



## “THIS TOWN IS AGAINST GENDER”

### Bending Gender in Italian Culture

*What is often expressed and understood by the term ‘gender’ ultimately ends up being man’s attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator. Man wants to be his own master, and alone—always and exclusively—to determine everything that concerns him. Yet in this way he lives in opposition to the truth, in opposition to the Creator Spirit.*

Benedict XVI, 2008

*So, I think, while I would prefer to believe otherwise, I guess my experience with my two and a half year old twin daughters who were not given dolls and who were given trucks, and found themselves saying to each other, look, daddy truck is carrying the baby truck, tells me something. And I think it’s just something that you probably have to recognize.*

Summers, 2005

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In 2005, Lawrence Summers, then president of Harvard University, ended up on the front pages of major US newspapers for having asserted that the underrepresentation of women at high levels in the international scientific community was connected to the innate differences between male and female brains. Neither discrimination in the selection of the researchers nor cultural models kept women away from math and quantum physics: it was genetics. Summers’ conviction that the cerebral difference



“The City Administration is against gender ideology.”  
Italy, 2015

between the sexes is due to a predefined genetic difference from which “innate and natural abilities” are derived has stimulated a heated debate, and many have recognized in those words a display of misogyny hardly incompatible with his academic position (Bombardieri, 2005: A1).

In the wake of the controversy triggered by his claims, Summers wrote a letter of apology for the scientifically debatable contents of his speech, while Harvard recognized the need to focus more on gender discrimination. When Summers stepped down in 2006, he was replaced by Drew Gilpin Faust, the first woman president in Harvard’s history. When he was first criticized for ignoring the ways in which the experience of discrimination affects the lives and choices of women, Summers referred to recent developments in behavioral genetics, underlining their impact in redefining the role of socialization in the development of personal characteristics:

My point was simply that the field of behavioral genetics had a revolution in the last fifteen years, and the principal thrust of that revolution was the discovery that a large number of things that people thought were due to socialization weren’t, and were in fact due to more intrinsic human nature, and that set of discoveries, it seemed to me, ought to influence the way one thought about other areas where there was a perception of the importance of socialization. (Summers, 2005)

Talking about sex and gender is never simple, as Summers could personally attest to, because to do so necessarily implies taking a stand on “human nature,” either by endorsing or by rejecting the existence of innate intellectual or psychological characteristics. The importance of the debate about identity is particularly visible in the United States, where the cultural climate has been deeply affected by the growing awareness about issues concerning sex, gender, and identity.

In the Italian context the meaning of the term “gender” is today at the center of a rhetorical dispute, closely linked to a heated political conflict. A fundamental role is carried out by the Catholic Church, whose far-reaching role in Italian culture has contributed to a form of gender-bending that is very far from the meaning usually associated with the expression in the United States. In the influential works written by Judith Jack Halberstam, professor of English and gender studies at the University of Southern

California, “bending gender” is a way to emphasize gender flexibility as a main feature of late postmodernism, a world where genders are no longer two—masculine and feminine—but many:

If we could actually see these gender categories as saturated with contradictions, as discontinuous across the bodies they are supposed to describe, then we could begin to notice the odd forms of genders, the gaga genders, that have multiplied like computer viruses in late capitalist cultures. (Halberstam, 2012: 71)

The way in which Italian media has been bending gender in the wake of the attacks unleashed by Pope Benedict XVI is completely different and involves a constant manipulation of the theoretical concepts associated with sex and identity.

Until 2005 “gender” was always translated into Italian as “*genere*,” but in the past few years it has become a linguistic borrowing and it is no longer translated. While “*genere*” was often considered almost a synonym of “woman-related” (“*politiche di genere*” being the official term to refer to women’s issues in politics), the meaning of “gender” in its English untranslated form has been appropriated by the political right, which describes it as an “ideology” characterized by its intolerant censorship towards traditional models of femininity and masculinity. “Gender” has also been repeatedly accused of representing a form of propaganda in favor of infantile masturbation and pedophilia.

How could this happen? What is at stake in the Italian gender wars? In the following pages I will describe some of the crucial aspects of the divarication of the categories of gender described in countless scholarly works and the use of gender that has dominated the Italian political debate in recent years.

#### SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND THE (AMERICAN) LANGUAGE OF GENDER

It is no coincidence that Steven Pinker, a psychology professor at Harvard who is known for his skepticism regarding the social construction of identity, linked the undeniable intellectual prestige which was relished by “gender” after 1950 to the devastating political outcome of the intertwining of Herbert Spenser’s social Darwinism and the eugenics movement inspired by the work of Sir Francis Galton in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Translated into racial improvement programs in numerous Western nations (including the United States, Canada and Scandinavian countries), eugenic theory was also used to justify the killing of millions of Jews in Nazi Germany. According to Pinker, the horror originated by the Holocaust, together with the accounts of lynchings and forced sterilization that took place at the heart of Western democracies, contributed to shaping a generation of academics acutely aware of the risks entailed by the attribution of some innate characteristics to an ethnic group:

This sea change included a revolution in the treatment of human nature by scientists and scholars. Academics were swept along by the changing attitudes to race and sex, but they also helped to direct the tide by holding forth on human nature in books and magazines and by lending their expertise to government agencies. The prevailing theories of the mind were refashioned to make racism and sexism as untenable as possible. The doctrine of the Blank Slate became entrenched in intellectual life in a form that has been called the Standard Social Science Model or social constructionism. The model is now second nature to people and few are aware of the history behind it. (Pinker, 2003: 16–17)

For Pinker, who embraces the theses of evolutionary psychology underlining the relations between biology and human nature, “the politics of gender is a major reason that the application of evolution, genetics, and neuroscience to the human mind is bitterly resisted in modern intellectual life” (Pinker, 2003: 340). In the context of my essay the strengths of Pinker’s approach (or its weaknesses) are beside the point; what is relevant is that he, too, recognizes the scientific centrality of the category of gender in American cultural life in academic circles. In literary studies the relevance of gender has proved decisive at least since the mid-1980s: in an influential collection of essays entitled *Critical Terms for Literary Studies* (1990), the chapter devoted to gender begins like this:

Like Molière’s bourgeois gentleman that discovered one day that all the time he thought he was only talking he was in fact speaking in prose, literary critics have recently recognized that in their most ordinary expositions of character, plot and style they speak the language of gender. (Jehlen, 1990: 263)

In the United States, the last decade of the twentieth century represented a time of great media and academic visibility for gender theory. In the wake of the political success of feminism, gender was recognized as a category capable of illuminating the entire cultural panorama from a new vantage point. The concept of gender as different from sex was developed with the aim of revealing the instability of the meanings associated with masculinity and femininity. If gender roles are subject to change, anatomy is no longer destiny and womanhood becomes a flexible concept, which acknowledges the complexity of female experience.

The success enjoyed by the concept of gender in the US didn't reach Italy. The Italian indifference to gender has long been shared by both conservative and left-wing politicians. And feminist thought wasn't an exception either.

Italian feminism looked with little interest at the deconstruction of identity theorized by American theorists deeply influenced by French thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault (Cavarero, 1999: 138–148). According to Adriana Cavarero, one of the most authoritative Italian philosophers, the American success of the Derridean deconstruction of subjectivity has everything to do with the peculiar social configuration of the United States:

From a radical point of view, the self becomes an empty space where multiple identities converge, a temporary point in their swirling movement. It is above all this focus on numerous and unstable identities which explains the success of postmodern thinking in a multiethnic and multicultural context like the United States. (Cavarero, 1999: 150)

According to Cavarero, gender as a category presupposes an emphasis on the multiplicity and mobility of the traits that characterize subjectivity, and it is thus perfectly suited to interact with American values and cultural expectations.

We could also see gender as a refashioning of some of the ideas Simone de Beauvoir had already proposed in *The Second Sex* with the fortunate synthesis “one is not born, one *becomes*, a woman,” thus assuming that sexual difference is discursively produced as an effect of the social. In her influential *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler reformulated de Beauvoir's hypothesis suggesting that not only “one is not born a woman,” but one *never* becomes one, since

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*woman* is a category that does not describe an identity but rather constructs it. Identity is “produced” as an effect of the naming: building on J. L. Austin’s work on performative utterances, Butler encourages us to see in the sex/gender dichotomy the effect of a system of significance that arbitrarily connects a biological variety potentially more complex to a masculine/feminine binary system (Fausto-Sterling, 1992). This binarism remains at the heart of Italian feminism, where the notion of “sexual difference” has proved far more popular and influential than “gender.” As a consequence, in Italy the diffusion of literary and non-literary research characterized by a focus on gender has been very limited. This is due, on the one hand, to a limited academic presence in the field of women’s studies.

Despite the international prestige enjoyed by Italian scholars like Teresa de Lauretis and Rosi Braidotti, most Italian works dealing with gender remain associated with academic output and haven’t reached a wider circulation. Until 1995 gender theory in Italy has thus enjoyed limited fame, even if “*le politiche di genere*” (“gender policies”) have been widely spoken of in the context of political actions promoting equal opportunities between men and women. In this case, however, the term “*genere*” (translated in Italian) is used as a synonym for “sex,” in order to refer to the need to enhance women’s empowerment and fight discriminations. Yet the idea that femininity and masculinity are sociocultural constructs and not innate and unalterable elements, and that it is their very pliability that makes them efficient as organizational categories of experience, remains very far from the use of the concept of “*genere*” as a synonym for “equal opportunities.”

IN THE NAME OF NATURE: ITALY AGAINST GENDER IDEOLOGY

The calm and marginal existence of gender in Italian politics ended abruptly in the spring of 2015 when the threatening ghost of “gender theory” started to infest the front pages of the provincial papers along with the national news dailies. A petition circulated that was directed at the president of the Republic, the prime minister and the minister of education “against the ideology of gender and in favor of a healthy education.” It collected more than 100,000 signatures in just a few weeks. What had happened?

The beginning of the new and tempestuous Italian life of gender goes back to the United Nations Meeting on the Status of Women held in Beijing in 1995: “In late April 1995, in preparation for the NGO meetings in Beijing—called the prepcom—several member states, under the guidance of the Catholic Church, sought to expunge the word ‘gender’ from the Platform for Action and to replace it with the word ‘sex’” (Butler, 2004: 182). The Catholic Church was beginning its preparations for the sex/gender wars, as Marco Politi—a leading Italian journalist and expert in Vatican politics—observed in “The Church is Getting Ready for the War of the Five Sexes,” a detailed article that presciently announced many of the attacks against gender that were to come (Politi, 1995: 11).

It was in 2013 that, after years of peripheral battles, the gender war broke out at the center of Italian culture. It happened when the government presented a law project about the training of school personnel that introduced, among the educational goals, the respect for diversity and the struggle against gender stereotypes. The proposal was immediately attacked in the Catholic daily, *L’Avvenire*, in an article entitled “Gender Theory Wants to Enter the Classroom” (Ferrario, 2013). Gender theory is here personified as a menacing entity pushing its way into Italian classrooms. Its impact, according to *L’Avvenire*, would be further amplified with the approval of the law against homophobia—which the parliament had been debating in the same weeks—with devastating effects on children, as it would “effectively banish all references to traditional families from Italian schools.”

After that first article a large scale attack began. It involved numerous radical Catholic associations and conservative political forces that organized anti-gender conferences and protests. A master class diploma on sexual difference and gender theory was activated at the Vatican University Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum. The class proposed to be on the alert regarding “gender theory, that—encouraged by international organizations such as the UN and the EU—is dangerously gaining momentum also in Italy, risking to determine the ‘loss of feminine identity’” (“Corso,” 2015).

The heated season of gender on a media level continued a few months later, in February 2014, with the diffusion of three manu-

als developed by the UNAR (National Racial Antidiscrimination Office), among them an initiative for “Educating for Diversity at School.” The protests of the Catholic associations were immediate and furious. They brought a quick suspension of every ministerial initiative dedicated to teacher training with the scope of reflecting on gender stereotypes in the school context (Di Mauro, 2015: 13–14). One of the instigators of the gender attacks was Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, archbishop of Genoa and president of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI). Bagnasco criticized the “dictatorship of gender ideology,” a form of cultural hegemony based on “westernist anthropology” and encouraged by international organisms like the UN:

This “penseé unique”—he says—has become a dictatorship, and the West wants to impose it on all the other parts of the world. But Western nations, and Europe in particular, are no longer the center of the world, so the arrogance of European culture should come to terms with this new reality. Unfortunately, some important international organizations, despite being representatives of all the countries of the world, adopt a culture, an anthropology that is westernized, and that by this point revolves around the so-called gender theory. (Muolo, 2014)

The Catholic hierarchy has identified in gender theory the cornerstone of a new Western philosophical orthodoxy bent on destroying the traditional family. The first theoretical attacks moved to a practical level in a Triest nursery school, when an educational project called “the game of respect” was accused of persuading kids to dress up in the clothes of the opposite sex and to touch their own genitals to find out about their gender identity (Neonato, 2015: 6–7). At least this is the description of the game which was given by one of the parents, Amedeo Rossetti, whose son was meant to take part in the activity (but didn’t). In this way Rossetti reached an impressive popularity in the news media, and contributed to a number of anti-gender initiatives with Catholic groups mobilized against the so-called “gender porno lessons” (Tieri, 2015).

The “intolerable” aspects of the “game of respect” were described by Rossetti in an interview given to the Vatican Radio station:

Q: What is the game of respect?

A: There is a box filled with cards upon which there are drawings of various jobs. For example, housewife and househusband, male and female



plumbers, firemen and firewomen, various jobs that show how the male gender and the female gender are absolutely the same, so much so that the figures are drawn identically. There's a game card that is called, "If he were her and she were him," where the boys and girls have to change roles and clothes. The boy must play like a girl and the girl like a boy. (Ondarza 2015)

The idea that a woman can be a plumber, have short hair or wear pants is clearly a source of outrage for Rossetti, who admits in the interview that "in theory" the exercise didn't anticipate references to sex education. The dressing up, encouraged by the teachers, regarded as a matter of fact the professional dimension: the children were encouraged to play by choosing to perform a job that was usually associated with the opposite gender (househusband or firewoman). This apparently harmless transgression was enough, however (along with the complicity of the press, which showed its preference for an unverified scandal instead of a journalistic investigation), to transform gender into an ideological threat.

The theme of dressing up and masturbation—which the children from the nursery school would have been induced to do according to a reconstruction later denied by all those involved—became for the Italian press the main characteristics of the dangerous gender theory. The Catholic anti-gender mobilization constantly refers to these aspects as adding to the accusation of encouraging homosexuality by spreading the idea that personal behavior can be freely chosen, independently from traditional models.

As a consequence, teaching young kids to recognize and avoid gender stereotypes has come to be described as the "anti-Christian project," aimed at encouraging the spread of homosexuality and the destruction of heterosexual families. It's a grotesque deformation that not only deliberately ignores the extensive scientific production of gender studies, but seems impervious to the refutations: in the case of the Trieste nursery school, as soon as the media storm calmed down, all accusations were discovered to be false.

Through the constant manipulations of facts, the struggle against gender has become a battle cry and contributed to keeping in check both the laws against homophobia and the demand for approval of gay marriage. For months, new gender threats have

been reported weekly by the press, describing a monster ready to “homosexualize” helpless children. In April 2015 in the small town of Cingoli, in the province of Macerata, the mayor wrote a letter to the principal of a local middle school, requesting an official explanation concerning a birthday party in which two teachers had worn colorful clothing and displayed “manners and behavior that appeared to support gender theory” (Giorgi, 2015). This season of anti-gender ferment culminated in a national protest held in Rome on June 20, 2015, in which the official slogan was “Let’s Defend Our Children. Stop Gender in the Schools.” Among the organizers was a group called “The Standing Sentries” that literally watches over gender in order to prevent its spread among younger generations. The Standing Sentries meet in Italian piazzas to warn Italians against the gender menace and stand in silence for one hour while reading a book. On their official page the guards describe gender threats as follows:

“gender”: an invented word in the new dictionary of single thought (*pensiero unico*) to eliminate the sexual differences that allow man to complete himself. Since this word was introduced in United Nations policies in the 1990s, a dangerous identity division has been officially ratified. For the inventors of “gender,” “*genere*” in Italian, biological sex can be seen as independent from the identity of a subject, who could instead identify himself with his own sexual preferences regardless of biology. (Sentinelle in piedi, 2015)

Sex, gender and sexuality appear to be confused here in a manner which is as crude as it is rhetorically effective. According to The Standing Sentries, homosexuality is a dangerous virus that can be spread by the idea that personal identity is no longer seen as a natural consequence of biology. One *is born* a woman, *pace* Simone de Beauvoir, and if we question the idea that our anatomy is our destiny, homosexuality will *naturally* spread. Emphasizing the role of culture in shaping our behavior, gender is thus intolerable.

Apart from their confused use of concepts and categories, The Standing Sentinels’ statements are interesting because they assume that, if we grant the same respect to all sexual preferences, the resulting freedom to choose will destroy traditional families, as if the freedom to choose one’s sexual preferences were incompatible with heterosexuality.

As the countless logical contradictions found in the descriptions offered by Catholic associations demonstrate, not all references to gender in the Italian political debate have to do with the social construction of identity. “Gender” is mainly considered a synonym for the promotion of homosexuality, and it is in this guise that it has been used to cast the shadow of pedophilia on educational projects about affectivity and on the parliamentary debates about stepchild adoption.

Instead of the progressive *gender-bending* practices analyzed by US scholars, what we find in the Italian context is the attempt to *bend gender*, distorting its concepts and manipulating its meaning. In September 2015 the Regional Council of Veneto outlawed all references to gender in public schools, stating that:

In all countries where similar strategies have been applied—England and Australia being two noteworthy examples—gender has brought about a precocious sexualization among the young, resulting in a rise in sexual abuse (also among young people), in the dependence on pornography, and in premature sexual activity, with a related increase in pregnancy and abortions even before adolescence, in addition to an increase in pedophilia. (Corlazzoli, 2015)

Veneto, a region in northeastern Italy, has distinguished itself for its unrelenting attacks on gender theory. Great media attention was given to Luigi Brugnaro, who became mayor of Venice—the capital of the Veneto region—in June 2015. As soon as Brugnaro was elected, the city council sent out a notice to all Venetian kindergarten teachers, ordering them to remove all “gender” books from school libraries. The dangerous volumes that were censored and confiscated in Venice are storybooks whose main characters are marked by some form of “diversity” with respect to traditional Catholic and Italian models: disabled children, families in which people of different religions and nationalities live together, and, in some cases, even families where parents are of the same sex (De Luca, 2015).

Another northern region, Lombardy, played a leading role in the summer battles against gender. At the height of the international media storm, unleashed by the censorship of Mayor Brugnaro (Sarkar, 2015), other mayors wanted to add to the fight against the menace of gender, placing LED street signs at town

entrances declaring their aversion to “gender ideology” (see picture at the beginning of this essay).

The anti-gender rage that swept through Italy in the summer of 2015 did not fade over time: in October of 2015 the Regional Council of Lombardy carried a motion that asked to “oppose the diffusion of gender theory in schools” (“No alla teoria gender nelle scuole,” 2015), and in December the same council approved the setting up of a 24-hour anti-gender hotline to receive reports of “school incidents that call into question family values” (Corica, 2015).

Scholarly attempts to explain the meaninglessness of the expression “gender ideology” by referring to the vast scientific output on the subject didn’t receive any attention on the national media. The Italian Association of Women Historians had already taken a stance in 2014, sending an open letter to Stefania Giannini, the minister of education, as soon as the attacks against the Good School guidelines for Affective Development Education gained extensive media coverage. A few months later the feminist magazine *Leggendaria* published a special issue entitled *School, It’s War against Gender*, which scrupulously rejected the distortions and contradictions that characterized the assault on school programs and practices designed to fight misogyny, racism, homophobia, and bullying. No matter how authoritative in their fields, the voices that cautioned readers against the manipulation of the concept of gender achieved only a very limited visibility. Even a high-profile philosopher like Michela Marzano was denied a city auditorium for the presentation of her book *Mom, Dad and Gender* (Sappino, 2015).

Trans/Lazio

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#### CONCLUSION: GENDER-BENDING OR BENDING GENDER?

The constant manipulation of the category of gender is affecting Italian culture in ways that are beyond the reach of this essay. Despite the anti-feminist bias that is clearly detectable in most references to natural and unchangeable paradigms of femininity, I want to argue that the Italian debate over gender theory can prove paradoxically effective for feminist politics because it reminds us of the revolutionary political power of a concept—gender—that in the American context has been considered for years to be almost conventional. The radicalism and enthusiasm that

greeted gender theory the 1970s have all but disappeared, leaving in their wake a sense of unrest summarized by Halberstam, who provocatively remarks that, after a day of talks and discussions, the young students attending a prestigious feminist conference at the New School in New York City seemed to be “bored out of their skulls” (Halberstam, 2012: 4). Reacting against the brand of “anemic feminism” associated with gender theory, Halberstam has theorized the need to “occupy gender” from a queer perspective, emphasizing the flexibility and fluidity of masculinities and femininities: “In the United States we have become far too sure about the stability and separation of various forms of gender and sexual identity” (Halberstam, 2012: 81).

Genderqueer and gender-bending practices like the ones advocated by Halberstam have made gender theory sound quaint and even a bit tedious. Yet, the Italian reception of gender reminds us of the audacity and importance of a theoretical paradigm that has called into question traditional views of femininity and masculinity, foregrounding the role played by culture in shaping the system of meanings and expectations associated with biological sex.

As the Larry Summers scandal described at the beginning of my essay illustrates, in today’s United States there exists a public opinion that is sensitive to the potentially misogynist dimension of discourses assigning to each sex behaviors and abilities that are both innate and different. The impact of forty years of women’s studies has certainly contributed to transforming most academic disciplines, spreading the awareness of the social construction of femininity and masculinity. On the contrary, gender theory has received little recognition in the Italian cultural panorama, thus allowing for mystifications and misrepresentations that are making genuine political dialogue about the theme of sexual difference almost impossible.

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"'No alla teoria gender nelle scuole,' passa la mozione in Regione. 'Documento ignorante e oscurantista.'" *La Repubblica* [Milan],

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*Trans/Lazio*

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