



The Role of the Family in the Italian Queer Liberation Movement Through the Lens of Marx on the Functions of Religion and Family in Society

Author: Noel Ullom, Barnard College Political Science Department
Mentor: Dr. Andrew Anastasi, Barnard College Sociology Department

Introduction

Research Question: In what ways does the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Italian politics challenge the legal recognition of same-sex couples, and what do Marx's critiques of religion and the family reveal about the implications of this influence?

- Despite the laws of most European Parliament's members and the countries that surround Italy, Italy has historically lagged behind in terms of rights for queer individuals and families.
- Same-sex couples in Italy do not have the right to legally recognized marriage, while also facing various legal obstacles in having children and growing their families (especially in regards to surrogacy, which is illegal in the country).
- The first landmark public demonstration of the queer liberation movement in Italy took place at the International Sexological Conference in Sanremo in 1972. Since then, it has evolved to include influential organizations such as FUORI! (the first openly gay political organization in Italy), Arcigay (the largest and most influential queer organization in Italy), and Rainbow Families (an organization supporting queer parents and aspiring parents).
- The efforts of these groups, coupled with the judicial courts' extended political influence due to gaps in EU family law, have led to notable legal victories for the LGBTQ+ community in areas such as residency, cohabitation, and civil union laws.
- However, the rise of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her party, Fratelli d'Italia, introduces a threat to the stability of these legal advancements. Through multiple legal acts, her party has fought on behalf of the conservative and Roman Catholic Church's values of the "natural family" and "primacy of blood." One of the most significant of these acts was Meloni's attempt to criminalize surrogacy abroad.

Goals & Objectives of the Work

- This research investigates the relationship between Italian law, the Roman Catholic Church, and the rights of same-sex couples, conducting the analysis through a Marxist lens.
- It examines the historical and ongoing influence of the Church in Italian politics, particularly regarding moral and social issues like LGBTQ+ rights, marriage, and family structures.
- It draws from Karl Marx's "On the Jewish Question" and *The Communist Manifesto* in order to critique Church's interference in political issues.

Methods

- This research utilizes historical, legal, and theoretical analysis.
- I examine key legal decisions, such as Italy's Cirinnà law and the influence of European Union law, using case studies of landmark court rulings that advanced or restricted LGBTQ+ rights.
- I engage with theoretical texts by Marx, specifically his critiques of religion and family structures.
- I use secondary sources, including scholarly works on Italian family law, the queer liberation movement, and the role of the Catholic Church to place these into context.

Discussion

Relationship Between the Church and Policymaking Regarding the Queer Community in Italy

- Despite the disproportionality between its political power and its popular support, the lack of a strong national identity and the fragmented politics in Italy enables the Roman Catholic Church to exert its extensive influence in both the political and cultural spheres.
- The Church asserts a deeply conservative stance on these issues, such as opposing the Italian law legalizing divorce in 1970, opposing the legalization of abortion in 1978, and opposing the law granting the right to civil unions to same-sex couples in 2016 among others.
- However, the Church's direct power in Italian politics and policymaking has weakened overtime due to the domestic influence of European Union law. For example, in February 2012, a landmark case decided by the First Instance Court in Reggio Emilia recognised the right for a same-sex spouse to reunify and reside in Italy. In doing so, the Court recognized his status as a "family member," serving as a significant example of domestic courts prioritizing EU law over Italian law.
- The lack of textual clarity and necessity to interpret the relationship between EU and domestic law left a gap for Italian courts to fill with certain examples and sources they chose to cite in their decision. The judicial branch of Italy's government has therefore gained greater power in terms of politics and legislation.

Marx on the Relationship Between Religion and Politics

- In his famous work titled "On the Jewish Question" published in 1843, Marx asserts that political and human emancipation are two separate concepts, one existing in the political sphere and the other in civil society, respectively.
- Furthermore, Marx asserts that the political rights granted to an individual as a citizen can and ought to be separated from their identity as a religious individual.
- In examining the current struggle for the rights of same-sex couples in Italy through this lens, Marx offers a strong critique of the Church's influence in Italian politics. As the Church exerts its political and cultural influence and supports opposition against further rights for Italian same-sex couples, the Church presents an explicit example of a religious institution asserting ideological and traditional values in the political sphere that in truth benefit its broader political interests, such as the prioritization of Catholic values in the social sphere.

Challenges for Same-Sex Families in the Face of Italian Law

- The law that regulates assisted reproduction in Italy does not grant access to ART (assisted reproductive technology) to same-sex couples. Instead, law 40/2004 only grants this access to married couples and those in long-term heterosexual relationships.
- Many same-sex couples are forced to consult with medical services abroad. These travels, commonly to Spain, Belgium, or Denmark depending on the type of service they require, place various burdensome costs upon the couple. To make matters even more complicated, Italian couples' greater need for services abroad also cause certain clinics to raise their prices specifically for Italian patients.
- Alongside cost-related concerns, same-sex families must also negotiate the relationship between their child and the parent who either donated or gave birth but is not a partner in the couple. Some parents decide to allow their child to share a sentimental relationship with the donor.

Marx and Engels on the Traditional Family Structure as an Oppressive Hierarchy

- In *The Communist Manifesto* published in 1848, Marx and Friedrich Engels criticize how the family represents a microcosm of corporate capitalism and that the family will "vanish" once power is redistributed.
- Marx and Engels' arguments regarding the family in this work have become outdated in various ways, but also maintain one truth that carries into Italy today: families, especially same-sex parents, continue to face various challenges that threaten their freedom to grow and exist under the capitalist market. As mentioned above, this oppression does not stem from within the family as would in the familial structure Marx and Engels describe, but instead frequently relates to these parents' ability to first give birth to their children and the medical services they seek.
- While the family has not "vanished," queer families are pushing the boundaries of what defines a family as they prioritize sentimental over biological connection.

Conclusions & Next Steps

- The Catholic Church's enduring influence on Italian politics continues to present significant barriers to same-sex marriage and family rights, reinforcing patriarchal family structures. While significant legal victories have been achieved, such as civil unions and cohabitation rights, the movement remains fragile, especially under the leadership of conservative politicians like Giorgia Meloni.
- For my LiA project, I intend to work with an LGBTQ+ advocacy in Italy to support the fight for secure rights for same-sex couples.

References (for a full bibliography, please email enu2105@barnard.edu)

- Anaya, Lauren A. "Policymaking in the Italian Courts: The 'Affermazione Civile' Project and the Struggle over Recognition of Rights for Same-sex Couples in Italy." *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, (2014). Accessed June 13, 2024.
- Bernini, Lorenzo. 2024. *The Sexual/Political: Freud with Marx, Fanon, Foucault*. Translated by Matthew Zundel. Routledge.
- Franchi, Marina, and Giulia Selmi. "Becoming Lesbian Mothers in Contemporary Italy: The Challenge of Social and Legal Constraints." *Verlag Barbara Budrich*, (2020). Accessed June 13, 2024.

Acknowledgments

- Thank you to Dr. Andrew Anastasi for his insightful guidance, and to my friends and family for their support.
- Special thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation for its generous support of Barnard students.