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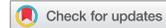
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The anti-gender movement in Italy: Catholic participation between electoral and protest politics

Anna Lavizzari ^a and Massimo Prearo^b

^aDepartment of Political and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, Italy;

^bDepartment of Humanities, University of Verona, Verona, Italy

ABSTRACT

Between 2013 and 2016, a broad range of Catholic groups following pro-life and pro-family agendas has conducted a large anti-gender campaign, whose main result was the definition of a Catholic anti-gender movement in Italy. The anti-gender movement, opposed to the approval of the bill on civil unions for same-sex couples and the introduction of gender education programs in schools, has grown in popularity, becoming a source of participation and protest for politically committed Catholic and social conservative actors. The emergence and consolidation of the movement has marked a new phase of political Catholicism characterized, on the one hand, by an intensification of protest and lobbying activities in the public and political arenas and, on the other, by a descent into the electoral arena of a part of the movement with the constitution of an autonomous political subject, the People of the Family party. This article proposes to analyze the dynamics of politicization of the anti-gender cause, with the aim of advancing the argument that long-lasting dilemmas are still affecting Catholic politics concerning the best strategies to combine religious coherence, political representation and consensus for the Italian Catholic militancy in an increasingly complex post-secular society.

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Introduction

Like many European countries, Italy is going through deep changes in its political and religious landscape, displaying increasing evidence of a complex ‘post-secular’ society and democracy (Bailey and Driessen 2017; Faggioli 2018). The participation of Italian Catholics in the political life of the country has been inquired by many scholars as well as religious elites and authorities. If in the past the Vatican and the Catholic Church have been engaged in promoting a pragmatic ‘quest for one political home

CONTACT Anna Lavizzari  anna.lavizzari@sns.it 

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for Italian Catholics at the ideological and institutional center of the system' (Faggioli 2018: 1), the current pontificate has increasingly disengaged from partisan politics. As other theorists have stressed, the Italian case is characterized by a heterogeneous and dispersed space of Catholic movements and associations, in other words, by a 'distinctive form of Catholic pluralism' (Bailey and Driessen 2017: 234), reflecting different political views and ideals. As rightly put by Faggioli (2018: 2), '[i]t remains to be seen if the political homelessness of Italian Catholics means an exodus of the "non-negotiable values" or a diaspora towards a destination still unknown.'

Since the spring of 2013, during the parliamentary debate related to the discipline of civil unions between same-sex couples, and to proposals for a law against homophobia and the introduction of gender and sexual education in schools, Italy has witnessed a new protest cycle by religious and social conservative actors (Garbagnoli and Prearo 2017). This protest cycle leans on a strong European and international network of activists, groups, and parties (Brake and Paternotte 2016; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). In particular, Catholic authorities under Pope Benedict have played a crucial role in refocusing and sharpening the efforts of their militant base around a new political cause. In turn, through brand-new anti-gender campaigns and groups, Catholic activists have helped diffusing a new wave of social conservatism in the Italian political landscape. Though several indicators make it possible to place the mobilization in the stream of actions already implemented on these issues, in particular during the debate on the DICOs (Rights and Duties for Stably Cohabiting People) that took place in 2007, the discursive and tactical repertoire employed in the recent cycle of protest presents elements of novelty. In fact, the focus on the concept of gender or, using the lexicon that contests its diffusion, on the 'theory of gender' or 'gender ideology', constitutes a distinct mobilization discourse. This discourse does not limit itself at introducing new thematic content, but brings with it new dynamics of positioning within the universe of Catholic activism and, above all, follows the emergence of new anti-gender groups created *ad hoc*.

Hence, the main result was the definition of an anti-gender movement with a relatively organized structure, equipped with spokespersons, a national coordination, and a collective identity recognized in the electoral, institutional, and protest arenas (Jasper and Duyvendak 2004). The emergence of the anti-gender movement in Italy has been followed by a stage of politicization characterized by, at once, an intensification of protest actions and group pressure by informal Catholic actors, channeled

through anti-gender groups, and the participation of a branch of the movement in the electoral arena.

Bringing together research perspectives on political parties, movements and participation, this article investigates the dynamics of politicization of the anti-gender cause through the strategic complementarities between movement and party arenas. In particular, the article focuses on the notion of political space to study the positions and identities of collective actors and, therefore, on the politics of its occupation by Italian Catholic activists. We refer to the findings, nowadays fairly widely shared within the community of political scientists and social movement analysts, that protest actions can no longer be considered a sort of ‘world apart’, a distinctive ‘sector’ (McCharty and Zald 1977; Suh 2011). Rather, the interdependence and fluidity of interactions between the social movement and political, institutional arenas have become increasingly central to the aims of collective actors (Jasper 2006; Mathieu 2012; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015).

First, we will contextualize the current situation of political Catholicism in Italy, highlighting the logics underlying the political presence of Catholic activists in the country. Second, we will trace the emergence of the anti-gender cause and movement in Italy, in order to better understand the constellation of actors and their positioning within the arena of Catholic political and social engagement. Third, we will analyze the strategies, dilemmas, and tensions faced by anti-gender actors in their attempt to occupy a political space at the intersection of different arenas within the Italian national context. In so doing, we will argue that the emergence of the anti-gender cause is at once a recent expression of the attempt by the conservative Catholic right to fight against a destructive secularist and relativist culture based on ‘non-negotiable’ values, while dogmatically imposing them on other citizens, and the failure to meet the normative pluralism necessary to succeed in formal politics. Empirically, the anti-gender cause and movement clearly show the most recent developments of long-lasting dilemmas affecting Catholic politics concerning the best strategies to combine religious coherence, political representation and consensus for Catholic activists in different arenas.

The hypothesis that we would like to propose here is that the anti-gender cause not only represents a mobilization discourse the Catholic movements rely on in order to realize a reshaping of Catholic activism. It also represents an opportunity to exploit this political *vacuum* by defining the boundaries of a political space for Catholic action that is perceived as absent or lost. We therefore advance the hypothesis that

the anti-gender movement responds to an expectation by the relatively dispersed world of Catholic activists to (re)activate Catholic political participation and action in the public sphere. An analysis in terms of political space allows to highlight and to understand how, in a context of Catholic diaspora and increasing secularization of politics, the anti-gender cause has functioned as an important trigger for the renewal and refocusing of Catholic political action by a constellation of different activist realities.

Finally, although the article does not aim at comparing Italy with other countries, it is important to stress that the following analysis of Catholic political action has to be placed in a broader context affecting other Western and Eastern European societies with Catholic heritages. In recent years, the centrality of the Catholic Church to the identity of several countries – including Ireland, Portugal and Spain – has been caught up in different struggles concerning abortion, gay marriage, and euthanasia, among others. Recent examples such as Ireland's referendum on abortion have direct links with mobilizations by anti-abortion associations in other countries, such as Italy, bringing about a transnationalization of oppositional strategies (Corrêa *et al.* 2018). Yet, the dilemma remains as how the church and Catholic militants would need to find new ways and strategies to negotiate secular parameters in European societies.

Intersecting social movements, political parties and public arenas

According to a minimal definition, a social movement refers to networks of individuals, groups, collectives, and associations that put in place collective forms of actions to defend the interests or needs of a category of people in the name of a common cause and shared beliefs, often accompanied by legal, social or cultural claims (Diani 1992; Neveu 2001; Tilly 2004). In this sense, the anti-gender movement emerges as the expression of a network of individuals, already existing organizations and newly formed groups concerned with the political and ideological threat centered around the notions of gender ideology and gender theory.

As noted by various scholars, the relations between movements and parties and between protest and electoral arenas have received little attention in the literature on social movements and political parties (Della Porta 2015). However, it has been recognized that these relationships are present and varied, in terms of competition, infiltration, and transformation (Garner and Zald 1985). The argument promoted by such

research is based on the premise that not only social movements are essential actors of the conventional political system – that is, of the party and electoral space – but also and above all that the boundaries between formal institutional political space and political space for collective action and protest are permeable, variable, overlapping and simultaneous (Goldstone 2004; Peterson 2016). Therefore, social movements that decide to include electoral participation in their repertoire of action become progressively part of two different systems of action: the party system and the system of social movements, in which they play different – but at the same time overlapping – roles (Diani 1992; Della Porta 2015). In this regard, it has been observed the emergence of hybrid political forces at the intersection of party action and movement (Katz and Crotty 2006; Almeida 2010; Della Porta *et al.* 2017; Hutter *et al.* 2018). In particular, the concept of movement-party understood as a coalition of activists coming from social movements that apply the practices and strategies of protest in the party system (Kitschelt 2006), explicitly describes the dynamics of coexistence between party and movement. In this hybrid space, social movements organizations exploit a wide range of actions, including lobbying activities and consultancy to parliamentarians and government officials, the support to specific candidates through voting, and the organization of protest actions, boycotts, demonstrations, public conferences and awareness campaigns (Kriesi *et al.* 1995).

In addition to that, there are different mechanisms that link movements to conventional political actors, encouraging the creation of a space for interaction and political action (McAdam and Tarrow 2010). Such mechanisms can be observed at the emergence of specific opportunities or political threats, such as the approval of laws and decrees opposing the cause of the movement. In fact, depending on who sees the elections as an opportunity or a threat to their activities and interests, the movements proactively participate in the electoral mobilization either by joining the electoral coalitions or by increasing the episodes of protest. In this sense, opportunities and political threats can be considered two sides of the same coin, in that they both are important propulsion forces for mobilization.

As for the anti-gender movement, the political threat is represented by the potential approval of the Scalfarotto, Fedeli, and Cirinnà bills, which respectively provide for the introduction of the crime of homophobia, of gender education programs in schools, and of civil unions. Taken together, these measures constitute both the *casus belli* for the affirmation of the anti-gender movement and the window of political opportunity the

action of the movement is based upon (Bellè *et al.* 2016). More generally, as Hutter and colleagues point out:

[i]deally, social movements expand a given issue-specific conflict in the general public, i.e. they create public controversy where there was none before, they draw the public's attention to the issue in question and frame it according to their own demands, and, by doing so, they strengthen the hand of their allies, particularly political parties in the parliamentary arena. (Hutter *et al.* 2018)

In other words, it is a dual dynamics whereby social movements create an opportunity for political elites to support the ideological cause in question, taking advantage of the popularity and media visibility to strengthen the support of some portions of the electoral base, and, at the same time, introduce and advance their requests in the political arena.

Analyzing mobilization strategies: methodological premise

The study follows a qualitative line of inquiry. In order to map the actors involved and interpret their positions, we conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of public discourses by representatives, leaders, and activists of the anti-gender movement. Our data corpus includes newspapers articles, videos, press releases, movement communiques, political speeches, blog and Facebook posts, along with social media outlets and activists' produced material from 2013 to 2016. The sampling unit was based on the public debate around the topic under analysis, and therefore particularly on movement actors' and Catholic authorities' voices. We sampled our texts on the basis of their importance vis-à-vis the discourse of interest (Lindekilde 2014). Our main text sources included articles from newspapers of the Italian Catholic specialized press, such as *Tempi*, *Avvenire*, *La Croce*, among others. In these articles, we analyzed the public narratives and knowledge within the landscape of political issues and their targeted audiences. In addition, we analyzed primary sources such as doctrinal texts and notes produced by Vatican authorities, which we consider as the basis, the 'guidelines' upon which the 'order of discourse' (Fairclough 1992) is constructed by movement's actors, and specific internal positioning are disseminated to the larger public. In so doing, we scrutinized multiple discursive units in order to 'understand the connections between discursive practices of social movement activists and wider social and cultural developments and change' (Lindekilde 2014: 10). Our research and analysis are mostly inductive, and thus interested in capturing discourses

supporting anti-gender strategies and interventions in the public sphere, rather than being based on pre-coded categories.

As we are interested in understanding how catholic protests produce an ‘anti-gender’ framework of mobilization, our data are collected in order to make visible the political discourses that actors mobilize in the intersected public arenas as strategies of a contentious collective action but also, and foremost, as an instrument of (re)construction and consolidation of ‘new’ public space of Catholic political action. The approach we propose, building on Juliette Rennes’ contribution on controversies analysis and mobilizations’ carriers (2011), is to track the relation between discursive strategies of occupation of public spaces and strategies of production of a ‘new’ Catholic cause.

Dilemmas of contemporary Catholic politics

According to Alberto Melloni (2006), the political context of the past decade has been marked by a crisis of ‘political unity’ of Italian Catholics, started with the dissolution of the Christian Democratic Party in 1994. Since then, politically committed Catholics have engaged in a policy of presence defined as ‘Catholic diaspora’ (Apruzzese 2012). There are different interpretations of the dynamics resulting from this impasse. Franco Garelli, for example, argues that

[T]he crisis of political Catholicism has freed up many resources of Catholic associations, which - also in relation to the demands of that time - have progressively been more directed towards the area of social-assistance and volunteering than to the political commitment and accountability within institutions.

However, confronted with political challenges related to bio-ethical and moral issues, it appears to be relevant ‘the choice of the Italian Church to give more prominence to issues of religious identity, to be more active in the field of culture, to urge believers to promote and defend Christian values in society’ (2014: § 24). Ultimately, Garelli concludes that ‘it derives a situation of substantially polarized ecclesial associations, with some groups and movements that fully participate in the ongoing dynamics, and with other groups that - while continuing in their commitment - are more silent and detached’ (2006: 1082–1083).

Moreover, in analyzing the dilemmas faced by the Italian Catholic Church, Garelli argues that ‘the people who came from the end of the world seems to have put on *standby* the strategy of occupation of the public scene activated by some national Episcopal Conferences - in

particular the Italian one – in recent years’. This means ‘looking for a new model of presence in the peninsula, less centered on cultural and identity references and more focused on spiritual requests and popular relations’ (Garelli 2014: § 40 and 44). Hence, we aim to understand the refocusing of Catholic activism in a context marked by a quest for a space of Catholic political action that has characterized political Catholicism for the past two decades, and, at the same time, to investigate the interactions between different arenas of collective action that are motivated by this quest. Indeed, Catholics are strategizing to find a balance between incorporating crucial Catholic claims and values not only in the parties’ political agendas, but also in the complex mix of identity-driven politics and secularism, and the ability to adapt to the social and cultural aspirations of contemporary Italian society. The question that arises concerns the ways in which the political space was conceived and occupied in order to create the conditions for the renewal of the Catholic political cause. The analysis of the tension that emerged within the framework of the anti-gender cause at the time of the foundation of an ad-hoc political party, the *People of the Family* (*Popolo della Famiglia* – PdF), allows to rethink the reading of Catholic political action in diasporic terms, and to define the diverging strategies that underlie the appropriation of the political space by Catholic actors.

Origins of the ‘gender’ question

The logics that underlie the reshaping of Catholic activism in Italy are characterized, on the one hand, by elements of continuity with a tradition of Catholic pro-life action (Avanza 2015) and, on the other hand, by tactical and discursive elements related to a set of recent transformations in the field of gender policies and sexuality. The studies that have investigated this dual dynamics of reshaping of Catholic activism at the international level agree in identifying the Onusian Conferences on population and development (Cairo 1994) and on women (Beijing 1995) as two turning points (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Since then, institutions and movements of the Catholic Church have launched an intense mobilization cycle. Indeed, during these conferences a ‘new international paradigm’ was introduced (McIntosh and Finkle 1995). Such a paradigm is essentially based on the right of women to control their reproductive capacity and, above all, on the political necessity to guarantee this right through access to abortion and all forms of contraception and sexual education. More precisely, the Beijing Conference adopted the concept of

‘gender’ to define, in terms of public policies (*gender-sensitive policies*), an approach focused on the promotion of equal opportunities and the achievement of full social and political equality between men and women (*gender equality*).

This epistemological break was perceived as being in conflict with a naturalistic and essentialist vision of the masculine and the feminine. Indeed, it was asserted the equal status of women and men based on women’s right to promote their existential emancipation from the supposed natural role of mothers and caregivers, and therefore from their position complementary to men. According to the Vatican Observer at the Beijing Conference,

the term ‘gender’ is interpreted by the Holy See as founded on the biological sexual identity [male or female], and excludes equivocal interpretations based on world perspectives, which state that such sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to correspond to new and different purposes.¹

The Vatican’s response to the introduction of the term ‘gender’ in the international arena comes as a reaction to the institutionalization of an ‘anti-naturalist’ position on the policies for regulating gender relations. In this sense, the two UN Conferences constitute the beginning of an intense work of elaboration of a Catholic response by the Vatican, Pontifical Councils, Catholic NGOs, pressure groups and movements (Avanza and Della Sudda 2017), to what is perceived as a dangerous attack on the fundamental values of family and life, introduced by the action of institutional feminism (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995; McBride Stetson 2001).

Concerned with these issues, the Pontifical Council of the Family launched an appeal to Catholic scholars and intellectuals to reflect on the meaning and political implications of the progressive advancement of feminist and LGBT politics. The publication of *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* in 2003 constitutes another crucial moment. This volume represents a wealth of argumentative tools whose purpose is to re-define the terms introduced at the international level – first and foremost the concept of ‘gender’ – which directly or indirectly concern life and the family.

The *Lexicon* is a central instrument of a distinct strategy for the appropriation of the public debate around egalitarian and non- discriminatory

¹Statement concerning the interpretation of the term “gender”, 15 September 1995 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/archivio/documents/rc_seg-st_19950915_conferenza-pechino-genero_sp.html.

gender and sexual policies. The aim is to provide doctrinal instruments through which the position of the Catholic Church with respect to such policies can be formalized and spread within the political, legal, social, and educational realms.

It is precisely in the *Lexicon* that the concept of gender is defined as ‘ideology’, whose focal point would be the negation of sexual difference and whose political consequence would be ‘egalitarian relativism’ (Garbagnoli 2014). The expressions ‘theory of gender’ or ‘gender ideology’ summarize these discursive processes in the form of a ‘rhetorical device’ (Garbagnoli 2016). Hence, gender represents a homogeneous set of principles, concepts, laws and policies of a new ‘ideological dictatorship’, whose political program would be the extension of the domain of democracy to the sexual realm. The concept of gender precisely undermines the ‘natural anthropology’ or ‘human ecology’ promoted in religious, conservative, and even nationalist discourses. In a process of secularization of the public sphere, the ‘gender ideology’ is perceived as a threat through which democratic institutions transgress traditional models based on Catholic values.

Finally, during the 2000s, the gender question entered the intra-Catholic debate. This allowed the organizations and groups already engaged in pro-life activism to renew and extend their discursive and tactical repertoire around the anti-gender cause, this time with a clear mandate from religious authorities to take the political field.²

Politicization of the anti-gender movement

The anti-gender discourse effectively mobilized groups, associations, and organizations belonging to the Catholic militancy, along with radical right parties and groups. Particularly, the movement gained increasing visibility in the public sphere with the establishment of the *La Manif Pour Tous Italy* (LMPTI) in 2013, imitating the existing French homonym, the organization of the Family Day³ of June 2015, and the foundation of the group *Committee Defend Our Sons* (CDNF). During these years, the movement was structured and organized, and it emerged in the public debate as a reality that was clearly recognized, and to some extent legitimized, by its political and institutional interlocutors and opponents. The CDNF and the LMPTI have to be considered as the main collective

²Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Doctrinal Note to Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, Rome, Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 24 November 2002.

³The first Family Day, in 2007, was organized in opposition to the DICO law.

actor through which the movement's demands are channeled and expressed, representing a heterogeneous set of identities, which however are lumped together in a radical discourse that guarantees the unity of purpose. With the Family Day event in June 2015, the anti-gender movement began a new sequence of actions that is no longer centered on mobilization and recruitment, but on collective and protest actions in the political space.

Following the approval of the Cirinnà bill on civil unions,⁴ the referendum on the Renzi-Boschi constitutional reform of 2016 creates a political opportunity. The mobilization is proactively supported in the context of the electoral campaign that has witnessed the opposition of parliamentarian and extra-parliamentarian pro-reform and anti-reform committees at both national and local levels. On the occasion of the Family Day of 2016, the challenge is directly launched to Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, threatening to campaign against the constitutional referendum.

Furthermore, the II CDNF Convention in May 2016 is precisely centered on this aspect. Indeed, it announces the establishment of a new Committee named *Families against the referendum*, which introduces a political and new discursive platform. The slogan of the Convention is in fact 'We do not scrap the Constitution'. The attempt is to combine a double rejection based on the same subject: the constitutional reform promoted by Renzi and the approval of the law on civil unions would constitute a scrapping of the Constitution, causing the disintegration of the intermediate bodies of society – above all the family.

During the various phases of mobilization, we also witnessed the temporary internal polarization of some political parties regarding the possibility of accepting the requests made by the anti-gender movement. In fact, while some members of the parliament and deputies have openly sided with the familialist front and were ready not only to vote against the approval of the laws but also to actively support the arguments of the movement in parliament and take part in national public initiatives, others, despite the same convictions, came to terms with the party line and the coalition logic.⁵ These dynamics have been grasped and interpreted by the board of the CDNF itself, which has clearly identified a weak point in its political pressure strategy. As reiterated by its leader, Massimo Gandolfini:

⁴Senate Act n. 14 XVII Legislature. The bill passed with 372 votes in favor, 51 against, and 99 abstentions.

⁵Among these are some members of the Democratic Party who, while supporting the no-gender cause, were repeatedly held up by the movement itself for the inability to represent these values and positions in parliament.

At the national level, we are trying to put pressure on the party leaders in order to change some things. By saying that you see that our people do not feel represented, we do not have a certain and sure point of reference. We have individual people in almost every party, including the 5 Star Movement. But they are terrified of emerging because the party line is different ...⁶

On the one hand, the desire of some fringes of the movement to become a party emerges in the light of the unsatisfactory representation and lack of impact of movement's goals in political parties' agendas. The weak representation and the betrayed promises have led to a repositioning of part of the anti-gender movement, represented by the *People of the Family*, in competition with other parties. On the other hand, the CDNF and LMPTI leadership would like to encourage a sustained action of lobbying according to the pattern of the Catholic diaspora, maintaining an egalitarian relationship with other parties. The CDNF itself believes that the values shared by both sides are not sufficient to guarantee an ideological basis for carrying out a coalition strategy:

The idea of creating a single political party like the Christian Democracy today is unfeasible since there are enormously different sensitivities. [...] Currently, the strategy is to turn to all the parties that want to listen, and we all said the same thing to them. [...] Therefore, we must carry out this cultural, educational, and informational lobbying addressed to grassroots activists and to political institutions.⁷

We can affirm, therefore, that the creation of the *People of the Family* represents a strategic action undertaken by a faction of the movement in order to advance the anti-gender cause in the political realm. Part of the movement, led by Mario Adinolfi, director of the ultra-Catholic *La Croce* newspaper, and by the president of the association *Lawyers for Life*, Gianfranco Amato, decided to actively pursue the political path during the administrative elections of June 2016 and 2017. As reported by the members of the CDNF, we are witnessing a 'forging ahead' by a fringe of the movement, and the consequent foundation of the autonomous political subject inspired by the Family Day. Some critical voices see the origin of this acceleration in the personal interests of the two leaders of the movement-party: Adinolfi and Amato. The approval of the draft bill on civil unions sanctions the partial failure of the anti-gender movement – or at least the failure of a significant part of the intense campaign carried out against homosexual unions. Since then,

⁶Massimo Gandolfini, public lecture, 22 January 2017.

⁷Massimo Gandolfini, public lecture, 22 January 2017.

the movement is divided. Two different political options arose: an ‘innovative’ one with its own autonomous political project, and a pre-political and cultural one. However, as we shall see, the two entities, though diversified in terms of strategies, still maintain similar formats, contributing to create a hybrid political space for Catholic collective action.

We are therefore witnessing a conflict regarding forms and strategies of occupation of the political space. Despite the collective identities and the activist base from which the factions draw are overlapping⁸ – in what the different Catholic realities call a split between ‘activism and witnessing’⁹ – the most important characteristic concerns the different conception of relations that both factions maintain with respect to political parties and to institutional politics. The *People of the Family*, erected as a bulwark of Catholic political activism, is critically positioned against majority parties, in a role similar to that of ‘anti-party’ (Kriesi 2015). In this sense, the position of the *People of the Family* in relation to other parties reflects the above, that is, a conflictual interaction in which the surrounding political actors take on the role of opponents and not of allies. Conversely, some fringes of the movement wanted political parties to respond directly to their requests, taking responsibility for representing them within decision-making processes, in particular by means of pressure exerted on some political exponents: ‘the people of life and of the family thank and appreciate those who have decided to be their honest spokesperson, without failing to keep under strict control who has been nominated as the guarantor of their requests’.¹⁰

We have seen how, in the face of the political threat posed by the above-mentioned bills, during the months following the parliamentary debate, from September 2015 to June 2016, the anti-gender movement increased the episodes of protest and the intensity of the campaign. Furthermore, before the vote on the Cirinnà and Fedeli bills took place, the role of mediators and institutional *brokers* carried out by several MPs in support of the movement activated a feeling of belonging to the cause and of alignment around the anti-gender identity. In this context, inter-organizational links between the movement and the parties – in particular through the creation of the ‘Parliamentary Committee for the Family’ involving MPs from the wide political spectrum – have been fostered in

⁸In this regard, the ecclesial movement Neocatechumenal Way represents one of the most propulsive forces of the anti-gender movement, as well as the most important resource of activists and Catholic militants.

⁹We refer to the position preached by Julian Carron during the Rimini Meeting 2016 of *Comunione e Liberazione*, where he took distance from the Family Day initiative.

¹⁰Massimo Gandolfini, public lecture, 22 January 2017.

order to increase both political representation and pressure in their respective parties.

(Re)founding Catholic political action: ideological matrices and strategic dilemmas

The anti-gender cause therefore constitutes a political lever for the re-establishment of Catholic political and collective action. More precisely, despite the presence of strategic differences, the simultaneous occupation of party and electoral space along with movement and protest space allowed the interaction between conservative political parties – which continue to rely on Catholic activist realities to expand their electoral base – and anti-gender groups. Anti-gender groups seized the opportunity to negotiate the priorities in the agenda of political parties and to influence the ideological line around issues which were traditionally related to the Catholic political and social doctrine (Heaney 2010). In this case, the non-inclusion of requests, values, and interests in the party agendas, particularly in the ones of large parties of the center-right and center-left fueled a climate of political distrust. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, the birth and rise of these hybrid political actors respond to a logic of ‘crisis of representation’:

the new categories are up and down, people against the caste, and the anthropological values – not left and right. [...] Catholics cannot have relationships with everyone, we cannot go to Mass and then vote for parties that have a program which goes against our values.¹¹

In this sense, it has been observed that, despite the transformation of the organizational structure towards a party format, the movement-party has maintained strong ideological characteristics (Tilly and Tarrow 2015), so that the link to a movement identity and to a practice of protest is actively supported in response to a weak political representation. In this regard, it is important to add that Bergoglio has publicly sided against the creation of a Catholic party. The role of the Church hierarchy, and in particular the establishment of the pontificate of Bergoglio, surely reflects the exacerbation of the intra-Catholic conflict between moderate conservatives and radicals in recent years, in particular regarding the mediation role played by the movements between the hierarchies and the Catholic world. The nature of a political movement project was also reaffirmed in response to the position of Bergoglio:

¹¹Fabio Torriero, National Assembly of the *People of the Family*, 28 January 2017.

Pope Francis is right [...], when he says that a party of only Catholics does not make sense and it is true. It would be reduced to hard-core members incapable of being inclusive, that is, intended to insignificant politics. [...] No, the PdF is a party that is inspired by the social principles of the doctrine of the Church, but it is also open to all those who can recognize those principles as being true. Our strategy is to be a recognizable and recognized autonomous political presence. [...] The vision of the family as a *prism* through which it is possible to look at all social and political problems of John Paul II.¹²

Hence, the creation of a movement-party that functions as the political arm of the movement (Maguire 1995; Goldstone 2004; McAdam and Tarrow 2010) brought about a series of dilemmas. As we have seen, in some cases, the creation of a party can be interpreted as an element of innovation in the face of the failure of previous mobilization strategies (Cowell-Mayers 2014). In this regard, in line with the statements made by its leaders, the birth of the *People of the Family* clearly responds to this logic:

we decided to abandon the scheme of the so-called Catholic diaspora [...], we will be inside the yeast that will change the policy. [...] We are not here to beg for two or three places in any political list. We decided to play on our own to revolutionize this politics.¹³

However, we observe the will of both CDFN and PdF to maintain, and above all to show, a certain unity of purpose in spite of the different approaches and initial personalisms. In this sense, the institution of the Catholic matrix of non-negotiable principles as the denominator for the creation of a political space where to frame a unitary political and ethical consciousness has led, albeit intermittently, to a progressive shift of the discourse from ‘anti-gender’ to ‘anti-laity’ or ‘anti-secularists’.

All equals, all liberals, and secularists on ethical and anthropological issues, and on non-negotiable values. That is the secular front. If we manage to impose this scheme – secular front versus non-secular front – our path lies open. Now, the era of zero-cost Catholics comes to an end. The anti-secularist front is open to believers, non-believers and other denominations.¹⁴

Finally, a major dilemma was faced concerning the negotiating power within the party system, essential for the movement-party to establish its position relative to other parties, namely the extent to which the movement-party is marginalized or included, recognized and legitimized in

¹²Gianfranco Amato, National Assembly of the *People of the Family*.

¹³Gianfranco Amato, National Assembly of the *People of the Family*.

¹⁴Fabio Torriero, National Assembly of the *People of the Family*, 28 January 2017.

front of other political and institutional actors. Such negotiating power can be strengthened in the context of alliances and coalitional logics, a position that has been advocated and practiced by the CDNF through the scheme of the Catholic diaspora and, as we have seen, strongly criticized by the PdF, which precisely sees in the coalitional logics the failure of previous electoral strategies:

We need a new political pact for life and the family: this is the gasoline to restart Italy. Therefore, there is a need for a large alliance between parties that identify with this pact, in order for it to become a 'government contract', including in their electoral lists candidates that represent and support those values. With 6% or 15% we do nothing. But with 30% you can do a lot. Once more there is strength in numbers.¹⁵

Asking a 30% party to be clear about the values means not understanding anything about politics: the more the alliance is vast, the more it is ambiguous about values, to get many votes as possible, it is even obvious.¹⁶

In his new hybrid dress as a movement-party, certain to increase its negotiating power without supporting candidates of other parties, the *People of the Family* entered fully in the electoral arena with a list of candidates for the local elections of June 2016 and 2017. However, it failed to reach an electoral success that enables it to gain legitimacy and sufficient political force within the party system.

In contrast, both CDNF and LMPTI openly opposed the strategy of a monothematic party focused on the family, which might limit the scope of Catholic influence, and choose to maintain an organizational form in the movement arena, the Committee, following the Catholic tradition of witnessing and cultural awareness. The desire to remain a movement of opinion finds its strength in the ability to influence all political groups, the so-called scheme of Cardinal Ruini, who – as president of the CEI – proposed to intervene and influence the Italian partisan agenda. From a strictly cultural point of view, the practice of witness as 'good Christians' has long been supported by different ecclesial movements, as reported by the leader of Communion and Liberation don Julian Carron. Although it constitutes one of the preferred strategies by which the Committee intends to advance the anti-gender cause, in particular through conferences and public meetings, the role as an interest group and therefore as a lobby

¹⁵Massimo Gandolfini, 'Five million good reasons', *The Times*, 26 June 2017, <http://www.tempi.it/cinque-milioni-di-buone-ragioni#.WXCrlNPYgWo>.

¹⁶Mario Adinolfi, 'Quick response to Massimo Gandolfini', Facebook official page of the newspaper *La Croce*, 26 June 2017.

that tries to influence the various political forces in parliament constitutes the pivotal political strategy of the movement. In this sense, and contrary to the *People of the Family*, the Committee does not arise in opposition to major parties, but as an ally and *broker* between civil society and the electoral and party arena, in search of a unity of action among the various political forces. Moreover, while institutional politics is dictated by the rhythms of elections and votes, the activities of social movements have the advantage of being able to develop outside the political arena over a more extensive and less intermittent period of time. The ability to simultaneously remain active and visible even outside election cycles, especially in the cultural context, has been identified by the CDNf leaders as one of the cornerstones of their political battle. At the same time, while social movements have the opportunity to focus on specific and restricted issues, or even become monothematic, this kind of focus is often difficult to translate into the electoral realm – a criticism that has been raised by the members of the Committee against the idea of a Catholic party.

Conclusion: a hybrid political space of Catholic action

The case study of the anti-gender movement and its evolution in Italy allows to highlight, on the one hand, the conditions of occupation of a renewed and hybrid Catholic political space through the reactivation of a political and activist identity based on the ‘non-negotiable values’ of the anti-gender cause and, on the other hand, the strategies and dilemmas that underlie the collective action. This analysis allows to (re)think the (dis)continuity of Catholic representation in the Italian public debate and political space. However, the creation of a Catholic hybrid political space must not be interpreted as a coming back of Catholics into politics – as they never left, but rather as a re-composition of Catholic political projects founded on the hybrid forms of collective presence and intersecting strategies.

In this sense, we tried to stress how the anti-gender cause – understood as the result of a mobilization discourse that would allow the creation of a community and of a movement identity – represented a political opportunity to ‘solve’ the problem posed by the Catholic political diaspora, raising tensions and criticisms with respect to the modes of action within the arenas of political parties and social movements. On the charge not only of being unable to represent the values defended by the people of the Family Day in parliament, but also of openly betraying

them, the *People of the Family* was born as an expression of the need to create an autonomous political actor in direct competition with existing parties.

The hypothesis that we have advanced encourages two further reflections. The first one concerns the specificity of the anti-gender movement – in particular, of this hybrid political space of Catholic action – and its relationship with other public arenas and actors. Though many of the movement actors and politicians are certainly not newcomers, the novelty regards the radial configuration of the space, where at the center of the repertoire of action lays the ideology of the non-negotiable principles, and where different projects that – sometimes with significant differences and in different arenas of intervention – translate such ideology into different discourses and actions. One of the fundamental features of this post-secular Catholic political space is precisely the hybrid character of the public space.

The second one relates to the forms of collective action in the context of a ‘crisis’ of the traditional political party function or, more generally, political representation. In fact, in such a context the emergence of the anti-gender movement develops according to a principle of interaction between different public arenas, producing within the realm of mobilization a division of labor and strategic dilemmas that, far from merely representing internal fractures, constitute the mode that allows the Catholicism to exist politically.

Finally, we suggest that future research should reflect on the extent that Catholic political action and strategies, confronted to different and similar dilemmas, can be compared across different European societies with Catholic heritages.

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Notes on contributors

Anna Lavizzari is a research fellow at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Department of Political and Social Sciences, in Florence, where she is part of the COSMOS (Centre on Social Movement Studies) research team. She holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Kent (2017, with a thesis on contentious politics between the LGBTQ movement and the Catholic countermovement in Italy). She is currently part of the Italian team within the H2020 European project ‘EURYKA – Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing

Inequalities'. Previously, she conducted different research projects on youth and inter-sectional identities, and gender issues across Europe.

Massimo Prearo is a research fellow at the University of Verona, Department of Humanities. He gained a PhD in Political Studies at the EHESS (School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences) in Paris. He is the author of different monographs, among which *Le moment politique de l'homosexualité. Mouvements, identités et communautés en France* (PUL, Lyon, 2014) and *La fabbrica dell'orgoglio. Una genealogia dei movimenti LGBT* (ETS, Pisa, 2015). He is also the editor of the volume *Politiche dell'orgoglio. Sessualità, soggettività e movimenti sociali* (ETS, Pisa, 2015). The latest publication is *La croisade 'anti-genre'. Du Vatican aux manifs pour tous* (Textuel, Paris, 2017) co-authored by Sara Garbagnoli.

ORCID

Anna Lavizzari  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7437-4142>

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