

Introduction

Since the late 1960s, European countries have known important changes in the possibilities of living sexual diversities (Roseneil et al., 2013; Seidman, 2002; Weeks, 2007). However, in spite of the “new norm of homotolerance and processes of homonormalization” (Roseneil et al., 2013: 186), sexuality-based discriminations are far from being resolved and heterosexuality continues to be normalized and naturalized, while LGBT individuals and their relations are stigmatized and marginalized. In countries where Catholicism still exerts considerable influence on public opinion and law-making, the religious disapprobation of sexualities outside the heterosexual order has played a central role in the way LGBT issues have been addressed (Santos, 2013). In the Mediterranean European countries, such as France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, the Church has for a long time deadlocked any initiative related to sexualities, and even after the approval of lesbian and gay couples’ civil rights, lay and religious conservative Catholics have continued to campaign against same-sex marriage and gender equality policies (anonymised source; De Michele, 2010; Digoix et. al., 2016; Santos, 2013).

With a notable delay compared to most European countries, Italy recognized same-sex civil unions only in 2016 (Law 76/2016, see *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 2016), thus representing a paradigmatic example of the resistance opposed by conservative institutions to the challenges to the heterosexual regime of normality. The legislative process was difficult and was marked by strong opposition inside and outside Parliament, as well as by deep divisions that split the government majority on this matter.

The law has been welcomed from many sides because it extends to same-sex couples most of the rights of married heterosexual couples, especially as regards the property regime, inheritance rights, survivors’ pensions, access to medical information, and full hospital and jail visitation. However, a number of compromises were necessary to approve the law and the original draft was subject to subsequent amendments, which testified to the persisting power of heteronormativity

(Kitzinger, 2005; Warner, 1991) in reifying the uniqueness of heterosexual relationships and parenthood.

Lesbian and gay parenthood was the preeminent bone of contention over the three-years-long debate because of Section number 5 of the draft bill, which would recognize the right of one partner to adopt the biological children of the other partner, thus supposedly introducing a view of the family independent of the two genders (Garbagnoli, 2014). As a result, the section of the bill on adoption rights was so controversial that it had to be deleted in order for the law to pass, thus continuing to alienate lesbians and gays from kinship (Weston, 1991) and reasserting the control of heteronormativity over Italian politics despite the fact that the country has partially filled the legislative gap on this matter.

This article investigates the parliamentary debate on the recognition of same-sex couples and their children that took place in Italy during the period from July 2013 to May 2016. Specifically, through a Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2001, 2003) of the speeches of Parliamentarians who opposed the section of the bill concerning lesbian and gay parenthood, the study addresses the following research questions: What are the discursive strategies currently used by the hegemonic heteronormative power to maintain the exclusive heterosexual access to reproduction and kinship? Did the hegemonic model of gender intelligibility inform legislative processes relating to family life and, if so, how?

By framing the analysis within a poststructuralist feminist framework, the paper sheds light on the practices of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1978) that have been deployed to reallocate reproduction and kinship within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) once the parliamentary debate in Italy issued a challenge to the hegemonic heteronormative power. Moreover, this research offers a contribution to the understanding of how the conservative resistance to non-heterosexual families supports the institutionalization of sexualities and reproduction within the patriarchal order, which creates normative standards on the practices of motherhood (Hays, 1996; Rich, 1977) and, at

the same time, contributes to maintaining the gender asymmetry at the origin of women's invisibility as active citizens (Amâncio & Oliveira, 2006).

This article is organized as follows. Firstly, we analyze the crucial role played by the Church in the reproductive arena (Connell, 2002) by dealing with bodies and reproductive differences, thus contributing to the creation of the cultural categories of women and men as well as influencing the political decisions about reproduction and kinship. Secondly, in the empirical section, we analyze the speeches of the Italian MPs who opposed the recognition of the right to adopt the biological children of one's gay or lesbian partner, focusing on the discursive strategies that confirmed the foundation of reproduction and kinship on heterosexual relations. Finally, by studying the Italian case as a particularly emblematic example of resistance to the subversion of heteronormativity, we shed light on how current discourses about lesbian and gay parenthood are intertwined with the normative model of gender that serves the reproduction of the normative family (Butler, 1998) and contributes to maintaining the hierarchical gender order of society (Connell, 1987) that imposes constraints to individual choices.

Catholicism, gender fundamentalism and heteronormativity

Since the end of the twentieth century, conservative religious activists from different faiths have converged in their efforts to build a "natural family" agenda and to combat "secular liberalism" (Buss & Herman, 2003). Against the struggles for the democratization of gender and sexual politics, a composite contingent of conservative social forces agreed on the need to defend the heterosexual family as the fundamental unit of society. In Western Europe, the Vatican has had a leading position on issues related to family life, and it has strenuously opposed any initiative that was supposed to undermine the heterosexual model of marriage and parenting.

In the effort to resist the contemporary threats of "sexual democracy and the homosexual problem" (Fassin, 2010), the Church has traditionally brought into play the role of the woman, which has been at the core of the naturalizing discourses about gender, sexuality, reproduction and

kinship. As a result, “new forms of gender fundamentalism” (Segal, 2007, p.196) have risen in the Church’s speeches in the effort to fight the challenges to what is considered the cornerstone of our culture: the self-evidence of sexual difference, the centrality of the nuclear family and the heterosexual mutual exclusion of sexual orientations and genders (Zappino, 2016).

By relying on the anthropological view of Karol Józef Wojtyła, who was pope with the name of John Paul II from 1978 to 2005, the Catholic Church has constructed motherhood as a crucial dimension for the fulfilment of the female personality (Pope John Paul II, 1988), thus helping to maintain the idea of a “prototypic psychology of women” (Shields, 1975) grounded on the maternal instinct. At a time when gender distinctions have been disrupted and denaturalized (Segal, 1999), under the fundamentalist regime of John Paul II, the Vatican supported a number of theologically and politically conservative organizations and became very active in the public discussion about reproduction, abortion, contraception and women’s rights (Buss & Herman, 2003). Women’s dispositions have been reaffirmed as natural and deeply-rooted in the anatomy of the body, while their authentic vocation has been identified in offering themselves to others as mothers and wives. The complementarity of functions and qualities between men and women was designated as a founding aspect of the society and precondition for harmonious social relations (Robcis, 2015), while heterosexuality was hypostatized as the only foundation of kinship (Butler, 2002). Over the last decades, the Church felt that the sex/gender system (Rubin, 1975) needed to be rescued against the threats coming from the feminist agenda and the recognition of same-sex unions. Since the 1990s, the syntagma “gender ideology” or “gender theory” began to be used by the Vatican for identifying a system of thought underlying the planned, slow and steady work of subverting the natural order of gender, sexuality, reproduction and kinship.

As Buss and Herman (2003) highlighted, two key moments for the mobilization of Christian conservatives against the so-called “gender ideology” were two United Nation conferences, the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, with the aim of promoting women’s rights so women could control their own fertility. In

response to the attention gained by feminist groups toward women rights, the Holy See (1995) reaffirmed that “*gender* is understood as grounded in biological sexual identity, male or female”. Within a short time “gender ideology” became an effective reactionary rhetorical device (Garbagnoli, 2014) to delegitimize any discussion aimed at denaturalizing sexual norms or contrasting the material and symbolic marginalization of non-heterosexualities. The consideration of female and male attributes as effects of historical and cultural conditioning, together with the “liberation from biological determinism” were construed by the Church as the inspiring “ideologies which call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality” (Ratzinger, 2004).

These views of the Catholic Church have had considerable influence upon law-making in European countries where the legacy of Catholicism is still significant; however, the “Italian case” (Garelli, 2007) is recognized as particularly representative of the power that the Vatican maintains in political decisions with regard to family life and sexualities. Church hierarchies’ influence over the country took root within a social context in which Catholic ethical values are still implicitly dominant and shared among the population. Moreover, the defense of the Vatican’s moral imperatives has traditionally come from both center-right politicians, who have explicitly proclaimed themselves defenders of Catholic values, and their centre-left counterparts, who have often protected the Catholic view of reproduction and kinship through inaction, for example postponing the introduction of a law on civil unions (Bolzoni, 2016).

Thanks to the recognition that “the principles of Catholicism are part of the historical heritage of the Italian people” (*Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 1985), the Vatican has been authorized to intervene on moral and critical issues that come to the fore in the political debate, and to reaffirm the unquestionable natural order of gender and sexuality in response to the challenges of modernity, such as the recognition of same-sex unions and parenting (Bertone & Franchi, 2014; Fassin, 2010).

The crucial and vital influence of the Vatican on the Italian political system has been played since the aftermath of World War II, mainly through the endorsement of its views by the Democrazia Cristiana (DC), the major Christian democratic political party, which had a leading part in the Italian Parliament until the early 1990s. After the radical transformation of the political system started in 1992 due to a nationwide judicial investigation into political corruption, the DC lost its power in the country. In the difficulty of indicating a single party to vote for, the Vatican has chosen a strategy of neutrality, not supporting any existing party. However,—the Church has maintained its influence upon law-making by warning the Catholic politicians against decisions that could undermine the family founded upon marriage (Bernini, 2008).

In the years since 2000, with bioethical questions receiving increasing attention in Western countries, the Vatican stated its positions more vigorously, and the conflict with the “demands” of politics and science on assisted reproductive technologies, the use of stem cells in research ~~of~~ and the recognition of same-sex civil unions has become more evident. In different European countries, the syntagma “gender ideology” started to be largely used to oppose any intervention that was supposed to normalize diversities, such as educational school programmes against discriminations based on sexuality and gender, or the draft bill on homo and transphobia submitted to the Italian Parliament in 2013, whose legal process has not yet been concluded. The law on civil unions recently adopted by the Italian Parliament has been the most recent event of major import that led to a mobilization of conservative forces against the risk of subverting the heteronormative order.

The Italian parliamentary discussion on same-sex couples and their children

Although the debate on same-sex couples’ rights had already started in Italy at the end of the eighties, no concrete initiative was taken to introduce legal recognition for same-sex couples before the year 2005. The promise of regulating civil partnership (regardless of sexual orientation) became central during the 2005 election campaign of the centre-left coalition headed by Romano Prodi and, although there were numerous conflicts within the government coalition, it was translated into a

draft bill known as “DICO” regulating the “Rights and Duties for Stably Cohabiting People” (Senato della Repubblica, 2007). The bill was the subject of fierce criticism in the country, particularly by the Catholic hierarchies, which warned that same-sex unions legal recognition was “unacceptable in principle and dangerous on a social and educative level” (CEI, 2007). The strong obstruction to the adoption of the law went on for the duration of the Prodi government, which fell within approximately two years of taking office without passing the law.

In March 2013, the government led by Matteo Renzi, the secretary of the Democratic Party, reopened the debate on civil rights for same-sex couples. Like during Prodi’s government, the political scenario in 2013 also involved a plethora of different ideological backgrounds, with a ruling coalition comprising the Democratic Party (centre-left) and other parties of the centre and the centre-right grounded in the DC tradition. Although the law was finally approved in May 2016, the process was not easy and the thorny question of the rights of same-sex couples and their children was among the most difficult problems to solve for the government coalition, which was split between a large part of the Democratic Party that supported the proposal, and the centre-right government forces that, together with a strong Catholic component of the Democratic Party, objected to the bill, mainly due to the measures regarding parenthood.

The law proposal n. 2081 (Senato della Repubblica, 2015), known as the Cirinnà bill – named after the main sponsor of the legislation, Senator Monica Cirinnà of the Democratic Party – introduced a regulation of same-sex civil unions on the model of heterosexual marriage, with the extension of the rights and duties of married heterosexual couples to cohabiting same-sex couples. The original proposal underwent considerable changes so as to eliminate what the opponents considered “inconvenient similarities” with heterosexual marriage, such as the obligation of mutual fidelity and the timing for the termination of a registered partnership. The most disputed section of the proposed law was the so-called “stepchild adoption”, namely the possibility for one partner in a same-sex couple to adopt the other partner’s biological children (Section number 5). In the heat of opposing lesbian and gay parenthood, the debate was also extended to assisted reproductive

technologies, which, although they were not taken into account in the draft legislation, were evoked as the forthcoming subversive scenario of reproduction. Specifically, surrogacy, in spite of not being allowed in Italy, was a frequent subject of discussion due to the presumption that permitting a gay man to adopt the biological child of his partner would encourage “reproductive tourism” for using surrogacy abroad, in the knowledge that the non-biological parent would be recognized as a legal parent once he returned to Italy.

Intense lobbying and campaigning against lesbian and gay parenthood were carried out through the entire length of the parliamentary discussion of the proposal, with an unexpected convergence of views between civil society organizations, lay and religious Catholics, and parliamentary groups from whichever part of the political spectrum, which shared a strong socially conservative view on gender, sexualities and reproduction. Moreover, while obstructing the legislative proposal under discussion in the Parliament, the Vatican hierarchies and citizens’ movements informed by Catholic thought also opposed any initiatives aimed at preventing discrimination based on sexuality and gender because they supposedly subverted the gender order of the family. The discursive device “gender ideology” was deployed against the legal recognition of same-sex couples and their children, constructed as the very subversion of a system in which gender, sexuality and reproduction belong to a transcendent order, presocial and unchangeable (anonymised source). The fierce climate in which the discussion took place testified to the strong conservative resistances towards queer families that are still seen as a threat to the hetero-patriarchal order and to society itself (Bernstein & Reiman, 2001).

The strong opposition from Catholics, lay and religious, had a large effect on the fate of the discussion of lesbian and gay couples’ rights and their children, leading to many delays in the parliamentary process of the bill and fomenting tensions between the two main ruling parties. As a result, the discussion lasted for over three years, and when even the possibility of passing the original bill with the support of some minority parties failed, the solution, sponsored primarily by

the Catholic component of the Democratic Party, was to drop Section number 5, concerning the so-called stepchild adoption.

In the next session, we analyse the speeches of MPs who opposed the approval of Section number 5 of the Cirinnà bill.

Methods

This research analyses the parliamentary debates on the legal recognition of same-sex couples and their children that took place in Italy between July 2013, when the preliminary examination of different law proposals on this matter started, and May 2016, when the Chamber of Deputies approved in a vote of confidence the bill that had been approved by the Senate, without any amendments. We accessed the parliamentary texts through the digital archive of the Italian Senate, where the entire dossier regarding the law is available. After reading all the texts regarding the preliminary examination of the bill by the Senate commissions, for which only summary records were available, we focused the analysis on the parliamentary sessions for which a verbatim transcript was available (Senate sessions from 9 September 2015 to 25 February 2016). The parties present in the Senate during the discussion of the bill are reported in Table 1. The acronyms of the parties used in the data analysis are indicated in bold.

Table 1: The Senate composition

Majority parties	Members	Opposition parties	Members
Partito Democratico – PD <i>(Democratic Party)</i>	107	Forza Italia – FI <i>(Forward Italy)</i>	60
Nuovo Centro-Destra – NCD <i>(New Centre-Right)</i>	31	Movimento 5 stelle - M5S <i>(Five Star Movement)</i>	50
Per l'Italia – PI <i>(For Italy)</i>	12	Lega Nord - LN <i>(North League)</i>	15
Per le Autonomie – AUT <i>(For the Autonomies)</i>	12	Grandi Autonomie e Libertà – GAL <i>(Great Autonomies and Freedom)</i>	10
Scelta Civica per l'Italia – SC <i>(Civic Choice for Italy)</i>	8	Sinistra Ecologia Libertà – SEL <i>(Left Ecology Freedom)</i>	7
<i>Others</i>	3	<i>Others</i>	4
Total Majority	173	Total Minority	145

Methodologically, at an early stage, three of the authors independently carried out a content analysis aimed at identifying the MPs' speeches that opposed the recognition of the section of the bill concerning the so-called stepchild adoption. Then, working together, the same three authors grouped all the speeches into broader themes, such as “child interest”, “natural order”, “gender order”, “intensive mothering” and “social revolution”. Finally, the data were organized around four main discourses: a) the essentialized motherhood, b) the monstrous gay fatherhood, c) the commodification of motherhood, and d) the anthropological revolution.

The discursive data analysis was based upon the assumptions of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001, 2003), with the purpose of revealing which discourses and social practices

contribute to maintaining the social order, thus sustaining the subjugation and discrimination of lesbian and gay individuals and their children. According to the emancipatory agenda of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001), the study explores what discourses oppose the solution of the problem, specifically the alienation of gay and lesbian individuals from kinship. The focus is on the ideological dimension of discourses as ways of representing aspect of the world, which contribute to sustain particular relations of power and domination. Moreover, since ideologies represent aspects of the world inadequately, the analysis focuses on the contradictions or failures within the dominant order so as to highlight possibilities for change. Finally, the analysis addresses the public and social policies implications of the research findings, highlighting how the critique can contribute to social emancipation.

Results

Essentializing motherhood

The opposition to the recognition of gay and lesbian parents and their children was largely built on the irreducible difference between the mother and the father, and the risks for children deprived of either of the two figures. Biology is at the root of the differences between men and women, differences that are the “real, natural, anatomical, biological essence of the human species” (Giuseppe Marinello, NCD). On the basis of their biological attributes, men and women were constructed as naturally and indisputably different and, according to the gender order of society (Connell, 2002), distinct and complementary thinking, emotions and capacities were allocated to each spouse. As a result, the parental arrangement based on sex categories was considered the only legitimate one.

Ideologies of “natural difference” (Connell, 2009) draw their force from the conviction that gender will never change. Disowning the deeply historical character of gender has the political and intellectual effect of not recognizing that as it came into existence, it may have an end.

The value of the male-female complementarity would be enhanced by the chance of procreating that many MPs regarded as a unique heterosexual privilege, while they constructed same-sex sexuality as non-procreative and alienated from kinship (Weston, 1991). As Senator Roberto Cociancich (PD) stated, “The generation of life requires the encounter and fusion of two differences, the body of a man and the body of a woman. At the beginning of every existence there is this difference”.

The so-called stepchild adoption, initially laid down in the law proposal (Section number 5), was at the heart of the debate precisely because it would detach parental roles from the biological substratum that was supposed to determine different enduring internal dispositions for men and women and their different roles in childrearing. Challenges to the natural order were resisted, with opponents invoking the notion that “motherhood and fatherhood have distinct characteristics, emotions, affects and social functions and this diversity must be maintained” (Antonio Azzolini, NCD).

By referring to gender as a “natural/biological state, an identity, or a role” (Hicks, 2013: 150), lesbian and gay parents are constructed as damaging children because they do not reflect the “natural” differences between men and women and the appropriate gender role models. The notion of a primary sexual difference at the base of psychic life and the idea that reproduction follows universally from heterosexual coitus (Butler, 2004) led the opponents of the Cirinnà bill to resist the stepchild adoption section because it supposedly undermined the protection of children. In the parliamentary debate, “family remains the complementary union of two sexes”, and for this reason it was considered the best environment to raise children and to educate them to opposite sex role models. The “fear of the queer child” (Rosky, 2013) was evoked against the recognition of lesbian and gay parenthood that in the speeches of MPs would expose children to queerness and to deviated gender roles. Male and female were considered to be “two archetypes that must be preserved, so that babies have precise reference points that support their development”.

In opposing the adoption of the law, so-called gender ideology was often evoked as it was purportedly at the origin of the conspiracy against the natural heterosexual family:

“This is the so-called gender ideology, that proposes to switch from the sexual duality – human beings as males or females – to the concept of gender, an open word that dismisses the sexual bipolarity of human beings. [...] Such measures have only the purpose to progressively dispossess the family, which is the favourite and natural setting of education, and which is responsible for sexual education.” (Nunziante Consiglio, LN)

Initiatives aimed at contesting the essentialist heteronormative views of sexual difference have been delegitimized and accused of abolishing male and female identity through educational manipulation. The expression “gender ideology” was commonly used to describe a political project aimed at erasing man and woman’s identities, thus thwarting critical theories and practices to dispute the oppression of sexual minorities.

The subversion of the natural role of the mother was considered one of the worst consequences introduced by the law. The speeches reflected the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), the gendered model of a mother who has natural and instinctive caring capacities. By invoking scientifically expert sources, motherhood was stressed in its unique relation to pregnancy and the endless maternal bond was constructed as fundamental to the child identity and health:

“You cannot evade the tenets of psychology, remove scientific knowledge, bypass the delicateness of the deep paths of pregnancy of a natural mother. Neither can you ignore that the cross talking occurs in the maternal-foetal relationship. Nor can you ignore that the child at birth, even though he is offered to someone else, carries within him an emotional and sensorial heritage, learned from the mother, that can be affected by her emotion, her mood and her well-being.” (Laura Fasiolo, PD)

As highlighted by Shields (1975), the emphasis on the maternal instinct, founded on reproductive biology, has the effect of reducing women to the predisposition to mothering, thus legitimizing power inequalities, with women subordinated to men (Rickett, 2016). In patriarchal culture, dominant ideologies about what mothering means regulate women's bodies and practices and establish normative expectations on motherhood, which implies powerlessness of women (Rich, 1977).

Monstrous gay fatherhood

During the parliamentary debate, stepchild adoption was often considered a “Trojan horse” to legitimize surrogacy, which is forbidden in Italy by Law 40/2004 (Legge 20 maggio 2004, n. 40 – see *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 2004). The opponents to Section number 5 of the draft bill maintained that its approval would allow gay couples to access the practice of “womb for rent”, as surrogacy was commonly called during the parliamentary debate, in countries where it is permitted, in the knowledge that the non-biological parent would then be recognized as a legal parent once he returned to Italy.

MPs defined surrogacy as “immoral”, “abominable”, “aberrant”, “inhuman”, and “contrary to human dignity”, and referred to it as the “antithesis of natural reproduction”. Despite having been widely used abroad for a long time, mostly by heterosexual couples, during the parliamentary debate on same-sex civil unions, surrogacy was addressed only with reference to gay couples. Gay couples were assumed to have an “obvious natural impediment to procreation” and medically assisted reproduction was demonized as an abnormal way of achieving fatherhood.

The legal restriction in access to fertility treatments, which in Italy are allowed only to stable heterosexual couples who are clinically infertile, together with the dominant rhetoric on reproduction and kinship, are embedded in the production of new forms of “othering”, through the definition of acceptable and unacceptable parents (Parolin, Perrotta, 2012). This was evident in the

construction of the figure of the “gay wealthy couple” who has been demonized because it may escape the legal framework and, on account of its money, “buys parenthood” on the international market to which it has free access:

“By introducing by law the possibility of same-sex parenting, that category of potential same-sex parents who have means and resources to surrogate their progeny, would be facilitated [...]; thus, a division in the matter of rights would be produced between those who can spend from fifty thousand to one hundred and fifty thousand euros for a surrogacy in the USA or in India and those who do not have these means.” (Aldo Di Biagio, NCD)

By emphasizing the supposed privileges of “rich gay couples”, MPs overshadowed the responsibility of the state for the unequal opportunities in the access to reproductive services. The claims to reproductive rights of intended parents who are excluded from fertility treatments, regardless of their sexual orientation, due to the restrictions of the Italian law, are eclipsed by the demonization of those (gay) individuals who receives these services abroad.

Right-wing parties constructed the recognition of gay parenthood as the first step to allowing “eugenic practices”, and they appealed for a national/nationalist mobilization against those European directives that called for the recognition of same-sex couples, thus resulting in legislations alien to the common wisdom and the natural law.

“They [the supporters of the draft law] say, ‘This is required of us by Europe’. [...] it is necessary to go against the tide precisely in the moment in which perversions arrive, such as the eugenic programming of a child. The agreement [between gay fathers and a surrogate mother] provides that she should abort if the child doesn’t come out well [...] because the gentleman customers want it perfect. They want it blonde, with blue eyes, with no physical defects and with a certain intelligence quotient; otherwise, they throw it away. Senators, is

this progress? [...] We will fight against this in the Parliament [...] and in the country. [...] This is a battle of civility against this barbarity. It begins now and we'll carry it forward all over the country together with 80% of Italians.” (Carlo Giovanardi, GAL)

By constructing Europe as a reality extraneous to national values, MPs' speeches imputed to the EU anti-discrimination policies the responsibility to subvert the values founding the national culture. The opposition to the recognition of gay and lesbian parenthood took the value of an appeal for the defence of the community and its future, while "other" citizens were identified with the normalization of immoral practices, a foreign body within a cohesive system which is proud of its values and traditions. The request for recognition of the rights of lesbian and gay parents and their children was assumed to be a conspiracy against the founding values of Italy, thus legitimizing the mobilization for exclusion of those who would threaten “our civilization”.

Against the “inhuman and very grave” practice of surrogacy, it was argued that children's rights were superior to the desire of a gay couple to have a child. Likewise, desires of adults should not be confused with the right to subvert the natural law of procreation, and the strong rhetoric of the “best interest of the child” (Clarke, 2001) was deployed by MPs to protect children from becoming commodities of selfish gay couples who should accept the limits imposed by nature to reproduction. Through the appeal to the interest of the child, lesbian and gay parenthood is opposed in the name of a morally superior and universally shared principle. The opposition to the bill was represented as a high moral stance opposed to the wish of lesbian and gay individuals to be recognized as parents, which would be a proof of their selfishness. Although in the opponents' speeches the best interest of the child remained an undefined concept coinciding with parents' heterosexuality in itself, the rhetorical force of this device construed lesbian and gay sexuality as incompatible with the responsibility and the readiness to self-sacrifice that are required to parents.

Heterosexual reproduction was also constructed as an imperative because it was assumed as the only context that might guarantee the right of the child to access his/her biological origin.

According to a genetic essentialist view (Witt, 2005), the development of an adequate self-knowledge was described as the result of knowing one's genetic origins, thus undermining the role of social practices in constituting personal identity.

“A baby who, due to the step-child adoption, grows up with a homosexual couple, may be filled with affection and educated as well as possible, but he will not have the certainty of his biological identity; he will not have both biological parents as legal parents; he will not have a father and a mother who raise him.” (Stefano Lepri, PD)

Not having a biological tie to the parents was construed as a case of “fictive kin”, thus reifying the hierarchical system in which genetic ties are essential for kinship, while other forms of family relationships are considered fictional (Weston, 1991). By assuming the “bionormative conception of the family” (Witt, 2014), according to which families with children who do not have a genetic connection to both their parents are not the ideal form of the family, MPs maintained the superiority of heterosexual parents with biologically related children compared to other forms of family. Moreover, by arguing that fertility biomedicine would imply not knowing the source of the biomaterial, *one's biological identity*, MPs did not acknowledge that in lesbian reproduction the narrative of conception has never been dominated by the secrecy of the use of a donor (Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015). It is also noteworthy that, by drawing on the new potential offered by the Web, new forms of relationships between donors and prospective parents or individuals who share genetic ties are increasingly expanding.

The commodification of motherhood

If on one side the arguments against the recognition of lesbian and gay parenting stressed the *monstrous* consequences of gay fatherhood for the child, on the other side they focused on the “wretched” conditions of women involved in surrogacy procedures. Many times, the opposition to

the proposed law was justified by the fact that surrogacy would endorse a view of the woman as a “reproductive machine” and that “commodification practices of motherhood would have the chance of succeeding”. In the speeches of MPs, surrogacy would represent an “ethical abomination” that “humiliates the dignity of women”.

The call for a global banning of surrogacy headed by some long-time feminists, such as Sylviane Agacinski in France and Luisa Muraro in Italy, echoed in different interventions across the parliamentary spectrum. “Homo-patriarchy” was evoked as the symbolic cornerstone of patriarchy, which would “exploit” and “humiliate” a woman’s body and would consider the uterus a “disposable part”, while gay couples were described as “devoid of moral restraints”:

“The legitimization of same-sex parenting inevitably and logically makes necessary the recourse to procedures that humiliate the dignity of the female body, with the objectification and commodification of gestation, which [gestation], instead, for intrinsic and innate qualities, it is rooted in the human, single, unique, unrepeatable mother-child relation, that it cannot ever be cancelled, neither contracted, nor justified for a so-called selfless or solidarity goal.”

(Lucio Romano, AUT)

New generative possibilities offered by fertility biomedicine have given rise to ethical concerns regarding vulnerability of those hired for reproductive labour. Risks linked to the profit-related fertility industry have been under discussion by feminist scholars and activists who have highlighted how the access to reproductive services may implicate injustice and exploitation if not cautiously regulated. The transnational nature of assisted reproduction practices, with a growing number of Western couples looking for the conditions to having children that are not possible in their countries, might increase the violation of vulnerable women’s rights in countries with an unregulated fertility scenario.

Although heterosexual couples represent the vast majority of customers of reproductive assisted technologies, the ethical concerns of Italian MPs focused only on gay couples who were described as privileged exploiters of vulnerable women. If on one side it is true that reproduction is stratified by structural inequities of race, class, and sexuality, and different conditions of rights and privileges are involved, on the other side transnational reproduction began as an option for evading state restrictive regulations (Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015). Limiting the discussion to lesbian and gay individuals' participation in practices of biomedicine has hidden that "the stratifications imbedded in practices of biomedicine are intensifying in political economies that do not include a right to health, but a right to buy health care and enhance one's own health" (Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz, 2015: 535).

Commercial reasons were not the only cause for opposing surrogacy and Italian MPs expressed their disapproval even if fecundity assistance services were available free of charge. While the rhetoric of the "gift of life" is often used by brokerage companies to depict the process in less starkly commercial terms, thus not threatening the maternal generosity ideal (Cooper & Waldby, 2014), the opponents to the bill did not consider the principle of non-remuneration sufficient to admit surrogacy, and they questioned women's personal volition and the voluntary nature of their involvement:

"The new theory of the gift, the altruistic surrogacy, is a theorem, a sophistry essentially, a specious argument, behind which is not always but most of the time, a covert reality of marginalized women. This happens in poor countries as well as in wealth countries." (Laura Fasiolo, PD)

By denying any difference in motivations of women who participate in assisted reproductive technologies as gestational surrogates or oocyte vendors, MPs failed to recognize the stratified feature of reproduction and the structural conditions which result in individual's choices. If on one

side there is a need to harmonize and regulate these practices on a global level so as to prevent women's exploitation, on the other side, MPs' speeches continued not to recognize women as volitional subjects, relegating them to a passive figure which received form from the male action upon them (Staikou, 2014).

Anthropological revolution

A fourth discourse referred to the Cirinnà bill was an attempt to pursue an anthropological revolution. LGBT groups were described as a *lobby* that works from the shadows to overcome traditional values and "to establish new models and examples of family life and to create a new human being who hasn't a father and a mother in its genesis" (Giuseppe Marinello, NCD). The description of the campaign for the recognition of lesbian and gay parenthood as a concerted effort by a lobby has resulted in the construction of a dangerous and organized occult force that wanted to subvert the allegedly common set of values of the country. MPs who opposed the bill characterized themselves as the defenders of the existent social stability, while they promoted a sense of dread in the public opinion or antipathetic sentiments over LGBT individuals.

Some MPs' speeches based the opposition to the bill on the need to respect the Italian Constitution. That was called into play to argue for the impossibility of adopting the law because it would not respect the constitutional definition of family as a "natural society":

"An attempt is being made, through a normative artifice not that ingenious, to unravel the natural society, which is regulated by the law and the constitution, for putting in front of it a sort of pseudo progressive society planned by the legislator, and this [...] damages, in an almost scientific manner, the anthropological harmony and the natural demands to which the legislator himself should bow down to." (Aldo Di Biagio, NCD)

MPs' speeches have favoured the misinterpretation of the expression "natural society" used in the Constitution to define family. Although heterosexuality was likely taken for granted in 1947 when the Constitution was laid down, the expression "natural society" was referred to as a "grandfather clause", according to which the family comes before the State temporally and in terms of importance. Therefore, the purpose was to prevent the State from intervening in the privacy of family life and not to enshrine the heterosexual foundation of the family (Ginsborg, 2013).

Against the subversion of the "natural society", the opponents to the Cirinnà bill deployed the argument of the natural order, "a reality that the norm cannot modify", and the dissolution of the original figures of the woman and the man was constructed as the likely consequence of *gender ideology*, which would give rise to a new human being, "with no soul, neither face nor identity".

"They want to overcome the compulsory heterosexuality in order to create a new human being, to whom the freedom to choose everything of himself must be recognized, the freedom to unleash his own sexual identity, regardless of his nature and his biologically defined sexuality. If sexual binary stops being the ontological parameter of the human being, any sexual deviation from heterosexuality is understood as normal. [...] We were not born as individuals and then we assumed a sexuality, we were born male or female from the moment of conception." (Nunziante Consiglio, LN)

In the words of the opponents, the affirmation of *gender ideology* would lead to the end of sexual difference and, "in a spiral of lies", schools would teach children that sexual differences are no longer differences, that there are children with two fathers or two mothers, and that babies "do not come from a man and a woman but from the affection of two individuals" (Lucio Malan, FI). Compulsory heterosexuality was identified by MPs as the natural condition of human beings and sexual binarism as its obvious consequence. In the Parliamentary debate, men and women were

characterized by different and opposite dispositions and, consequently, by complementary roles and duties, while the function of performativity in the construction of sexual difference and its signification was disregarded. As a result, the opposition to the bill not only established the supremacy and exclusivity of heterosexual parenthood, but it was also a source of epistemic violence that imposed a prescriptive and unique meaning of gender, while other subjectivities were disowned. Parliamentary speeches demonized the so-called *gender ideology* by identifying it with a political stance and a social engineering project for ending male and female identities, thus hiding the emancipatory aim of critical reflections on how binarism should be deconstructed in the interest of any oppressed subjectivity.

The refusal to recognize any form of parenthood outside the nuclear heterosexual family was based on the argument that same-sex parenthood would be damaging to the child, a threat to culture and destructive of the human (Butler, 2004). Lesbian and gay parents were opposed to the symbolic order of the family because they “overcome the difference between parents that is necessary in the individual pathway of every person” (Piero Aiello, NCD), and, therefore, they would challenge the ideology of gender, motherhood and family, which together were considered the basis of the stability of society (Romans, 1992).

“The moral strength of a nation comes from the healthy family, united and with children, that represents the future of the nation. Family is the most important social security valve and the fundamental educational agency. It must be supported, not abandoned and assimilated to others. It is in the family that the individual is recognized and empowered and he learns sociality.” (Remigio Ceroni, FI)

Conclusions

This paper has analysed the parliamentary debate on the recognition of same-sex civil unions and their children that took place in Italy between July 2013 and May 2016, which resulted

in the approval of the law 76/2016 (*Gazzetta Ufficiale*, 2016). If on one hand the approved law recognizes same-sex couples' entitlements, on the other, as had already happened in other European countries (e.g. Brandão & Machado, 2012), the condition for the recognition of gay and lesbian couples is their exclusion from parenthood. The opposition to the possibility of a partner in a same-sex couple adopting the biological children of the other partner came from parties from the entire political spectrum, including the majority forces within which the bill was drafted.

The empirical analysis of MPs' speeches has revealed the alacrity of their opposition to non-heterosexual families, and the contribution the MPs have made, as part of the system of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1978) within the specific Italian cultural and historical context, to repress alternatives to the hegemonic model of reproduction and kinship.

With specific reference to the study's research questions, the analysis has shown different discursive strategies deployed during the debate in the Italian Parliament to contrast the challenges to the heteronormative family, whose common reference is the hegemonic model of gender and, specifically, the construction of women as essentially predisposed to mothering. By echoing the gender fundamentalism that has characterized the conservative resistance, mainly by the Catholic Church, to the recognition of non-heterosexual reproduction and kinship, the MPs' speeches have reified the differences between men and women by appealing to "*Darwinian fundamentalism*" and "*genetic determinism*" (Segal, 1999), which reiterate women's supposed caring virtues and limit the possibility for change in gender arrangements. Gender configurations in lesbian and gay families have been regarded as abnormal because they challenge the heteronormative views about the discrete 'roles' and characteristics of men and women, such as the caring/nurturing mother and the providing father (Hicks, 2005; 2013). The reference to women's natural caring capacities were accompanied in the speeches by the glorification of gender complementarity as the only access to reproduction and the requisite for *good and healthy parenting* (Bertone, 2017), thus contributing to upholding social hierarchies between heterosexual parents and *the others*.

The analysis of the parliamentary discussion over same-sex couples and their children has offered a contribution to the understanding of how “the oppression of homosexuals is a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women” (Rubin, 1975, p. 180). By opposing the recognition of gay and lesbian parents owing to the challenges they would throw down to the *sacredness of motherhood* (Rich, 1977), the parliamentary debate has contributed to reiterating restrictive standards of motherhood and to maintaining the institutionalization of sexualities and reproduction within the patriarchal order, thus channelling the experience of maternity to serve male interests.

Our findings highlight the need to implement initiatives at various levels (such as public and social policies, social campaigns, educational programmes), which should address not only issues directly linked to sexuality-based prejudices, but also general matters related to the division of roles and responsibilities based on the heterosexual matrix. As the research has showed, the guarantee to lesbian and gay parents and their children of the fundamental rights they need has been hampered in Italy by resorting to discourses that did not reject homosexuality itself, but rather they have appealed to the hegemonic gender order and its rules about mothering as the only warranty of social stability.

Interventions aimed at recognizing the rights of sexual minorities need to be accompanied by a broader project of cultural change, which, by promoting the deconstruction of gender binarism, might support legislative progresses. The ongoing gender asymmetries in the paid labour market as well as in family work (Fuwa 2004; Ridgeway 2011) call for laws and social policies to challenge social inequities and to problematize the conservative notion of gender. As previous studies have shown (e.g. Pistella et al., 2018), gender inequalities and discriminatory treatments based on traditional beliefs about the superiority of men over women, sustain prejudices against sexual minorities. Public opinion can perceive LGBT groups’ political demands for legal rights as a subversion of the social equilibrium based on the gender order, and in some cases political leaders ride the waves of the public fears. In countries such as Italy where the influence of Catholicism is

still undiminished, the fundamentalist view of gender and the self-evidence of sexual difference are forcefully defended in public discourses against the risk of subverting the patriarchal order and the heteronormative foundation of kinship. This leads to believe that political initiatives and legislative changes intended to overcome institutionalized sexuality-based discriminations, in spite of being of key importance in everyday lives, will not suffice to guarantee positive societal attitudes toward LGBT individuals (Costa et al, 2014; Pereira & Monteiro, 2016). Legal changes to support LGBT individuals' demands can fail to promote societal progressive attitudes unless accompanied by a broader cultural challenge to the ruling heterosexual order. Legal initiatives and social policies that address different form of subordination, such as sexism and sexual discrimination, could be more effective in challenging restrictive conceptions of identities and their relationships.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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