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Queering kinship, overcoming heteronorms

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Abstract

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

Keywords

Heteronormativity, Gender order, Homonormativity, Queer politics.

1. Exiles from kinship

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

Among the last countries in Europe, Italy legislated on same-sex couples in May 2016. This was an issue that was already taken into account at the end of the 1980s, thanks to the bill presented by the socialist parliamentarian Agata Alma Cappiello (Camera dei Deputati, 1988), and in 2007 when a bill was presented by the centre-left government led by Romano Prodi (Senato della Repubblica, 2007). As already happened during Prodi's government, also during Matteo Renzi's government, which presented the new bill in 2013, the recognition of same-sex couples and their children was at the origin of strong divergences between the ruling parties. Specifically, the draft law caused strong conflicts between the Democratic Party, which was the majority party, and the centre-right allies in government parties, grounded in the Christian democratic tradition. Moreover, important disagreements arose also within the Democratic Party where a large Catholic component opposed the bill. Additionally, a strong opposition to the law proposal came from lay and religious civil society organisations in the country, which took a position in favour of a conservative interpretation of gender, sexualities and kinship.

The law 76/2016 (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2016) recognised same-sex civil unions by extending to them most of the provisions regarding heterosexual married couples with regards to measures such as widow(er)'s pension, inheritance, admission to hospital during partner's hospitalisation, decisions about medical treatments. Although this almost complete assimilation of same-sex civil unions to

heterosexual married couples, the section of the law proposal that would allow a partner to adopt the biological children of the other partner (the so-called stepchild adoption) was so controversial that it had to be erased in order for the law to pass. Many commentators stated that the denial to the right to adopt the children of the partner is understandable as a normal and predictable resistance typical of the first step of a country toward homonormalisation and this would be soon resolved as already the case in other countries.

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

Furthermore, heteronormativity is embedded in every social and civic institution and it acts as a cultural hegemonic force, which can lead subordinate groups to give their consent to those dominant worldviews that are at the origins of their oppression (Gramsci, 1975; Lasio, Serri, Ibba & Oliveira, 2019; Lopes, Oliveira, Nogueira & Grave, 2017; Ludwig, 2011). The power of heteronormativity consists of condemning to invisibility what does not conform to the hegemonic order, thus becoming the only possible vision of the world and manipulating perceptions, beliefs and values. The ideology of dominant groups does not require forceful actions or punitive and coercive control to take a dominant position; rather, power acts by ensuring that its worldviews become universally valid social norms. Therefore, the social and political status quo may seem natural, inevitable, immutable and beneficial for everyone, even for those who are victims of oppression. The liberal power does not simply impose its rules; it does not merely say what is forbidden; it does not oppress in a direct way. Rather, it normalises, it makes individuals responsible, it disciplines. The state does not need to be coercive: it can be assured that its subjects make their choices in the “sacrosanct private sphere of personal freedom” (Halperin, 1995, p. 9). LGBT¹ individuals may continue to be exiled from kinship

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans.

(Weston, 1991) both because of the absence of state legitimacy and their own adhesion to the heteronorms. Heteronormativity may be upheld by LGBT individuals who may perceive transgressions of the heteronorms as a cost and therefore adhere to homonormativity (Oliveira, Costa & Nogueira, 2013).

In Italy, the strong contrariety toward the recognition of lesbian and gay parents and their children attests that heteronormativity, together with xenophobia and racism towards migrants (Castro, Carnassale, 2019), are still widespread in the country.

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

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

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

In order to scrutinise the social and institutional practices that reinforce the normative models of sexuality and kinship, and give origin to sexuality-based discriminations, the section that follows enlightens how in Italy the resistance to the trend toward sexual democracy relies on discourses that naturalise gender and sexuality and support the traditional heterosexual nuclear family model. This paper offers a theoretical and contextual analysis of heteronormativity working in tandem with neoliberal political economies.

2. The defence of the gender order in contemporary Italy

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

The relationship with the Catholic Church is very important for the Italian civic discourse on sexualities because of the cooperation between the Italian State and the Church in “promoting the human being (<<persona humana>>) and the sake of the Nation” (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 1985), which in some extent it meant the same thing as condemning non-heterosexualities. In fact, the Catholic archives reveal traces of a deeply rooted condemnation of non-normative sexualities and even today, the position of Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis), often perceived as progressive with regards to sexual minorities, it is consistent with the tradition. As an example, in the proposition number 64 of the apostolic exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (2013), Bergoglio mentions the document on the “Pastoral care of persons with homosexual inclination”, written by the Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States, where homosexuality is defined as “not in accord with God’s purpose and plan for human sexuality”. Moreover, the document affirms that “God created human beings in

his own image, meaning that the complementary sexuality of man and woman is a gift from God and ought to be respected as such.”

The debate that occurred in Italy in the years between 2013 and 2016 on the recognition of same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood has offered a valuable opportunity to examine how the overlapping of sex, gender and sexuality is reinforced by contemporary heteronormative power, which has revitalised the efforts to contrast any attempt to subvert the gender order (Connell, 1987). Not surprisingly, the opposition to the recognition of sexual minorities has pursued the path of reaffirming the well-established gender order of society and the traditional female and male roles by taking up “the various institutionalised routines for preserving men’s power over women and over men who deviate from masculine ideals” (Segal, 2007, p. 132).

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

The division of roles and responsibilities is based on the belief that men and women differ widely for their psychology, attitudes and skills, which contributes to maintaining the gender asymmetry at the origin of women’s invisibility as active citizens (Amâncio & Oliveira, 2006). Masculinity and femininity are construed as opposite categories and their differences are reified by inscribing them into concepts such as nature, personality or individuality, which fail to recognise the role of social,

cultural and political factors in determining their differences (Oliveira, Costa, Carneiro, 2014). Male social supremacy is justified by reason of the alleged connection between the social order and the biological difference between women and men. Being constructed as opposite categories, men and women are positioned within an order defined by their gender and this gender order (Connell, 1987) implies that they assume a different position in the social hierarchy with women who are subordinated to men.

The debate about same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood has occurred in close connection with a mobilisation against the so-called “gender ideology” or “gender theory” (Bernini, 2016; Garbagnoli, 2014; Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018). Different conservative groups and institutions used these syntagmas to designate numerous initiatives intended to overcome discrimination based on gender or sexuality, which were accused of being part of project for subverting the gender order. As Robcis (2015) already pointed out with regard to France, also in Italy one of the peculiarity of the opposition to the recognition of lesbian and gay couples and their children was the focus on the need to preserve sexual differentiation and complementarity, which were described as the very foundation of human identity. As a result, while opposing a bill that would protect the rights and duties of lesbian and gay couples and their children, the debate inside and outside Parliament supported the ordering of parenthood within the patriarchal order and strengthened the normative standards on the practices of motherhood.

Research (Lasio & Serri, 2019) on the debates that occurred in Italy while this law proposal (add reference law number, project of law ref...) was under discussion in the Parliament showed the discursive strategies used by the heteronormative power to exclude non-heterosexual subjectivities from kinship and to reinforce the hegemonic model of gender intelligibility. These discursive strategies were tightly anchored in the cultural background that has historically prevented the expression of sexual minorities in the Italian context. Even if today the rhetoric is not the denial of the existence of homosexuality as it happened in the past (Dall’Orto 1988), the recent debate on lesbian and gay couples constructed them as foreign subjectivities to the symbolic system of kinship,

with the delineation of a clear distinction between heterosexual married couples and the “specific social formations”, as lesbian and gay civil unions have been defined by the Law 76/2016 (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2016) in order to distinguish them from the “natural family” founded on the marriage between man and woman.

The debate on the legislative proposal insisted on issues not just related to same-sex unions or lesbian and gay parenthood; what have been evoked were unanswered questions concerning the connection between biological differences and identity, sexuality, parenting and kinship. The discourses of the natural order has been central for the maintenance of the heteronormative view of the family, which on one side grants the access to reproduction and kinship only to heterosexual individuals and, on the other side, reinforces the gender order of society by constructing as natural the differences between men and women and their roles in childrearing.

A congeries of forces contributed to reinforcing the distinction between forms of kinship that are acceptable and others that are not by leaning on the need to grant the social order founded on the alleged natural expression of human intimacy and reproduction.

A crucial role in the opposition to the recognition of same-sex couples and lesbian and gay parenthood was played by the Catholic Church, which took part in the debate in defence of the “natural family” while the law proposal was under discussion in the Italian Parliament. The Vatican hierarchies and citizens’ organisations informed by Catholic thought contested the bill because it was supposed to be aimed at subverting the “natural” order of the family. In the years between 2013 and 2016, the antagonism opposed by the Church had an important influence on the political scenario, causing interruptions in the parliamentary course of the bill and providing arguments against its approval. This was reflected by the fact that the opposition to the recognition of lesbian and gay parenthood was almost unanimous in the Parliament: the opposition to the so-called stepchild adoption came not only from centre-right politicians, but the disapproval was expressed also by a large number of members of the Democratic Party, largely parliamentarians of Catholic extraction, thus leading to a profound rift internal to the party (Lasio, Congiargiu, De Simone & Serri, 2018).

Moreover, the relationships between gender, sexuality and reproduction has been reinforced during the parliamentary debate by placing in linear continuity heterosexuality with affections and sexual practices. MPs' speeches constructed relations between same-sex individuals as erotic but not procreative, thus further excluding LGBT individuals from kinship. Lesbian and gay families have been considered as abnormal because they might challenge expectations about common heterosexual family roles (Hicks, 2013), and variations in kinship from the normative model of heterosexual family have been defined as dangerous for the natural laws, which are supposed to preside over human intelligibility. Discourses on the natural family not only reinforced the exclusion of lesbian and gay individuals from kinship, but they also contributed to reaffirm the hegemonic model of gender, which considered women as naturally disposed to care. The gender fundamentalism embedded in the speeches of parliamentarians resulted similar to the discourses advocated by the Vatican since the 1990s against the denaturalisation of sexual norms (Buss & Herman, 2003) and the opposition to the recognition of gay and lesbian parents reaffirmed limits for women and their contribution to childrearing, which is maintained within the framework of the patriarchal order.

3. Queering kinship

The debate recently occurred in Italy on the recognition of same-sex couples and gay and lesbian parenthood has a value that goes beyond the law itself. The very controversial discussion touched on teleological questions, which raised issues such as the ultimate goal of sexuality, the conditions that would make kinship possible and the connections between biology and kinship. With regard to these points, the heteronormative power succeeds in reaffirming the connection between sexual binarism, heterosexual coitus and reproduction, thus decreeing that the only form of acceptable and generative sexuality is the heterosexual one.

The approval of the law indicates that something is changing because it recognizes the existence of gay and lesbian couples and it grants them most of the rights and duties of heterosexual married couples, bringing them out (at least in part) of hiding. However, the opponents to the law proposal

have been able to reiterate the heteronormative model of kinship by using different arguments related to the need to protect the social status quo and its balance with the natural order. As a result, the law continues to exclude lesbian and gay individuals from kinship, thus revealing that the heteronormative imperatives still resist and they exert a decisive influence on the understanding of kinship.

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

Within the framework of queer theory, Drucker (2015) highlighted how also LGBT politics can succumb to the temptation to seek assimilation into the dominant culture, while radical movements can fail to propose compelling alternative models. Homonormativity (Duggan, 2003; Drucker, 2015; Oliveira, Costa, Nogueira, 2013; Richardson, 2000) leads LGBT individuals to support the social order by colluding with the hegemonic views of gender, sexuality, reproduction and kinship. This can be the case of political claims for equal rights for LGBT individuals, which many times result in complicity with heteronormative institutions, such as marriage, which privatise functions that should belong to the state by recognising fundamental rights (parenthood, inheritance) only to those who adhere to them. For queer theorists (e.g. Duggan, 2003; Eng, 2010; Warner, 1999), through the demands for marriage LGBT social movements express their complicity with a model of kinship that normalises the dominant model of gender and sexuality and marginalises those who do not identify

with it. As Judith Butler (2002, p. 17) states: “to be legitimised by the state means to enter into the terms of the legitimation offered there and to find out that one’s public and recognisable sense of personhood is dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation”.

Alternative models of intimacy and family forms that queer communities promoted in the past have been disowned, for embracing a model of marriage grounded on the white, middle-class imperatives, which are conceived as the “normal” and marginalised poor, people of colour, transgender subjectivities and any other who refused the hegemonic model.

Discourses around same-sex rights to marry and lesbian and gay parenthood are often imbued with the rhetoric of “no differences” between lesbian and gay families and the heterosexual ones as an argument for demanding equal rights. Although it can seem counterintuitive, claiming for the right to marriage or for the recognition of gay and lesbian parenthood might support those heteronormative assumptions that are at the basis of the marginalisation of sexual minorities, legitimising them by seeking inclusion in heteronormative institutions.

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

However, being at odds with heteronorms does not necessarily mean being for or against the legal recognition of lesbian and gay couples or their right to adopt. Rather, heteronormativity builds its power by relying on assumptions that are taken for granted, such as the role of the mother in childrearing, so that the subversive potential of non-heterosexual sexualities can be enhanced. Relying exclusively on monogamous marriage to access kinship and family rights is a way of legitimising marriage as a central institution in contemporary societies. At the same time, LGBT equal rights politics do not guarantee a challenge to the heteronormative assumptions that underpin

the unequal social status quo. Drucker (2015) suggests the resistance to the privatisation of care and the encouragement of flexible and queer forms of intimate relationship, among others, as forms of resisting heteronormativity alongside with trans respect policies.

The access to kinship seems still to rely on the condition defined by comparison with the naturalized “biological families” in Italy, as shown by Lasio et al (2018 [j hom](#)), with LGBT activists agreeing with such contentions. A project of questioning heteronormativity will need alliances and articulation among different groups in order to foster a coalitional logic (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Rather, to advance this conundrum it seems necessary to think simultaneously on a heteronormative and gendered social order that regulates intimacy and kinship.

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