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# "Leave the Kids Alone"

## A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Glorification of Reproductive Futurism in Anti-gender and Pro-family Movements in Italy

**ABSTRACT**

In this paper we engage in a critical exploration of the strategic use of weaponised and glorified media representations of children and (re)production in anti-gender and pro-family movements. We argue that this strategy aims to portray the heteronormative family as the "natural" aim, the normal (normative) condition of living, and the only acceptable social engagement in society. We analyse these semantic representations through three theoretical lenses: anti-social queer theory, children's rights theory, and intersectional feminism. These inform and share the critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013) of media documentation of two recent events in Italy: the pro-family conference "The Wind of Change: Europe and the Global Pro-Family Movement", which took place in Verona in March 2019; and the reactionary far-right and ultra-Catholic campaigns in response to the updated guidelines for the application of the Abortion Law 194, in regard to the administration of the abortion pill (RU486) in August 2020. We review three recurrent concepts in the rhetoric of the anti-gender and pro-family movements discussed in the analysed media articles: the Child; reproductive futurism; and the glorification of hetero-normative modes of socialisation, discussed here as "positive sociality". In exploring the ideological discourses presented in relation to these concepts, we adopt Bersani's (1995) critique of heteronormative practices as a starting point. Findings highlight the modality in which anti-gender and pro-family movements utilise these three ideological concepts as weapons to define non-normative sociality as a threat to the traditional (and reproductive) family as well as the (white) nation.

**Keywords:** pro-family, reproduction, abortive rights, children's rights, feminism

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**DISCUSSIONS ABOUT REPRODUCTION** have always taken place between the inside and outside of the home, the family, and the State, the public and the private. This article stems from our embodied positionalities, as white, cis-women[1] in their mid-thirties-forties, raised in predominantly middle-class and Italian Catholic contexts, with direct experiences of the ubiquitous social pressure to reproduce within such a heteronormative framework (Vignoli & Salvini 2014). The social pressure to build a traditional heterosexual family in the private sphere is one of the devices in which certain social norms and politics are grounded, and through which acceptable social meaning and being is established. Mindful of the social pressure to reproduce, experienced by ourselves and many of our peers, within and beyond the Italian context, we decided to turn our gaze to the public structures that develop and maintain the hetero, nuclear family as a core social artifice, as the only politically and culturally acceptable possibility of a future. In this paper we conduct this exploration through a critical analysis of media representations of children and (re)production, focusing on the ideological discourses utilised by anti-gender and pro-family movements in relation to specific events. The critical discourse analysis (Mullet 2018) focuses on selected media documentation of two events in Italy: "The Wind of Change: Europe and the Global Pro-Family Movement" conference which took place in Verona in March 2019; and the reactionary far-right and ultra-Catholic campaigns in response to the updated guidelines for the administration of the abortion pill (RU486), August 2020. Through the analysis, we identify three ideological concepts weaponised in and by anti-gender and pro-family movements: the Child, reproductive futurism, and "positive" sociality.

In the discussion we develop grounds for the deconstruction of the glorification of reproductive futurism. In its weaponised use, "the Child", i.e., the promise of Future and social contribution (Edelman 2004), is presented as against "Subjects", the female bodies that engage in sexual activities without reproductive intentions, for the sole purpose of egoistic pleasure. In this context the use of "Subjects" reflects the queer theory critique of the concept of "self" as a "discursive prod-

uct of modernity" (Boyd 2008, 180). In our analysis, we explore how Subject-woman is positioned against the demand for reproduction and futurism. In the last section, we then juxtapose the glorification of heteronormative practices of re-production, in the paper labelled as positive sociality, against Bersani's (1995) celebration of anti-sociality. The analysis of these three concepts, the Child, reproductive futurism, and positive sociality, unveils their use as ideological weapons to neutralise all threats to the traditional (reproductive) family, and ultimately the (white) nation.

## A Wind of Fear in Europe: A brief Introduction to the Anti-gender, Pro-family Movements and Their Semantic Spheres

The expression "gender ideology" was used for the first time in the beginning of the 2000s by the Pontifical Council in texts concerning the family (Butler 2019), to delegitimize gender studies research (Garbagnoli 2014). "Gender ideology" quickly became a staple at protests against legal reforms concerning same-sex marriage and recognition of same-sex parents, and laws to combat homo-transphobic violence. As the protesters defined themselves as "anti-gender" and made this term a central aspect of their protests, they "contributed to the metamorphosis of a label with no referent into a category of political mobilization producing political effects" (ibid 2014, 251).

As the discussion in media became increasingly polarised, the use of the phrases "gender ideology", "gender theory" and "gender philosophy" also increased, the concept "ideology" often being used interchangeably with terms such as "theory" and "philosophy." It is important to note that these terms were not chosen randomly. Starting in the mid-1990s, the Vatican began a systematic delegitimization of gender studies (Butler 2019). A central point of this process can be identified in the publication of the letter "New Catholic Lexicon and Dignity," published by the Vatican in 2003. The lexicon is presented as an encyclopaedic dictionary, composed of more than ninety items concerning gender, sexuality and bioethics. The Vatican's attack is directed against all those subjectivities that do not perfectly embody the heterosexual norm, whether this

involves being homosexual, trans, or choosing not to become a mother or thinking of motherhood in terms other than that of the nuclear or traditional family. Kovats and Põim (2007) argue that the weaponised use of language is the most effective strategy of anti-gender movements. The authors discuss the use of the label "gender ideology" as a "symbolic glue" to bind together women's rights, reproductive rights and LGBTIQ+ rights, creating a common enemy – a threat to society. It is through this same "symbolic glue" that anti-gender and pro-family agendas are brought together in defending and preserving society.

The use of the term "ideology" is considered central in the positioning of anti-gender and pro-family movements as protectors and guardians of society. Sosa (2021) identifies an important discursive shift in the Vatican's "Note on the use of the concept of gender," where the Vatican made clear the connections between gender ideology and legal repercussions for "ordinary" citizens. The semantic war on gender shifted from a matter of religious belief to one of rights and democracy. Changes in the understanding of gender are in the note portrayed as an attack on the rights of both women and men due to the denial of biological differentiation; as an attack on parental rights, due to the denial of parents' rights to their own values and to decide over their children; and an attack on future society, due to the denial of society's continuation through natural reproduction (Miškovska Kajevska 2018; Coman et al. 2021). In this rights-based "artificially induced cultural and ideological conflict" (Żuk & Żuk 2020) the preservation of democracy is constructed as the central task of the anti-gender campaigns.

This brief genealogy of the anti-gender movements, and the semantic sphere in which they operate, is, we believe, useful to the development of a historically grounded analysis of the ideological discourses, both political and linguistic, adopted by anti-gender and pro-family movements.

## Methodology

We adopted critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2013) as the method of research, as we wanted to investigate the role and use of linguistic categories, "ideologies", in the formation of social mean-

ing-making. Through CDA we seek to explain and evaluate realities, as presented in the media documents, and how they connect to values and beliefs. Through this approach, we are engaged in uncovering and understanding the discourses (Foucault 1977; Purcell et al. 2014) adopted in the media documentation of the two events in analysis.

CDA allows for transdisciplinary action, enabling the juxtaposition of the three theoretical frames adopted as our paradigm. Within CDA we also adopted a historical approach (Wodak & Reisigl 2012), recognising the role of temporal situations and institutions in the formation of social structures ultimately informing the formulation of discourses. Within this approach, discourses are examined in relation to historical linguistic categories and social practices and understood as both constituted within and exercising influence on social dynamics and environments. Through this methodological framework we engaged in the exploration of the correlations between texts and social practices (Wodak 1997). In this process, texts hold and convey the meaning(s) of socially constituted identities, of representations and idealisations of subjects within the social requirements, and of dynamics of production and power.

The analytical process was informed by two iterations of data collection, focusing on news-media reports on two major events concerning the anti-gender and pro-family movements in Italy. Firstly, we searched for a mix of private and state funded newspaper and news media articles published in English or Italian, for a British or Italian audience. We specifically selected articles only intended for public fruition and information. We did not include any personal blog, social media, or organisation reports. We selected media publications from the UK and Italy as we wanted the geographical scope of the publications to reflect our socio-geographical contexts. We then sampled through the period of publication. In the case of the World Congress of Families, given the large number of media articles published on the event, we restricted our selection to articles published during March and April 2019 (i.e., around the event) reporting directly on the event. For the change in legislation on the administration of the pharmacological abortifacient RU846, we searched for articles published during the five months of core discussion

around the event (June–October 2020). This process led to the selection of twenty-two media articles on the World Congress of Families and thirteen articles on RU846.

The analysis was initiated through individual processes of coding. The data sets obtained are composed of extracts from the news media articles analysed. Once we had constructed the two data sets of text, we worked together through the analytical process of identifying the dimensions of discursive and social practice. We identified three nodal discourses (Fairclough 2013), or themes, reproducing the ideological pillars of anti-gender and pro-family movements: "child", "reproductive futurism" and "positive sociality."

## Theoretical Paradigms

Our investigation is grounded in the juxtaposition of three theoretical lenses: children's rights, intersectional feminism, and anti-social queer theory.

The children's rights lens offers theoretical grounds to unpack contemporary media representations of childhood, as category, that are circumscribed to the Child as a future-oriented investment that exists outside socio-political issues (Mayall 2002). This framework questions the political imageries of "childhood as innocence" as informed by racially discriminatory (Bernstein 2011) and heteronormative hegemonies (Bond Stockton 2009). The children's rights lens also offers grounds to challenge functionalist conceptualisations of children as social investments for labour, productivity and replication (Archard 1993). Children's rights literature uncovers and challenges the notion that the children worth protecting (and producing) are white (Bernstein 2011), able-bodied, developmentally compliant and well-behaved (Burman 2008), set for a future as productive citizens (Leonard 2016), as opposed to stateless individuals (Bhabha 2009).

The second lens adopted, intersectional feminist theory, grounds the critique of the hetero-nuclear-white family as the core of social existence. The feminist theories that inform our thinking belong to a "radical" vision that seeks to move beyond the limitations imposed by white

middle-class feminism (Hester 2018) and to overturn social paradigms (Halberstam 2008). This feminist lens rejects the absolutism of gender and the binaries derived from biological reductionism and patriarchy. We appropriate two feminist principles that challenge heteronormative meaning-making in the context of reproduction: Firstly, the analysis of the prescribed role and responsibilities of the mother/parent, alongside the refusal of traditionalist formulations of family (hooks 2000; Haraway 2016). Secondly, the rejection of the female body as merely a tool for reproduction, thereby redefining female beings beyond the procreative cycles (Hester 2018).

The third and last theoretical lens we adopt is anti-social queer theories. Stretching the concepts developed in Xenofeminism (Hester 2018), anti-social queer theory proposes a new sense of worth for individuals, one that evades the requirements to obey "positive sociality", defined as "the forward looking, reproductive and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects" (Halberstam 2008, 142).

Through this lens, freed from the necessity of behaving as good citizens (Bersani 1995) in order to be recognised as worthy individuals, social subjects have new possibilities for alternative modes of socialisation – ones that might challenge the tasks assigned by political agendas aimed at the preservation of white male dominated hierarchies. The anti-social theory moves further with the exploration of a feminist reading that enters a realm of techno-realism freed from the necessity of future (Edelman 2004). This realm is a non-binary realm, in which the concepts of nature and culture are not so clearly distinguished, and the subject does not necessarily have to submit to their biological destiny. In this realm the future is not delineated in a positivist way but is instead a temporal space that one can decide to abdicate from

## The Wind of Change

In September 2018, on the fortieth anniversary of the legalisation of medical abortion in Italy, Verona's local council voted to promote public initiatives to prevent abortions and support maternity. The document presented in support to this vote cites six million aborted children as one

of the causes behind decreasing birth rates (Comune di Verona 2018). The motion makes direct reference to the danger of RU-486 promoting a "throw-away" culture. When the motion was officially approved, October 4, it was revealed that the city of Verona was to host the thirteenth edition of the World Congress of Families, in association with the local organisations Pro Vita Onlus, Committee Defend Our Children, and Generation Family. This conference is the first event discussed in our analysis of media articles.

The announcement did not come as a surprise, given the political and ideological history of the city of Verona. The city is home to the headquarters of Italy's main far-right political groups, Casa Pound and Forza Nuova. In 1995, a few years before the establishment of the World Congress of Families, the city council of Verona approved a motion in response to the European Council (1994) report on the equal rights for homosexuals and lesbians in the European Council (A3-0028/94). The motion declared that the LGBTIQ+ community was not welcome in Verona, on the grounds that "homosexuality contradicts natural laws" (366–1995). In 2014, the city council of Verona passed another motion (426–2014) on policing the teaching of LGBTIQ+ matters in schools, echoing the infamous Section 28, which outlawed "the promotion of homosexuality" in British schools between 1988 and 2003.

The World Congress of Families was conceptualised and founded in 1997, during a meeting between three white male academics – an American and two Russians – with the aim of connecting organisations and individuals with "pro-family" ideals. The group is grounded on two principles: addressing the international decrease in birth rates (allegedly caused by the rise of LGBTIQ+ and women's rights) (HRCF 2014); and reviving the focus (Howard 2000) on Article 16 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which positions the family as the "natural and fundamental group unit of society." In a recent radio talk, Allan C. Carlson (2021), one of the founders of the World Congress of Families, described the organisation as an international movement aimed at defending the natural family. In this context, "natural family" is to be understood in biblical terms, which Carlson defines as

> "the organised effort to promote, encourage and defend the concept of the national family, a man and a woman bound in a one flesh marital union for the purpose of procreation, mutual love and support and the building of a strong home, a strong home economy" (Carlson 2021).

We will further unpack this conflation of family and nation and its implications in shaping beliefs and attitudes (Wakefield 2016) in the analysis. At the heart of the family-nation movement is the fight against the "decadent liberalism of the sexual revolution" (ibid 2021), as well as an attempt to return to a society, understood as a nation to be created on or with the traditional family where children and young people are "acculturated" to "standards of acceptable behaviours" (Howard 2000). This creates a link between the traditional family and the construction of the nation, whose future is possible thanks to this type of family and which at the same time claims a past and roots linked to this type of family.

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2014) published a report on this highly organised international political organisation, accounting for its rich finances, its numerous affiliations with religious and political groups, and its influence on political and legislative matters at international level.

### Commandment RU846: "Woman, You Shall Suffer"

Women may – where it is available – choose to have a pharmacological abortion, since such abortions are considered less invasive and more "private" than surgical abortions (Alam et al. 2020). In Italy, since processes within the national health system are devolved to regional governments, rather than centralised nationally (Pellegrino 2005), the availability and accessibility of medical abortion has however been hindered at the procedural level. Up until 2020, the pill could be prescribed only up to the forty-ninth day of gestation and only within the context of a three-day hospital stay, with the exception of eight regions where outpatient use was experimented with.

As reported by the ministry of health (Ministero della Salute 2018) regarding the implementation of Law 194 (the law that legalized abortion in Italy), these restrictions do not allow for a real freedom of choice

between the two types of intervention. According to the ministry's data, pharmacological abortions make up only 17.8 percent of the total number of IVGs (Italian for "voluntary interruption of pregnancy"), a percentage that contrasts with that of other European countries, such as England and Sweden, where pharmacological IVG represent, respectively, 60 and 90 percent of the total number of IVGs (Ministero della Salute 2018). The length of the required hospitalisation (three days) poses an enormous practical limitation to access to pharmacological IVG. As discussed in numerous campaigns during the core months of the global Covid-19 pandemic (Scarano 2020), the outpatient services provided for pharmacological IVG broaden access to all those who cannot afford to take more than one day off work, or who have other commitments or deadlines related to family, work, or other aspects of life.

Outpatient administration was recommended at national level in August 2020, but remains highly controversial and not universally implemented. For example, some regional governors advocate for a return to three day hospitalization, while the undersecretary of the ministry of health instead recommends revising the official guidelines (the last revision was made in 2010) to authorize outpatient administration for all regions.

In the next section, we present our analysis of the texts that reported on the two events, separated into the three core ideological discourses that emerged in the coding process. The three themes function as pillars in the construction of the portrayal of the national and/or natural family, conceptualised, following Foucault (1977), as a device of power. We include sections of the texts – in italics and referenced as "media extract" (m.e.) – as examples that provide tangible evidence of the systems of signification (Davies and Robinson 2010) deployed by the anti-gender movement through the pro-family campaigns.

## The Child

It is apt to start with the analysis of the main rhetorical focus of most discussions, concerns and adulations in anti-gender and pro-family discourses: the Child. As unveiled in queer theory (Bersani 2011) and chil-

dren's rights literature (Burman 2008) this "child" in anti-gender and pro-family discourses is often presented an inanimate object, a silent presence, the centrepiece of an altar dedicated to the veneration to Life.

In the media articles analysed, the Child is presented through binaries: female or male; alive or dead; past or future; victim or saviour. A main binary distinction in the weaponised imageries of the Child is between its materials and abstract representations. Constructed, or better, constricted, within these binaries, the Child is biologically rooted in a normative yet primitive stage (Archard 1993) and positioned at the heart of family, as a core societal structure (Giddens 1998).

In one article discussing the abortive pill, the material representation of the Child is achieved through the phrasing "a formed human on her hand" (m.e.). Here, the formed human is the aborted child, and the hand is that of the aborting woman.

The analysed articles reporting on "The Wind of Change" conference present the material Child via two images: that of the gifts offered to conference participants and that of the bodily form of the unborn child. The first striking format is a physical reminder of the materiality of the aborted Child, provided through the gifts offered to participants on their arrival. These come in the shape of a "life-size ten week foetus soft rubber figurine" (m.e.), accompanied by a card reading "abortion stops a beating heart", and by a "life-size ten week foetus' feet key-ring" (m.e.) – a reminder that the feet are developed before the legal deadline for abortion, between the eighth and ninth week of gestation. In the second format, the Child is introduced through the material representation of "empty cribs" (m.e.) and of "yet-to-be-born-adoptable children" (m.e.). The material essence of the Child is here presented through the juxtaposition of contrasting paradoxes: the empty crib for a dead baby against the "full uterus" (m.e.) of the rejecting (aborting) and selfish (Downing 2019) subject-woman. These material representations of the Child continue a long-standing tradition that confines Childhood to an ontology of pure biological-bodily form (Bond Stockdown 2009). In this weaponised form, the Child has no thoughts, no words, no wishes, no feelings. The Child just is – in its bodily parts, in its tangible significations of life and of future.

In articles on the abortive pill, the Child is presented in its bodily form as a corpse. This corpse is discussed as a "'corpicino', i.e., tiny body," that "is born and then killed," that has been "disposed of" or that is "a child that never was" (m.e.). This corpse, also presented through gruesome medical terms such as "abortive product" (m.e.), is afforded not only the status of a body, but that of an individual to be buried in the "garden of angels" (m.e.) against the wishes of its own family members. In these articles, the unborn Child (at risk of being aborted) is often discussed as an abstract idea of lost hope and possibility. The unborn Child (at risk of being aborted) is abstracted into the reporting of an experience of shared, communal mourning. Interviewees in the articles refer to their experience of loss of the "missed opportunities" (m.e.) of the unborn Child, perished at the hands of the aborting women, the selfish Subject uninterested in the future of society. Another form of abstraction is introduced through a number representing the Italian citizens "lost through abortion" (m.e.), a recurrent figure in the articles reporting on the two events. In one of the articles, the president of Family Day, an Italian organisation that organises recurrent pro-life gatherings, is reported to quantify such loss through citing the number of (known) abortions performed since 1978, the year in which abortion was made legally available in Italy. Conversely, the abstract living Child is depicted through quotations of references made in the conference to the growth of the pro-family movement "we are growing, we are growing, we are growing" (m.e.). The growth of the movement is in one article connected to the growth of the "children saved" (from abortion) (m.e.). This growth is presented as "an opportunity of development for the organisation, its Nations, and the movement" (m.e.).

In the material representations of the Child there is no space for the displeasing, such as crying babies, terrible toddlers, uncontrollable teenagers. In most articles, the references to the Child in the conference are presented mainly through two distinct age-groups: the young (four to ten year old) child and the troublesome teenagers. In the articles reporting on the abortive pill, the Child is presented as "the embryo," "the foetus," "the unborn baby" (m.e.). In articles reporting on the conference,

this image is accompanied by the description of the "young children" who marched through Verona to defend their and their unborn siblings' rights. In the articles, the children are described as "docile," "tender," "playful" and "open to learning." The images mostly include pictures of primary school-age children. The material Child is presented only in its most perfect forms. The troubling and forbidden representations of the Child are denigrated as dangerous and impure, "teens who have sex" (m.e.). Interesting to note is that these selected depictions of the Child are consistent with the societal representations of "acceptable children" critiqued in children's rights literature (Mayall 2002; Burman 2008).

It could be argued that to serve their semantic purpose, the weaponised representations of the Child limit its image to one specific form, abstract or material, unborn foetus at risk of being aborted or possible growth for the future (of the movement or the nation), etcetera. We argue here that these representations deny any multidimensionality in the Child, whose only purpose is to represent life, future, and possibility. This flattened, single-dimensional ontology of the Child is introduced in the articles to offer the Child as a collective experience, as something relatable for anyone and everyone (Edelman 2004). Under this representation, the Child is either the saviour of the collective, or the victim that needs to be saved by the collective. Relatedly, it is interesting to note that many media articles on "The Wind of Change" conference include an image of the conference flyer, the image which depicts a male, white, cis Child wearing a superhero outfit, aptly reminding the readers that the only way to salvage the future is (re)production.

## Reproductive Futurism

"Italians need to start bringing children into the World. A country which does not create children is destined to die" (m.e.). This comment, from an article in our material, made during the World Congress of Families by the leader of the Lega, one of the main Italian right-wing parties, is a perfect example of the way in which anti-gender and pro-family movements weaponise the role of defenders and saviours of society at large (Miškovska Kajevska 2018; Coman et al. 2021). We have gathered

further examples of this semantic strategy under the label reproductive futurism, a concept here informed by our reading of Edelman (2004) and the reflections of Xenofeminism (Hester 2008).

In this context, the term reproductive futurism refers to the idea that reproduction is in fact the only method to ensure the future of a state, especially a white and heteronormative state. In this way, reproductive futurism opens the possibility of connecting the pro-family and anti-gender movement to matters of the state, of democracy, and from there to the defence of the nation (Żuk & Żuk 2020). It is significant that the World Congress of Families held in Verona, and the campaign against the new guidelines regarding the administration of the RU486 pill, are supported by both anti-gender Catholic movements and xenophobic, right-wing parties.

The insistence on the importance of reproduction can be found in an article discussing the conference in association with the threat of "foreign invasion" (m.e.), and in another article reporting on the fears expressed during the conference that there are "more children of migrants" (m.e.) than there are white children in Italian schools. In the articles investigated, migration, and the birth rates of "non-Italian children" are discussed as a national problem, which "confuses and dilutes" (m.e.) the national identity.

The state that needs protecting is a Christian nation based on the "natural family" (m.e.), a phrase regularly used in articles discussing both the World Congress of Families and the abortive pill. Many of the analysed articles report on the family as something "natural" (m.e.) and not socially constructed. We note that in the articles its naturalness is based first on this historicity, on the fact that "it has always been this way" (m.e.), as explained in a comment by an interviewee – an assertion founded neither on evidence nor on any historical base. This belief, or ideology if you will, justifies the nuclear family format through a series of recurring labels in the articles. The nuclear family is described as the "the original" (m.e.) label, justified through its repetition and dominance throughout time, a logical process that is nothing but constructivism and that paradoxically recalls Butler's concept of performativity! This

belief is grounded on the link between family and reproduction (Lewis 2019); one cannot exist without the other, the first is functional to the second and vice versa. The nuclear family is referred to as the "natural" and "traditional" (m.e.) family, consisting of a man and a woman, in which the role of women is confined to that of mother. The concept of family that emerges from the labels introduced in the articles represents the type of family that is challenged through the feminist lens (hooks 2000; Haraway 2016). This lens offers a critique of a world within which motherhood is considered natural and necessary, constitutive of women, and precisely for this reason those who reject this role must be sanctioned (Haraway 2016; Lewis 2019).

In between the images of the Child, discussed in the previous section, and those of the nuclear family seems to emerge a recurrent image of a selfish subject-woman (Downing 2019), who by deciding to have an abortion effectively denies the Child a future life and undermines the future of the nation, but above all shirks her natural role as a mother.

We argue that this selfish subject-woman concept is represented as a threat to the Child, the nation, and the future. In the articles reporting on the debates on the new regulations for the RU486 pill, discussed above, focus is on the change to outpatient practice. The discussion revolves around the fact that the RU486 pill would make abortion more accessible and less painful. In the arguments against the changes, this is presented as cause for concern owing to the risk of an increase in pregnancy terminations, which would aggravate the decrease in birth rates. We speculate that an underlying argument against the changes could be that the less painful and less invasive method (Alam et al. 2020) would in fact remove the element of punishment for those who dare escape the norm.

The hostility towards pharmaceutical technology is linked to the more general hostility towards new technologies related to reproduction (Lewis 2019). These, in fact, impose a rethinking of motherhood and make it increasingly evident that there is no distinction between "natural" (m.e.) and "artificial" (m.e.) motherhood, labels utilised in articles reporting on the World Congress of Families.

Reproductive technology forces us to reconsider the concept of natural motherhood (Hester 2018), to think about different types of parenting and families and to unhinge heteronormativity (hooks 2000). By contrast, the narrative of anti-gender and pro-life movements denies that there is any motherhood other than "natural" (m.e.) motherhood –womanhood (Butler 2019). Thus, we argue that in our current sociohistorical context, untying motherhood from naturalness would in fact imply breaking the heterosexual norm on the one hand and the nation's promise of a white future on the other.

The notion of "the future of the nation" is often used in political rhetoric (Bernini 2013), where the future is progress and always better than the past, where the future is the time towards which we ought to strive, the promise at which we ought to arrive, thus recalling a messianic dimension. In a political horizon dominated by a conceptualisation of future interlinked with the figure of the Child and the white heterosexual norm, questioning the reproduction of genders at the root and intersectionally means imagining other forms of relationships that allow us to think politics beyond genders and beyond the future. This exercise of re-imagining reproduction will also require challenging conceptualisations of production (Lewis 2019). Anti-gender and pro-family movements propose economic "incentives" (m.e.) for (re)production. The economic incentive to have children is connected to the nation's need or demand for young and healthy people who can produce: the state of the natural family is the neoliberal state.

Many articles expressing concern about Italy's declining population at the same time point out how the population is aging, how Italy is a country of retirees. In other words, it is emphasized that there are no longer productive people, which poses a threat to society.

## Positive Sociality

In this section, we discuss the rhetorical elements utilised in media discourses that contribute to shaping the agreed acceptable and normal (normative) way of being within society. This way of being, agreed through heteronormative political imagination (Halberstam 2008), is

discussed here as "positive sociality," in contrast to Edelman's (2005) idea of "anti-social" being. Positive sociality is realised through the image of the Child, "heterosexual optimism and its realization" (Halberstam 2008, 141) through reproductive futurism and nationalist preservation. Positive sociality can only occur within the realisation of the family.

In the rhetoric of the media articles, the defence of the "natural" (m.e.) family is presented as the defence of a better, positive society. In the discussions presented in the articles reporting on the World Congress of Families, the need to defend the "natural" (m.e.) family is demonstrated through numerous invocations of and references to the Human Rights Act made by attendees and members, mostly in relation to Article 16 (the right to family). The defence of a certain type of family is framed as the defence of collective human rights. Within the rights of the collective, it is important to note whose rights take priority. Women's rights are relinquished, placed behind those of children in the hierarchy of rights, following the paradoxical principle of predominance3 (Borda Carulla 2018).

In the hierarchy of rights, the rights of the unborn Child are at the forefront, for unborn children are "the most fragile and defenceless of all human beings" (m.e.), as reported in an interview with a conference attendant. In this discourse, unborn children are presented as separate from the mother or parent – freed from this interdependency. The rights-holding entity "Child" (Mayall 2002) is for once afforded multiple temporalities, as it exists in the past and in the future. In the past, it is identified as a victim of homicide, with abortion referenced in one article as "the first form of feminicide" (m.e.). In the future, it is offered up for adoption, with the catchy slogan "adopt a foetus" (m.e.), captured in photographs in articles reporting on the pro-life protests against the RU486. We argue that in the articles analysed, the deployment of "positive sociality" is actualised through the connection between the future of the Child and the future of the collective, with children positioned in the unique role of future citizens in need of saving with the aim of saving society.

The children's rights lens offers solid grounds for critiquing the language and approaches in which the Child is portrayed as in need of

saving. Firstly, the language deployed by anti-gender movements is that of modern, international, neoliberal rights, focusing on individualism and idealisation of the "human"; discourses widely criticised within critical human rights scholarship (Moyn 2018). Secondly, the discourse around the Child is always framed around the need for "safeguarding" and "protecting" (m.e.) the Child, rather than around promoting the actualisation of rights. Saving the Child means protecting the rights of the individual foetus to ensure the future life of the unborn Child, ultimately for the good of the collective. The rights of mothers are also considered, but only within the aim of her positive socialisation, her contribution to society as good citizen (Bersani 1995). In stopping abortions, the rights of mothers are protected from external pressures to relinquish motherhood. Women are described as in need of protection from their individual incapacities (in articles discussing the abortive pill, reference is made to a list of risks: "anxiety", "death," "pain," "poor hygiene," "loss of freedom of choice," "regret" (m.e.). The aim is the preservation of the woman/body for the sake of the collective. In this framework, women are denied the status of Subject and are associated with children labelled as "fragile" (m.e.), which positions both as objects in need of safekeeping. In the discussions reported in the articles on the abortive pill, women are presented as in need of defence, "vulnerable" and "incapable" (m.e.) of making independent decisions. We argue that these labels position women's dignity and health within the right-defenders' realm of responsibilities, rather than the realm of their own agency, and posit that their dignity and health can only be secured within the "natural" (m.e.) family. Women's rights can only be secured and safeguarded within the "sanctity" and "beauty" of a "natural" (m.e.) union: marriage.

Abortion, the non-natural family, gender-theory, technology assisted motherhood are the realities posing a threat to women's rights. The ultimate threat is the withdrawal of the rights of women. In Salvini's words, without the protective guardianship of (white straight) men, women face the risk of all their rights being "revoked at the hand of Islam" (m.e.).

In the articles, women refusing such guardianship are discussed by

representatives of the anti-gender movements as perpetrators, infringers of rights. Women using the abortive pill are questioned not only on account of their morals, but also on account of their "precarious" (m.e.) health and hygiene standards. The abortive pill is described as a "battle," a "dark secret," a "get out of jail free card" (m.e.) absolving men of their responsibilities. Even here, women are not afforded agency, since the pill is the subject of the very action being condemned, for depriving women of their rights and "protections" (m.e.). Echoing historical imageries of women as frail and unstable (one cannot help but think of the history of hysteria), questions are raised in regard to the emotional state of women approaching the abortive pill, also labelled in articles as DIY abortion. Specific concerns are raised both in relation to women's capacity to handle anxiety and regarding their pain threshold.

A few articles report indications of women's rejection of "guardianship" (m.e.) and pro-life principles not being tolerated. In one article, for example, the daughter of a leader of the pro-life movement, reports having been "cancelled" (m.e.) by her father for getting divorced. In another example, a member of the pro-life movement suggests that "large sums of money" (m.e.) will be offered to stop women from getting abortions. When asked what would happen if a woman was to refuse the offer, the response was clear: "not an option" (m.e.). The only choice available is to protect the rights of the Child. The promotion of the "natural family" (m.e.), the opposition to abortion and the rejection of in vitro conception are all ultimately aimed to defend of the rights of the Child/nation.

It is important to interrogate the rhetoric adopted around rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is mentioned only once, in passing. The only right discussed is the right to protection, ironically the most problematised within children's rights literature and scholarship (Burman 2008; Quennerstedt 2013). Provision and participation, pillars of the children's rights framework (O'Kane 2003), are missing in this version of the defence of children's rights. Agency, voice, and capacities (Spyrou 2011; Wyness 2012), the principles that children's rights scholarship explores in relation to children as citizens, are never dis-

cussed in relation to the Child in anti-gender movements as is evident from these Italian examples. The notion of the knowing child has always troubled the righteous right, since it upsets the rules of positive sociality (Robinson 2013). The Hero Child, poster child of the conference, is the Child that saves the world in the future, rather than in the present, and its knowledge is determined by the requirements of the nation. The Hero Child is the martyr of the nation, the hope for collectivity. This duality is enshrined in the pure, white dresses of the young girls showcased and celebrated on the stage of the conference. The white dresses symbolise both their purity and their potential as future brides, future serving mothers. In this context of futurality and possibility, the "natural family" (m.e.) is presented as the only "sustainable unit of society" (m.e.). The Child's function to preserve and continue the tradition of the "values that have advanced human society from its beginning" (m.e.).

The dominant concern with the "decrease of birth rates" (m.e.) solely focuses on the births of white Italian children. The birth of Italian children is what will ensure that Italian identity is not "diluted" (m.e.) by others – migrants. Following the attempts to overturn the ius sangue[4] in Italy, the call for the birth of Italian children seems to reflect what Giuliani (2019) refers to as the process of invisibilisation of the racialised subject. In her book examining realities of race, gender and nation in Italy, the author indicates denial as a crucial practice for maintaining the existing hierarchies upholding white, nationalist supremacy. Giuliani (2019) describes this process as a cover up for the biopolitical practices of Italian far-right parties. Choice and rights are used as an excuse to differentiate the ideal of the Italian woman, free in the "natural family" (m.e.), from that of the woman in the Islamic "retrograde" (m.e.) family. In this context, Salvini has referred to Islam as the main danger to all social achievements concerning women's rights (m.e.). Another representative of the Italian government, the then minister for family and disability, Lorenzo Fontana, suggested that homosexuality, gender-theory and immigration are the main dangers to society at large. They pose a threat to the future of the nation.

## Conclusions

Our analysis of the concepts of the Child, Reproductive Futurism and Positive Sociality, as they are presented in news-media articles reporting on the World Congress of Families and on the abortive pill, highlights the ideological discourses utilised by anti-gender and pro-family movements in the promotion of the "natural family" as the only viable means for securing the nation's future.

In these discourses, reproduction is framed as an act of public and political meaning, aimed at safeguarding the nation. Safeguarding the rights of the Child, and of (re)productive women, is not only a responsibility of the nation, it is a "natural" principle (m.e.). "The world needs heroes," and the only possible heroes are the children of "natural families" (m.e.). Within this framework, non-normative experiences of sociality pose the ultimate threat to the traditional (and reproductive) family and the (white) nation. Individuals are held hostage by the necessity of their behaving as good citizens (Bersani 1995) in order to be recognised as worthy individuals. Outside this framework, social subjects have new possibilities for alternative modes of socialisation, ones that might challenge the tasks assigned by political agendas aimed at the preservation of white male-dominated hierarchies.

The defence of the unborn Child and the guardianship of the (re) productive woman is hereby framed as a mission entrenched in political agendas that legitimise the natural family as the only public institution capable of preserving national identity, the future of the nation and ultimately the future of humanity. We have shown the ways in which the rhetorical devices of the Child, Reproductive Futurism and Positive Sociality are being deployed as a response to the advancement of theories and rights requests by, or concerning, groups that question the so-called natural order of sexuality and of gender hierarchies (Bernini 2014). These attacks are not directed only against the LGBTIQ+ community, but in fact against all those subjectivities that do not perfectly embody the (white?) heterosexual norm, whether this involves being homosexual or choosing not to become a mother or thinking of motherhood in terms other than that of the nuclear/traditional family.

## Articles on the World Congress of Families

| | Media | Title | Date of publication |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Il Post | Il Congresso Mondiale delle Famiglie, spiegato bene | 24 March 2019 |
| 2 | Trieste Prima | Fedriga al Congresso delle Famiglie: "Per i diritti dei bambini" | 30 March 2019 |
| 3 | Ansa IT | Verona: Gandolfini, 'gadget del feto fotografa la realtà' | 30 March 2019 |
| 4 | Udine Today | Fedriga: "Famiglia nucleo fondamentale della società, il 30 marzo sarò a Verona" | 19 March 2020 |
| 5 | The Face | How the far right is weaponising "the family" | 19 April 2019 |
| 6 | Ansa IT | Famiglia: tra gadget anche feto di gomma | 29 March 2019 |
| 7 | Il Fatto Quotidiano | Congresso Famiglie, dalle critiche a gay e aborto ai feti come gadget: "È l'alba di una rinascita". La sinistra: "Oscurantismo" | 29 March 2019 |
| 8 | Ansa IT | Controversial World Families Conference starts in Verona | 29 March 2019 |
| 9 | Il Sole 24 Ore | Dall'ecologia umana alla tutela della vita, i temi del congresso di Verona | 29 March 2019 |
| 10 | Il Foglio | Gli errori del Congresso di Verona all'epoca della morte degli argomenti | 31 March 2019 |
| 11 | Il Foglio | Per difendere la famiglia serve una rivolta contro la strategia della pensione | 01 April 2019 |
| 12 | Il Foglio | Il Congresso di Verona è il prodotto della critica all'ordine liberale | 27 March 2019 |
| 13 | The Guardian | City of love? Christian right congress in Verona divides Italy<br>This article is more than 3 years old<br>Opponents says League-backed event symptomatic of politics of extremism going national | 26 March 2019 |

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| 14 | Il Fatto Quotidiano | Congresso Verona: "L'omosessualità è un abominio, va curata", "l'aborto? Un delitto". Il videoracconto | 29 March 2019 |
| 15 | Il Fatto Quotidiano | Congresso Verona, anche un feto di gomma tra i gadget: "L'aborto ferma un cuore che batte" | 29 March 2019 |
| 16 | Il Fatto Quotidiano | Congresso Famiglie, a sorpresa sul palco la senatrice M5s Drago: "Alcuni di noi hanno apertura pro famiglia tradizionale" | 29 March 2019 |
| 17 | Articolo 21 | World Congress of Families di Verona. Schlein – Capogna (Possibile): "Tajani chiarisca sulla sua presenza" | 22 February 2019 |
| 18 | BuzzFeed News | Italy Is Ground Zero For The War On Women — Which Is Why These Far-Right Groups Are Meeting There | 28 March 2019 |
| 19 | The Times | World congress of families. Russia plays happy Christian families with Europe' populists | 30 March 2019 |
| 20 | Open Democracy | Italian neo-fascists prepare to join World Congress of Families events | 29 March 2019 |
| 21 | La Stampa | Congresso famiglie, Zenti: "Medioevo? In quel periodo c'erano valori" | 22 March 2019 |
| 22 | La Stampa | Verona, la rivolta dell'università contro il raduno delle famiglie | 20 March 2019 |

## Articles on RU846

| | Media | Title | Date of publication |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Il Foglio | Le verità scientifiche che il Parlamento non vuol sentire sulla Ru486 | 08 August 2020 |
| 2 | Il Post | L'aborto farmacologico si potrà fare in day hospital in tutte le Regioni | 08 August 2020 |

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|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | L'Avvenire | Ru486. L'aborto farmacologico diventa fai-da-te, l'annuncio (via tweet) del ministro | 08 August 2020 |
| 4 | L'Avvenire | Le linee guida. Aborto farmacologico: serve monitoraggio continuo | 14 August 2020 |
| 5 | L'Avvenire | Aborto farmacologico. Otto obiezioni alla linee guida del ministero della Salute | 20 August 2020 |
| 6 | Sky tg24 | Aborto farmacologico, ecco le nuove linee guida sulla pillola Ru486 | 13 August 2020 |
| 7 | Il Fatto Quotidiano | Ru486, campagna choc di Pro Vita e Famiglia: "Prenderesti mai del veleno? Stop alla pillola abortiva, mette a rischio la salute" | 7 December 2020 |
| 8 | L'Espresso di Repubblica | RU486, in Piemonte soldi pubblici ai Pro-Life: delibera choc dell'assessore di Fratelli d'Italia | 17 September 2020 |
| 9 | Repubblica | Aborto, pubblicate le nuove linee guida sulla Ru486 | 13 August 2020 |
| 10 | La Stampa | Pillola Ru486, arrivano i paletti della Regione: aborti farmacologici solo negli ospedali e sportelli dei Pro Vita | 02 October 2020 |
| 11 | La Stampa | La Regione contro la pillola abortiva: "Stop nei consultori, ricovero obbligatorio" | 16 September 2020 |
| 12 | La Repubblica | "La legge sull'aborto è sotto attacco. Entro un mese nuove linee guida per quello farmacologico in day hospital" | 17 June 2020 |
| 13 | Independent | Italy approving outpatient use for the abortion pill is finally a step in the right direction for women's rights | 14 August 2020 |

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## NOTES

1. One of the authors (Fran Zanatta) identifies as non-binary.
2. This point makes reference to a different news item that emerged a few months after the approval of the new legislation on the abortive pill.
3. When children's rights are put before women's rights, the first to suffer are, paradoxically, children. This is due to the interdependency enforced by social dynamics.
4. Literally 'right of blood', indicates that Italian nationality at birth is acquired only by the nationality of one or both parents, not by the place of birth (e.g.: a baby born in Italy to non-Italian citizens does not have the right to Italian citizenship).