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Gender and Culture Wars in Italy

A Genealogy of Media Representations

Emiliana De Blasio
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Introduction

Abstract In the midst of military conflicts and global crises, the concept of culture wars may seem disconnected from the tangible struggles faced by societies. However, this book navigates the complex terrain of culture wars, emphasising their intersection with gender issues and their role in contemporary political discourse. Drawing from theoretical perspectives and empirical case studies, it examines the evolution of culture wars in Italy, particularly focusing on gender dynamics. The book traces the historical backdrop of these conflicts, exploring how shifting societal norms and media representations have shaped the trajectory of gender discourse. It underscores the role of media in perpetuating cultural divisions and influencing public opinion on gender issues. Moreover, it elucidates how gender issues intersect with broader political movements, particularly in the rise of far-right leaders. Through a feminist historiographical approach, the book documents the struggles and counter-hegemonic discourses within gender culture wars. It critically analyses processes of politicisation, polarisation, and domestication of neoliberal governmentality, revealing the communicative and cultural mechanisms at play.

Keywords Gender • Media • Far-right • Politicisation • Polarisation • Neoliberalism • Feminist studies

1.1 WHY CULTURE WARS AND WHY NOW

How is it possible to talk about cultural wars while the images of devastation and death left by ‘real’ wars flash before our eyes? Between February 2022 and October 2023, Italy and Europe were confronted with conflicts too near to close our eyes and pretend they do not exist. First the war in Ukraine, and then the war in Gaza, were certainly not sudden conflicts as they were perceived; yet, it was with the events of that year and a half that Italian public opinion associated the word ‘war’ in its proper meaning. The term had been used with a more symbolic and less militaristic meaning during the Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021, in Italy as in other countries around the world, but even in this case the term ‘war’ was used because life was at stake.

The adjective *cultural* should not mislead the reader. Cultural does not mean to exclude the use of violence, whether legitimate or not. Even military wars themselves are flanked, supported and often prepared for from a cultural perspective, and many wars in our history are motivated (also) by cultural reasons, including the wars of religion during the Middle Ages. Some aspects of culture, indeed, can be mobilised to justify, legitimise or armour forms of direct (physical) or structural violence (mostly linked to situations of discrimination and exploitation; Galtung, 1990). But the first time the expression culture war appeared in the public debate was in 1992 at the Republican Convention that saw the victory of George H. W. Bush: the defeated candidate Pat Buchanan, former advisor to three presidents and later a TV commentator, compared the electoral competition between Bush and Clinton to the Cold War, describing it as a culture war, that is, a battle to decide ‘who we are’, ‘what we believe’, what is ‘the soul of America’. Significantly, he was referring to the differences between the two candidates on issues such as abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights (Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016).

Culture wars are defined in the international literature as ideological and moral battles based on *hot-button cultural issues* such as, typically, religion and bioethics, but for extension, on whether and how consolidated social norms might fit into contemporary art, media, educational programmes, and peoples’ behaviours (Hunter, 1991; Hartman, 2015). Reflecting the changes of contemporary cultures and of our ways of understanding what culture is, culture wars are conflicts about finding a balance between the inclusion of diversity (of gender, ethnicity, religion, health status, ability, etc.) and the preservation of the cultural identity.

However, as will become clearer in the course of the volume, our approach understands culture wars as specific ways of articulating contemporary political debate, beyond the more or less *cultural* character of the issues, through processes of politicisation, affective polarisation and domestication of a neoliberal governmentality. In other words, what characterises culture wars are the communicative and cultural processes activated in specific moments by mutable social actors and on variable issues; in such processes, emotions play a key role.

The term originally derives from the German *kulturkampf*, which identified the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants at the end of the nineteenth century: they were cultural conflicts in the sense that they stemmed from religious and moral discrepancies; but they were also cultural in the sense that they involved the way in which the moral content was conveyed through the socialisation agencies available at the time, that is, the Church, the school, and, to an increasingly important extent, the press. In some European countries, these cultural/social divisions or *cleavages* formed the basis of the democratic constitution, for example in the Netherlands and to a lesser extent in Germany.

The concept crossed the Atlantic a century later, and established in the US: sociologist James Davison Hunter (1991) traced similar conflicts in the United States. Since then, the concept of culture wars has experienced periods of less popularity, but has become popular again since the first half of the 2010s, with a decisive boost due to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Expressions such as woke, cancel culture, politically correct have started to become more and more widespread in the public and media debate, to the point of composing the standard vocabulary of the political-ideological clash. At the same time, processes of polarisation are described as *increased* in quantity or changed in quality, as in the case of *affective* polarisation (Mason, 2018; Davis, 2019; Sorice, 2021). Indeed, polarisation is a process that can take on greater or lesser intensity at different moments in a country's history (hence one cannot say that a country is or is not polarised once and forever; Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016). Here we want to emphasise the fact that culture as well is not a monolith but is made up of different elements, even potentially contradictory ones. The greater or lesser mobilisation of the public on cultural issues (or even the attention paid to it) depends on the specific ways in which the cultural identity of each is formed, in a continuous game of renegotiation of the different elements. In other words, one can be mobilised on single issues, at different moments and in different ways during the life-course and depending on

the socio-cultural contexts, in which the media play an important but not totalising role.

Even if every country has its own roots and issues, we can see that in Europe most of contemporary culture wars still stem from religious and bioethical topics (e.g. with regard to stem-cell research and the end of life); at the same time, there has also been a shift towards attributing an increasing identitarian relevance to gender issues (Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016; Giorgi et al., 2024). However, it is important to emphasise that what characterises contemporary culture wars are not so much the themes or the actors as the communicative and cultural processes by which public debate is articulated. Indeed, Ozzano and Giorgi (2016) describe culture wars as “controversies described in a binary master frame, a dialectical opposition between two sets of irreconcilable values, often related to a supposed war between religious and secularist perspectives” (p. 1).

As we argue in this book, we want to track how gender issues lead to an exacerbation of media and political debate in Italy, creating a sort of narrative mechanism that is reactivated every time we return to these issues. We pursue the interpretative hypothesis that suggests that the gender culture wars in Italy have been fought over time through episodes that are apparently distinct (in terms of the argumentative methods and actors involved) but constitute a logical-semantic continuum.

We privilege the feminist genealogy as method of inquiry. The historiographical approach has been the prevalent one in recounting the emergence of gender issues (particularly women’s issues), so much so that it has been customary to identify the various generations that have focused on such issues as ‘waves’ of feminism. Our historiographic approach serves to pursue two interlinked objectives: the first is to historicise the concept of culture wars by applying it to the contemporary Italian context and focusing on gender issues, which have been less investigated within the phenomenon of culture wars. Indeed, we know from recent studies that the convergence between neoliberalism and populism has emphasised the cruciality of gender in the political arena at the global level, and that gender conflicts are also implied in the rise of far-right and alt-right formations (Mudde, 2019; Dardot et al., 2023). The second objective of the historiographic approach is to document the struggles of these years, to remember and to leave a trace of the counter-hegemonic discourses that continue to exist and resist.

In order to avoid running into the trap of revolutionary presentism, it seems appropriate to recognise some decisive stages in the construction of

the current Italian cultural and political context; a context marked by two important political-media events from the point of view of gender.

One is the election in September 2022, of Giorgia Meloni, the first woman Prime Minister, who comes from the convergence of neo-Catholic movements, (femo-)nationalism and the far-right. At a first glance, this convergence is not matched by an equally evident reorganisation of political subjectivities that fall within the progressive spectrum (Bordignon et al., 2023; Chiaramonte & De Sio, 2024); however, the book highlights how a progressive alliance has formed, as well as rapidly dissolved, at various times over the last five years, coinciding with a series of significant events. Although this novelty in the Italian political field has raised the issue of the relationship between women and power (which is certainly a good thing with a view to achieving greater awareness), on the other hand it has also resulted in the reopening of the debate on an issue such as abortion. In fact, while the European Parliament was approving the Resolution proposing to include the right to abortion among the fundamental European rights, the Italian Parliament was debating the amendment presented by a deputy from Brothers of Italy that allows “associations that have gained experience in maternity support” to enter counselling centres and clinics. This is part of a general framework in which the right to abortion is formally recognised by Italian law (l. 194/1978), but disavowed in practice, with a rate of ‘conscientious objector’ doctors that in some southern Italian regions makes it impossible to access the service (Lalli & Montegiove, 2022).

The second is the femicide of a soon-to-be graduate engineering student, Giulia Cecchettin, on 11 November 2023. Just few months earlier, another episode of gender violence has attracted the media and public’s attention: the so-called ‘Palermo rape’ in which a group of young men have raped a girl in mid-August, vividly mediated through the support of CCTV images and chat messages among the rapist. Unlike the hundreds of other victims before and after them, those cases attracted so much attention that they stimulated an unprecedented mobilisation at demonstrations on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November. Many wondered why Giulia Cecchettin had prompted this popular support, as well as unprecedented media coverage, so much so that Brothers of Italy’s Minister of Education and Merit, Giuseppe Valditara, ordered a minute of silence to be observed in schools and universities. The reasons for this are varied: Giulia’s smile in the photos spread by the press, the fact that she was a ‘normal’ student

from a ‘normal’ family, the fact that she lived in the very civilised North of Italy. Moreover, the femicide took place just a few weeks after the release in theatres of *C’è ancora domani* (*There’s still tomorrow*), a movie by Paola Cortellesi which tells the story of Italian women at the time of the first vote in June 1946, including daily life made up of continuous abuse and violence. The movie, which went on to become one of the five most-watched Italian films of all time, caused a lot of talk in the media and society because of its content. To explain why Giulia Cecchettin’s femicide mobilised people as never before, and how it is possible that a film about domestic violence could have risen to a national-popular status, we also add the fact that, as common sense goes, ‘times have changed’; and in this book we try to understand when, how and why they have changed between 2019 and 2023.

Hence, the book first examines the historical backdrop against which these conflicts arise, tracing the evolution of gender norms and societal expectations in Italy. By contextualising contemporary debates within a historical framework, we gain insight into the roots of these tensions and the ways in which they intersect with broader cultural and political movements. Central to the narrative is the intricate history of gender culture wars in Italy, from the era of Berlusconi’s leadership, marked by the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and a highly sexualised public sphere, to the emergence of feminist movements in the 2000s, advocating for gender equality and challenging entrenched patriarchal structures. Through a nuanced analysis of Italy’s socio-political landscape, the book highlights the ongoing struggles against patriarchy and the complex interplay of factors that shape the trajectory of gender discourse in Italian society.

Moreover, the influence of media, both traditional and digital, cannot be understated in shaping public opinion and exacerbating cultural divisions. Through the lens of media influence, the book explores how narratives around gender and identity are constructed, disseminated, and contested, and the ramifications of these discourses on social cohesion and political discourse. As many scholars have pointed out, social fragmentation and political polarisation are the main structural forces that contribute to shape contemporary public spaces. In the digital age, the proliferation of information disorder and the platformisation of the public sphere have added another layer of complexity to the landscape (van Dijck et al., 2018). Taking as a point of observation three cases of gender culture wars that have occurred in Italy in recent years, our work shows the

mechanisms through which social fragmentation, political polarisation, and platformisation intersect with gender issues, exacerbating long-lasting tensions and creating new articulations of the political debate.

We could say that the topic is comprised of an interweaving of issues, like threads knotted together. Three are the main threads that we aim to unravel:

- Genealogy of gender culture wars in Italy: over time, the history of gender culture wars in Italy has undergone a complex evolution, shaped by shifting societal norms, political movements, and media representations. From the reinforcement of traditional gender roles during the Berlusconi era to the emergence of feminist movements advocating for gender equality, the book traces the trajectory of these conflicts and their implications for Italian society. Through a nuanced analysis, it highlights the ongoing struggles against patriarchy and the intersections between gender discourse and political dynamics.
- Role of media in shaping culture wars: the book delves into the significant role played by the media in shaping culture wars, particularly concerning gender issues. Through processes of (in)visibilisation, agenda-setting and framing, media outlets contribute to the perpetuation of ideology and gender stereotypes. Moreover, the digital landscape amplifies these effects, facilitating the spread of divisive narratives and misinformation.
- Influence of gender issues on the rise of far-right leaders in Italy: the book elucidates how gender issues have played a pivotal role in the rise of far-right leaders in Italy. By tapping into societal anxieties surrounding traditional gender roles and identity, these leaders capitalise on cultural divisions and exploit populist rhetoric to garner support. The book examines how far-right narratives often intertwine with gendered ideologies, perpetuating notions of national identity and cultural preservation. In this framework, affective mobilisation and neoliberal feminism are also key concepts explored in the course of the volume, shedding light on how emotions are harnessed to galvanise support for or opposition to gender-related issues, and the ways in which neoliberal ideologies intersect with the far-right, shaping public discourse and political agendas.

These three threads (or lines of inquiry) recur throughout the volume.

1.2 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The structure of the book consists of an introductory chapter, with a theoretical-historical approach, and three chapters, each dedicated to an empirical case study related to the mediatisation of immigration, the political communication over the recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights (and anti-gender mobilisations), and the rise of the leadership of Giorgia Meloni within the right-wing.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the concept of culture wars, providing its significance within the context. We identify three different dimensions of the context to which we refer: the theoretical context, which involves various theoretical perspectives such as cultural studies, political theory, and political science, with particular emphasis provided to the concepts of cultural hegemony and ideology; the geographical context, which particularly concerns the evolution of the Italian public and political debate on gender issues, from the birth of the Republic to the present day, through the long era of Berlusconi; finally, the communicative-media context, characterised by processes of transformation of discourse and public debate such as platformisation, fragmentation, polarisation, and emotionalisation.

The other chapters address three illustrative case studies of processes that we term ‘typical’ of culture wars on gender issues: politicisation, polarisation, and domestication of neoliberal governmentality.

Chapter 3 faces the politicisation of an issue, that is, the process of bringing such issue to the attention of the public and politics, to the point that it is inscribed in the list of the top priorities. As we shall see, this process is multifaceted: politicisation may start from a specific will of a social or political actor (such as a leader, an activist, a movement, a party, a religious or educational organisation) but it may also be brought about by the chorus with which the media converge in assigning particular importance to a certain topic at a certain historical moment. The chapter focuses on a case study on the rescue of migrants at sea by an NGO in the summer of 2019 and the coverage offered by the Italian press. The ship’s captain, Carola Rackete, has become a useful character to serve as a counterpoint to former Minister of Interior and leader of the League, Matteo Salvini. The chapter shows how genderisation mechanisms are at work in the press to favour the invisibility of some subjects (migrants) and the visibility of others (such as Europe and Salvini).

Chapter 4 delves the process of polarisation: in fact, culture wars “do not always take form in coherent, clearly articulated, sharply differentiated world views. Rather, these moral visions take expression as *polarizing impulses or tendencies* in American culture” (Hunter, 1991, p. 43, emphasis in the original). Polarisation is a process with a dual nature. On the one hand, it has a discursive and manipulative nature bringing it closer to disinformation (Morlino & Sorice, 2021), which concerns the use of a frame of representation as an ‘uncompromising struggle’ and which requires, for every social issue or problem, a mobilisation on the part of the people and an alignment around irreconcilable positions (yes or no; this or that candidate; this or that policy). Often this discursive polarisation occurs through the use of misinformation, fake news, negative communication, registers and tones related to incivility, discrediting of opponents, and constructing the enemy (Bentivegna & Rega, 2024). On the other hand, it has an ideological nature, which relates to the positioning of political actors on more or less consolidated axes (right vs. left; conservatives vs. progressives); the greater or lesser degree of extremism or moderatism that can be observed in the various political systems and historical epochs also depends on this continuous search for relative positioning. It is clear that the two aspects are closely related. However, it is increasingly easy to listen to polarising leaders (from a discursive point of view) who pursue a fundamentally moderate agenda (from an ideological point of view); it is also very common to observe the polarising representation of a fact or topic, often linked to pseudo-moralistic debates, as a commercial strategy of the platformised news media. Indeed, many have pointed out that culture wars are often debates circumscribed to intellectual and political elites, who find space in the media to attract the attention of an otherwise disinterested public (Hunter, 1991; Wolfe, 1998; Fiorina et al., 2010). The trail of polarising manipulation for commercial purposes brings to light the role of affective mobilisation. It is indicative of this process, for example, the affective divides that quickly formed around Leavers and Remainers in the run-up and aftermath of the EU Referendum in 2016 (Hobolt et al., 2021). In Chap. 4 we will see how the gender culture war develops around mechanisms of polarisation of this sort. We will focus in particular on the case of the Zan Bill discussion, how politicians have used Facebook in the year and a half between the presentation of the Bill in the Chamber of the Deputies and the final rejection in the summer of 2021. The chapter shows how focusing on a single aspect of the LGBTQIA+ movements’ demands, such as the establishment of a law punishing

homo-trans-phobia, is a perverse strategy, because while it seems to favour a reformist or pragmatic agenda, it also exposes to polarising manipulation that emphasises the moral panic to mobilise the public. Indeed, it was precisely the analysis of the Facebook debate by politicians that revealed opposing strategies of affective mobilisation that reinforced the dynamics of polarisation.

To the path proposed by Hunter in order to move from a (supposedly) healthy public debate to a culture war, we add a further step, which seems to us particularly relevant in the case of culture wars that focus on gender issues. Chapter 5 examines the ways in which neoliberalism has encompassed the public discourse on gender: partly, as we shall see, this is a readjustment of the old discussions around gender (in particular with respect to women's emancipation there has been a shift towards concepts such as empowerment, leadership and self-entrepreneurship); partly, however, neoliberalism introduces new themes and new ways of looking at social phenomena concerning gender, including for instance reproductive technologies and work-life balance. In Chap. 5 we will therefore address the ways in which gender culture wars are fought in the context of neoliberal hegemony. Neoliberal technocracy has not eliminated culture wars but rather has fuelled them. The theme of neoliberal violence is not a new one, but it received attention again during the pandemic and during the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement; of course, the tone and communication styles of Donald Trump in the White House provide the backdrop (Giroux, 2021). David Harvey (2020), among others, have pointed out that as global and domestic inequality has increased due to economic and military crises, contemporary neoliberalism is benefitting from the rise of the far-right to marginalise claims of social redistribution. At the same time, as Dardot et al. (2023) explain, the hegemony of neoliberalism corresponds to a shift in the axis of conflict from issues of social justice and redistribution to issues of another nature. In this sense, the conflict over values can be interpreted as a functional substitute for nineteenth-twentieth century political conflict. Gender issues fit perfectly into this framework, touching on ideals of the traditional family and social order that are presumably 'under attack'. All this also impacts feminism and public discourses relating to the position of women in society, politics, domestic and professional contexts. For this reason, the chapter focuses on the concept of neoliberal feminism and uses the case study of Giorgia Meloni. In her self-representation in speeches and interviews and in the representation offered by popular media such as the women's press,