficult to respond. Three main effects derive from this specific *modus operandi*. First, even if gender studies scholars or feminist and LGBTQ activists do not recognize themselves in the distortion made of their own analyses and claims and reject it as misleading, the anti-gender discourse may succeed in impressing legislators and policy makers and weakening the social legitimacy of the actors it targets. Second, the disarray produced by the term 'gender' as constituted by the Vatican, amplified the equivocity of the concept. When used in the field of gender and sexuality studies, gender has different meanings referring to different theories of the sexual order (Mathieu 1991) and it does not necessary have the

same meaning when used by jurists or politicians. Hence the syntagma 'gender theory' and 'gender ideology', as they began circulating in public discourses and media, produced a proliferation of discourses on gender characterized by a form of structural 'inter-incomprehension' (Maingueneau 1983). Third, 'gender ideology' seeks to legitimize the anti-gender rhetoric as a rational and scientific discourse defending 'what is human'.

The main success obtained by this discursive device is the eruption of the gender vs. anti-gender cleavage in the public space and its progressive crystallization. This does not only mean that 'anti-gender' rhetoric succeeded in positing a symmetry between two non-equivalent discourses and groups,<sup>3</sup> but also that each pole of this divide tends to be understood on the Vatican's terms (Husson 2015). The existence of an 'anti-gender' front produces a belief in the existence of a 'pro-gender' front. This political offensive against the denaturalization of sexual norms, moreover, occurs under the sign of an intellectual controversy over 'humanity'. The Vatican sought to reinvent its discourse on the transcendent character of the sexual order, given that its traditional arguments on sex groups ceased to be socially audible and politically efficient as feminists and LGBTQ struggles and theories reshaped the terms of debate. Hence the Vatican's reformulation is not just a euphemized version of the previous position in which different forms of linguistic smoothing would have been put in place. The invention of 'gender ideology' specifically targets the theoretical revolution produced by sexual minorities, that is, the concepts they have been forging in order to render visible and thinkable the social origins of the oppression that they bear (Guillaumin 1995: 166–169; Wittig 1992).

The denaturalization of the sexual order – the 'denaturation' to use the Vatican's terms – fostered by these concepts and analysis implies that, despite the seriousness of 'the drama of poverty', the opposition to this 'dangerous ideology' is inserted at the very core of the Church's social doctrine. Indeed, the last three annual reports on Catholic social doctrine focus entirely on 'gender' as a form of 'colonization of human nature' and express the urgency to contest its spread in the political field (CVTIO 2012). While the reports reproduce the same topics developed in the *Lexicon*, the perspective shifts from an analytical concern to a political one. The risk of the subversion of the 'order of the creation' produced by gender demands a public implication of the Catholic Church in order to promote a 'human ecology protecting the nature of the human being as man and woman from its self-destruction' (Benedict XVI 2009a). Presenting itself as 'the expert in humanity' (Ratzinger 2004), the Vatican positions itself as a political actor taking part in sexual controversies in the name of 'what is human' and a reference point not only for Catholics but for 'all people of good will'. A note on biopolitics edited in February 2009 by the S.I.R. (Religious Information Service) affirms the 'full engagement of the Vatican to directly participate in the contemporary debate on the development of the civilization laying its roots in the anthropological question' and exhorts Catholics to 'react to this attack against life and family'. The label 'gender' has become a political rallying cry.

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<sup>3</sup> On the misuse of science see Fillod (2014), on the connexion with far-right see De Guerre (2016).

## Performing Anti-gender Discourse in the Streets of Italy and France

### 'Gender Ideology' in Italy before the French Marriage-for-All Debate: A Useless Category of Mobilization

Between the *Lexicon's* introduction of anti-gender rhetoric (2003) and the French debate on same-sex marriage in which this discourse was successfully performed in street demonstrations (2013), 'gender ideology' had already circulated in several Catholic countries such as Spain, Slovenia or Croatia (Kovats and Poim 2015; Kuhar 2015; Paternotte 2015; Paternotte et al. 2016). Unsurprisingly, due to the strong interference of the Vatican in the Italian political field, Italy was one of these first countries. Still it was only after the success of the French anti-gender demonstrations that 'gender ideology' became a useful political category used by different groups and activists to block social and legal reforms that affected LGBTQ people.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to 2013, the propagation of 'gender ideology' in the public space, which began after the publication of the *Lexicon*,<sup>5</sup> did not receive much resonance in Italian society at large. It did operate in three different ways: as an alluring label for non-Catholic intellectuals supporting the idea that sexual difference is the ground of social relationships, as a new rhetorical device for actors already supporting the Vatican's views in the political field, and as the main signifier shaping a new form of Catholic activism. The syntagma 'gender ideology' was initially used in Catholic newspapers and websites, but soon it was also used by non-Catholic essayists such as the 'devout atheist' Giuliano Ferrara or the sexual difference feminist Luisa Muraro. In 2004, both reacted to Cardinal Ratzinger's *Letter on the collaboration between man and woman* by praising Ratzinger's critique of 'gender feminism' and defending the pre-eminence of sexual difference.<sup>6</sup> In 2006 the Italian translation of Dale O'Leary's *The Gender Agenda* brought 'anti-gender' rhetoric to the Library of the Italian Senate, where the book was presented by two main right-wing MP defenders of the 'natural family': Paola Binetti, a numerary member of Opus Dei, and Luca Volonté, a former leader of the movement Communion and Liberation and the founder in 2007 of the European conservative foundation Novae Terrae.

A second front spreading 'anti-gender' rhetoric came from the Catholic association *Scienza e Vita* (Science and Life). Founded in 2005 following a successful

<sup>4</sup> Due to the influence of the Catholic hierarchy on the Italian political agenda, the Italian Parliament has remained impermeable to the main claims expressed by LGBT movement and people during the last two decades (Winkler and Strazio 2015).

<sup>5</sup> In its first edition, the book counted more than fifteen Italian authors, who were all very active political actors in the Italian public space. Among them Cardinals Carlo Caffarra, Angelo Scola and Elio Sgreccia, who belong to the group of the more intransigent prelates, Carlo Casini, the founder of the anti-abortion Movimento per la Vita (Movement for Life) and Francesco D'Agostino, the president of the Unione Giuristi Cattolici Italiani (Union of the Italian Catholic Jurists).

<sup>6</sup> Giuliano Ferrara, 'La differenza tra i sessi esiste (grazie al Cielo), e Ratzinger la spiega in una lettera ai vescovi', *Il Foglio* 31th July 2004; Luisa Muraro, 'Se il Cardinale Ratzinger fosse un mio studente', *Il Manifesto*, 7th August 2004.



campaign against ART legislation, its scope and its *modus operandi* are different from those of the *Movimento per la Vita*, the oldest Italian anti-abortion association. In 2007, it published a special issue on 'gender ideology' and the following year it organized a congress to 'unveil its dangers' (De Guerre 2016). The articles – including the translations of two papers by French essayists Xavier Lacroix and Jacques Arènes – covered all the tenets of the anti-gender discourse: gender as a danger menacing human nature, the genetics of sexual difference, the theology of the woman, new feminism, and human ecology.

In 2007, a rally called Family Day was organized in Rome under the auspices of the Italian Conference of Bishops against a governmental bill that would have granted a limited form of legal protection for same-sex couples (the Di.Co. bill). The *Forum delle Associazioni Familiari* (Forum of Family Associations), financed by the CEI, ran the initiative. Given the actors, the rhetoric (the defence of 'the natural family', sex and sexuality as 'the alphabet of the human', 'the right of the children to have a mother and a father'), and its political success (the Di.Co. bill was blocked), the Family Day constituted a remarkable antecedent of 'anti-gender' mobilizations. Only the explicit reference to gender as the main enemy was missing. We might speculate that the specificities of the Italian context explain the temporality of the use of the syntagma 'gender ideology'. This includes the hegemony of sexual difference thinking and the fact that gender and sexuality studies are hardly institutionalized in academia (Di Cori 2013). In other words, introducing the expression would have been obscure and useless, contrary to what happened in 2013 when 'gender' had become something 'real', that is the dangerous adversary against which French anti-gender demonstrators had taken the street.

### **'Gender Theory' Takes to the Streets of France: Defending the Human, Protecting the Children**

If the anti-gender discursive strategy was disseminated in the French political field since the mid-2000s (Carnac 2014), the syntagma 'gender theory' became an effective political category of mobilization during the same-sex marriage controversy (Béraud and Portier 2015). Opponents used this expression as the banner under which they coordinated their protest, and succeeded in producing what the discursive device has not achieved yet: the emergence of 'gender' (as defined by the Vatican) as a new category of perception. We may argue that the formal properties of this discursive device – a Catholic discourse under cover, a floating polemical signifier targeting and federating different actors, an anathema capable of producing a moral panic – had been successful factors in France due to the peculiarities of its history. On the one hand, in a political context in which the notion of *laïcité* is constitutionalized and plays a pivotal role in the national narrative, an argument referring to anthropology and biology was not as discredited as an openly religious one might have been. On the other hand, a secular reasoning reaffirming sexual difference as a pre-condition of all forms of societies resonated smoothly with lacanian or structuralist theories which share this presupposition and remain very influential in the French public debate (Robcis 2013).

In 2011, the expressions 'gender theory' and 'sexual gender theory' entered the French Parliament: they both figured in official letters that dozens of

right-wing MPs sent to the Minister of Education asking for the withdrawal of biology textbooks supposedly introducing this 'dangerous theory' in high schools (Fillod 2014). This controversy was accompanied by a broader political mobilization fuelled by Catholic experts and concerned citizens sending letters to MPs, signing petitions, and animating discussions in the blogosphere to support this claim (Tricou 2016). Hence, the syntagma 'gender theory' was both adopted by conservative MPs (including Christine Boutin), and spread by the 'moral entrepreneurs' such as Tony Anatrella, Elisabeth Montfort or Jacques Arènes (Béraud and Portier 2015). Boutin, who in 1999 had brandished a Bible inside the National Assembly provoking a political outcry, abandoned the religious register and fully adopted the anti-gender rhetoric.

Hence, in 2011 same-sex marriage had become an 'anthropological issue'. This symptomatic change, along with the broad influence of this discursive device far beyond religious circles, testified to two main shifts that occurred in the French national narrative on the sexual order since the *PaCS* debate. On the one hand, the reference to anthropology and biology produces a naturalistic argument able to assemble different actors naturalizing the sexual order and, more broadly, the social order. On the other hand, even if the anti-gender front presented the same-sex marriage debate as a 'controversy on what is human', references to Catholicism already played a different role. This may be explained as the outcome of a deflection that occurred to the notion of *laïcité* itself during the past decade (Fassin 2011). Since the beginning of Sarkozy's presidency, the notion of positive secularism (*laïcité positive*), as supported by Benedict XVI, has been circulating in the French public sphere. It postulates that Catholic countries do not have to 'cut their Christian roots' because it 'would mean to lose meaning and to weaken the cement of national identity'. This new version of French secularism produces differential responses of political institutions to different religious expressions in the public space, as anti-gender demonstrations will show.

After the quarrel about handbooks during which the reference to 'gender theory' began to spread in public discourse, the debate on same-sex marriage (Autumn 2012–Spring 2013) represented the climax of the anti-gender rhetoric. The syntagma 'gender theory' functioned both as the label by which the opponents of the law identified their adversaries and as a category of political mobilization. The detractors of same-sex marriage apprehended same-sex marriage as the consequence of 'gender theory'. The banner opening one of the first 'anti-gender' demonstrations bore the slogan ' "marriage pour tous" = théorie du gender pour tous' ('Marriage for all' = gender theory for all).

This political controversy was re-launched by the French episcopacy in contrast to previous decades when the episcopacy had a more discrete presence (Béraud and Portier 2015). The Vatican and the French Conference of Bishops supplied both rhetoric and organizational resources to the protesters. Anti-gender demonstrations were run by different groups that did not define themselves as political or religious, yet all groups were related in one way or the other to the Vatican's structures or Catholic associations and movements. The most important one was *La Manif pour tous* (LMPT), which, since its creation in September 2012, claimed autonomy from political parties and religious structures, yet remained connected to French Conference of Bishops. Anti-gender protests also encompassed the creation of smaller groups

– such as the Hommen, the Antigones, the *Veilleurs* (Vigils) – that contributed to the constitution of the anti-gender cause with spectacular actions and performances. Far-right, traditionalist or integralist Catholic groups, headed by Institut Civitas, closely associated to the Society of St. Pius X, marched autonomously from LMPT and organized prayers in the streets. These prayers, notably, did not cause the same political scandal as did Muslim prayers in the streets of Paris in 2011. In March 2013, criticism of the mildness of the political strategies of LMPT gave rise to the new collective *Printemps français* (French Spring) – a name coined to allude to the recent Arab Spring – in which identitarian and far-right groups were deeply involved. Anti-gender rhetoric could bypass all these political cleavages and splits: ‘gender’ operated as the common ground assembling these different forms of the protest, whose more radicalized expressions worried the majority of the French episcopacy (Béraud and Portier 2015).

How did the anti-gender protests translate and express anti-gender discourse? Which strategies of self-presentation did the protesters rely on to embody anti-gender discursive devices? What was the outcome of this transmutation of a rhetorical tool into embodied action? This strategy testifies to a change of discursive repertoire. Rather than claiming the inferiority of LGBTQ people, it shifts to the notion of ‘natural family’ understood as the bedrock of humanity. Following this logic, if the ‘natural family’ exists and it is the conjugal heterosexual one, the child becomes the innocent victim of the hedonism and egoism of LGBTQ individuals. ‘Protect the children’ was the slogan written across Hommen’s naked torsos, images of frightened infants and children losing their origins were widely invoked during the demonstrations, together with slogans affirming ‘children’s right to have a father and mother’ and access to ‘their biological truth’. In alignment with this view, kinship was both biologized, that is presented as the outcome of female and male gonads, and sacralized, that is considered as a non-debatable issue (Borrillo 2014; Fassin 2014). Thus ‘gender ideology’ might be understood as a discursive device produced under constraint, i.e., as a linguistic compromise between a certain intention and the possibility of making it explicit considering what is socially audible in a given political context.

Anti-gender demonstrations formally seize and restyle the adversary language (colours, music, graphics, design, gestures, actions, references). This strategy of semiotic re-appropriation had already begun by the end of the 1990s, with the World Youth Days and the demonstration organized by *Génération anti-PACS*. Using nudity with slogans written on the body and the enactment of performances, groups such as Hommen or the *Veilleurs* borrow from the repertoire of groups such as Act-up or Femen. This re-appropriation of the adversary’s codes testifies to a change in power relations between LGBTQ groups and their opponents. At the same time, it comes with a rhetorical strategy that aims to deny the existence of (hetero)sexist oppression. In reversing the argument of oppression, anti-gender actors foster the idea that dominant groups are ‘the real oppressed’. The invention and the use of terms such as ‘familyphobia’ and ‘heterophobia’ were quintessential for this kind of strategy.

The anti-gender rhetoric has also been enriched with the traditional workers’ movement argument that distinguishes and opposes sexual questions to economic issues. More broadly, the iconography picked up graphics and slogans

used by left-wing movements or parties, such as slogans of the left wing party *Front de Gauche* during the last Presidential and European Elections. This allowed anti-gender demonstrators to present themselves as 'common people', who fight for their economic livelihood against a privileged élite whose only concerns would be sexual issues. They also depict themselves as the true revolutionaries opposed to 'gay conformism' and 'gender dictatorship'. This was supported by graphics and design referring to revolutionary movements and moments, and notably those of May 68, the Arab Spring, or appropriated heroes of the French resistance such as Jean Moulin or the General Charles de Gaulle. Anti-gender demonstrators finally presented themselves as non-violent against the violence of the State. They referred to Gandhi and depicted President François Hollande and the Prime Minister Manuel Valls with features of dictators such as Hitler and Stalin.

All these rhetorical and praxeological strategies of self-presentation performed by different groups of protesters enacted the Vatican's definition of gender as a 'totalitarian ideology'. As it was performed during demonstrations, chanted like a mantra, depicted as the main enemy on the posters and uncritically re-used by media, the syntagma 'gender theory' became not only a category of action for thousands of demonstrators, but also a new category of perception. Anti-gender demonstrations thus operated as performances of 'gender ideology' producing performative effects: the syntagma 'gender theory' has operated as a performative utterance that transforms the social reality it supposedly describes.

The anti-gender movement succeeded in producing major political effects. The introduction of the same-sex marriage law was strongly criticized by the LGBTQ movement for its limited scope (Borrillo 2014), the project of a new law concerning LGBTQ parenting was postponed, the term gender was removed in ministerial documents and an experimental scholastic program against gender stereotypes was interrupted. These political achievements produced strong ripples in other European countries (Paternotte 2015).

### ***The Italian Adaptation of the French Lesson: A Bastion of Human Civilization Against an Anthropological Revolution***

Since the summer of 2013, a vast anti-gender campaign has been taking place in Italy and within a few months gender became a salient political category. The success of French anti-gender mobilizations encouraged Catholic associations to fully adopt the anti-gender rhetoric. The Italian anti-gender movement, in other words, was created by copying and pasting the logos, the names, and the style of the main anti-gender French protests. New groups were created as the equivalent of French ones: *La Manif pour tous* – Italia (LMPT-I), the *Sentinelle in Piedi* (Standing Sentinels) and *Hommen-Italy*.

Still, behind the formal similarities and the sharing of their main target, that is reaffirming the transcendent nature of the sexual order, the adjustment of this rhetorical device to the specificities of the Italian context produced a different repertoire of action, political alliances, and effects. In contrast to the French LMPT, which is a collective gathering different groups, LMPT-I is a single organization whose main role has been to personify the leader of the Italian anti-gender protest and to inscribe it in a transnational successful movement. In addition

to LMPT-I, a plethora of legal subjects (committees and boards) were constituted to spread anti-gender discourse using non-religious arguments (mainly the protection of the children and the defence of human ecology), all of them pointing back to a few individuals associated with the Vatican and the Italian Conference of Bishops or to family and anti-abortion associations (De Guerre 2016). These committees connect the main actors fuelling the anti-gender Italian movement: they include three anti-abortion movements (*Scienza e Vita*, *Giuristi per la Vita* and *Notizie Pro-Vita*) and a traditionalist Catholic association, *Alleanza Cattolica* (Catholic Alliance). These organizations used the anti-gender cause as a new opportunity to promote their purpose by inscribing it in a wider framework, that is the defence of human nature against the 'anthropological revolution' produced by what these activists call 'gender' (Avanza 2015). Gender succeeded in operating as a rallying cry federating a wide range of different Catholic groups – from the *Forum delle Associazioni Familiari* to neo-fascist groups such as *Forza Nuova* – in order to fuel a moral panic and to block legal and social reforms concerning sexual and reproductive health and rights and LGBTQ rights.

Italian protesters used the same references as those developed by the Vatican and employed in France, yet adapted them to a context in which gender is ignored as a concept and as such more easy to demonize. Gender is the enemy coming from abroad menacing Italian national identity. Not only does gender amount to 'ideological colonization', it also becomes both the symbol of what is 'transhuman' and the metonymy of the secular and capitalist West threatening Catholic values that should constitute a ground for European identities. In opposing this 'anthropological revolution', Italy is presented by the anti-gender protesters as 'the lighthouse' and 'the bastion of human civilization' which should become the reference for all European countries.

Moreover, given the peculiarities of the Italian context, the references to homophobia and feminist scholarship play out differently. In France, where anti-homophobia legislation has been in place since 2004, demonstrators formally declare themselves as non-homophobic. In Italy, where anti-discrimination law on the basis of sexual orientation is lacking, anti-gender demonstrators reject the pertinence of anti-homophobia. As for feminism, sexual difference thinking has strongly influenced the Italian feminist movement, and hence the anti-gender campaign is focused on a feminism that is perceived as coming from abroad. The term gender is most often used in English, thus reactivating the *topos* claiming that it would be a non-translatable term. Italian feminism may even be presented as Catholic Church's ally against gender (Galeotti 2009).

Demonstrators performed similar strategies of self-presentation as the French: they presented themselves as peaceful citizens and victims of a 'totalitarian ideology' seeking to destroy human nature. As in France, the register of the interventions invokes both 'reality' and biology. Their repertoire of action included conferences, street vigils, and Family Day rallies. All these actions were coordinated by anti-abortion associations and traditionalist groups mobilising by means of two distinct registers of intervention. The first, one of expertise for the conferences and the second, the concern of common citizens responding to what they consider a democratic urgency by means of vigils and demonstrations. Conferences are supposed to inform lay people about gender and its

purported offences to children. Several times per week, they gather experts, such as doctors and lawyers, and witnesses, such as ex-gays or ex-lesbians, in order to spread pseudo-scientific arguments that borrow from theories of reparative therapy (Avanza 2015). Street vigils are organized by the *Sentinelle in piedi*. They stand in front of a town hall or court of justice silently absorbed in reading a book they have in their hands. Their refusal to speak is meant to be a warning of the threats to freedom of speech and diversity of thinking that 'LGBT lobbies' would enact. The *Sentinelle* present their actions as a form of non-violent resistance inspired by Gandhi. Hundreds of vigils have been organized since the Fall of 2013 and their success overtook the one of their French counterpart to the extent that the French groups renamed themselves *Sentinelle*s to align with the Italian groups, to capitalize upon their achievements, and create a clearly recognisable transnational movement. Although they claim to be apolitical, journalists established a connection with *Alleanza Cattolica*, which is in turn linked to the international organization of traditional Catholics called Tradition, Family and Property.

Finally, the main anti-gender actors convened two new Family Days in June 2015 and in January 2016. These new rallies targeted 'gender theory as an ideological colonization' and the adoption of a new law on civil unions under discussion in Parliament. The Episcopacy only partially endorsed these two new Family Days, as some Bishops preferred to avoid frontal opposition to political authorities. This divide was mirrored within movements and associations: while more radical movements considered the demonstrations as an effective way to influence parliament, the leaders of movements such as Communion and Liberation, *Rinnovamento dello Spirito*, and the *Forum delle Associazioni Familiari* preferred to exercise more prudent forms of influence.

Thanks to the strong mobilization of Catholic associations, in just a few months 'gender ideology' succeeded in becoming a salient political category. The 'anti-gender' movement has achieved important political successes: the implementation in schools of a strategy against homophobia and transphobia was blocked in 2014 a few days after the President of the CEI expressed his opposition against 'the dictatorship of gender that is transforming public schools in re-education camps and indoctrination'; the discussion of the bill on hate crimes related to sexual orientation and gender identity has been abandoned and in February 2016 the Italian Senate passed a watered-down bill recognising same-sex civil unions. The Home Affairs Minister, Angelino Alfano, declared that the opponents to the bill succeeded in 'preventing a revolution against nature and anthropological' (*sic*). Moreover, several town halls adopted deliberations to oppose 'gender ideology', 'anti-gender' slogans have been broadcasted by led-signposts at crossroads and in few bookstores new shelves appeared classifying books under the category 'gender ideology'. In these bookstores Judith Butler's books face the books by anti-gender authors, as if they were different but equivalent intellectual positions.

This success is related to how the 'gender ideology' rhetoric has been constructed: a Catholic transnational discourse deploying as an 'anthropological' and scientific point of view on 'what is human'. But it also speaks to its capacity to create a moral panic in a country where the Vatican still exercises a huge political and cultural influence, where sexual difference theories are persuasive and where family policies are lacking. The Italian welfare regime is characterized by

a paradox: the 'natural family' is symbolically sacralized in public discourse but families are not sustained by the State. There is an extremely weak presence of public policies supporting families and a strong presence of Catholic institutions (co-financed with public funds dealing with education and health). So what is at stake for the Vatican is its capacity of remaining the authority concerning the sexual order and a powerful supplier of services to Italian families.

## Conclusion: 'Gender Ideology' as a Political Reaction to a Political and Epistemological Revolution

In this article, I study 'gender ideology' as a new rhetorical device that seeks to establish that sexual norms are neither historical nor political. By analysing the structure of the anti-gender discourse and how it has been reformulated and performed in demonstrations in France and Italy, I suggest that the political successes achieved by anti-gender campaigns should be understood as the combination of two elements: the specificities of the anti-gender device itself and the characteristics of the national contexts where it was deployed. The strength of 'gender ideology' as a discursive device lies in its form (a Catholic discourse presented as an anthropological evidence on human nature), its impressive rhetoric (notably the use of the notion of victimhood), and its plasticity. Constructed in a transnational manner, 'gender ideology' is an empty signifier capable of adjusting to different national contexts and different sexual issues (gender and sexuality studies, same-sex marriage, LGBT parenting, school or legal reforms, sexual reproductive health and rights). Different actors who support the belief that sexual norms transcend history have deployed this rhetorical construction, and have successfully adapted it to different national contexts, thus creating an transnational circulation of arguments and actions sustained by complex forms of intertextuality and connections. Articulated in texts and performed and ritualized in street demonstrations, this struggle against the denaturalization of the sexual order operated as an instituting act producing what it enunciates (Bourdieu 2001). 'Gender ideology' now exists in the French and the Italian context as a category of perception, mobilization, and action.

This rhetorical device acts efficaciously because it reaffirms in a new manner that the sexual order transcends history. This belief, far from being specific to the Catholic Church, is largely shared by many social actors. Thanks to the strength of the arrangements naturalizing sexual norms, sex and sexuality tend to be socially perceived as natural facts. 'Gender ideology' has the power to create a moral panic because it concerns what is deeply believed and inscribed in our categories of perception, appreciation, and action as natural. As Christine Delphy writes, without the system of gender we lose our points of reference and 'humankind itself seems to be in danger' (Delphy 2001: 31). In this sense, she argues, gender, that is the system producing men and women as two complementary natural groups, operates as a *cosmology*: a world without gender seems unthinkable. So those feminist or LGBT theories and claims contrasting the idea that sexes are natural and complementary groups destabilize a deeply rooted belief.

The Vatican has chosen to demonize the concept of gender as the symbol of these analyses and those struggles undermining the belief in the naturalness of

the sexual order. What upsets the Catholic Church is not gender in itself – gender may be used in a naturalistic and normative way as a synonym for ‘women’ considered as a ‘natural group’ –, but gender as a critical concept denaturalizing sexual order (Scott 2013).<sup>7</sup> Since their emergence in the 1970s, sexual minorities’ theories and claims have contributed to produce a radical critique of the *doxa* interpreting social facts as if they were natural kinds: the regime of the sexual order, the nature of sex groups, the sexual division of work. As Colette Guillaumin argues, the introduction of the denaturalization of the sexual order into the intellectual field has not led to a refinement of knowledge, but rather overturned the perspective (Guillaumin 1995). Guillaumin’s analysis does not seek to account for the heterogeneity, the differences, and the tensions that characterize the theories produced in gender and sexuality studies. It aims at highlighting the epistemological revolution that came along with minoritarian knowledge entering politics and the academy. As she wrote in *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*, ‘from oppressed peoples comes the radical contention that the world can be thought of in terms of essences. From them comes the knowledge that nothing happens that is not historical, that nothing is ever impervious to change, that no one is the bearer (or expression) of a ‘being’ or of an eternal fate, and, ultimately, that practice makes this history’ (Guillaumin 1995: 168). In this vein, the invention of ‘gender ideology’ may be understood as a new political reaction to this political and theoretical revolution producing ‘the knowledge that social groups are the results of relationships and not just the “elements” of those relationships’ (Guillaumin 1995). The successes of anti-gender movements prove that this revolution is far from being achieved and needs to be tenaciously carried forward.

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<sup>7</sup> Since 1995, the Vatican has been proposing a definition for the concept of gender which would fit its view. To be acceptable, gender should refer to ‘the transcendent dimension of human sexuality corresponding to the natural order already given in the body’, see Beatriz Volmer Coles, in Pontifical Council for Family, 2003 and Eadem, ‘New Feminism: A Sex-Gender Reunion’ in Michele M. Schumacher (ed.), *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2004.



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