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Who is afraid of ‘Gender’?

Gender and Politics Research between Institutionalization and Contestation in Italy

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Abstract

Gender and politics scholarship has challenged conventional political science with new political questions and research issues and enriched the discipline both theoretically and methodologically. However, gender-based analysis of political phenomena is confronted with the resistance of political science – a traditionally male-dominated discipline. In Italy, gender research is still a weakly institutionalized academic field compared with other European countries. This contribution reflects on the state of gender within Italian political science and discusses the present situation at the crossroads between slow academic institutionalization and strong political contestation.

1. Introduction

It was not long ago that both the journals *European Political Science* (Mügge, Evans and Engeli 2016) and *Italian Political Science* itself (Padovani and Vingelli 2016) hosted a symposium on the state of gender scholarship in European political science, addressing the contributions of gender research in studying political phenomena and challenges for the future. Overall, they predicted a bright future for gender and politics studies due to the resurgence of the feminist movement across Europe, the ongoing process of recognition within the political science discipline and the key role of the European Union in funding and promoting gender politics and research. In sum, the feminist project was here to stay and would have an enduring life. This scenario strongly contrasts with the present climate of growing populism and ‘anti-genderism’, given that in 2018 gender studies were banned by Prime Minister Orbán in Hungary (University World News 2018), a member state of the European Union and the Council of Europe, while in other European countries the subject is increasingly opposed by a variety of actors (Verloo 2018). Why are gender studies and scholars under attack today? What has happened in the recent period to lead some parts of politics and society to declare ‘a war on gender studies’? This short contribution aims to open a discussion within our discipline about the state of gender and politics studies and the challenges posed by the rise of far-right populist parties, with broader implications for academic freedom.

The article will proceed as follows. The first section outlines the relevance of adopting a gender perspective in studying politics and the results achieved over the past thirty years. The second section focuses on the state of gender research within Italian political science. The third section discusses the current backlash against gender studies and gender scholars in times of far-right populism, a situation we also know very intimately in Italy. The conclusion raises some questions involving the academic community as a whole.

2. The challenge of gender research to conventional political science

The concept of ‘gender’ is rooted in the experience of the 1960s feminist movement. In the 1970s, it gained political significance and became an issue in the study of politics (Lovenduski 1992). It also diffused erratically – neither with linearity nor in homogenous mode – across the field of social sciences (including economics, sociology, law, history and anthropology). Using a gender perspective in research emphasized how the differences between men and women are structured, embedded and maintained by a variety of historically male-dominated institutions (for example, the state, family, church, labour market, politics, or education) (Scott 1986). While ‘sex’ refers to the biological differences between men and women, the term ‘gender’ indicates the social and cultural construction of the differences between masculinity and femininity. This process occurs in more than one context, shaping a ‘gender order’, a term that refers to a power system which constrains the relationships between people (Connell 2017). As political science is concerned with the exercise of power, studying gender and politics aims to ‘reveal and explain how and why political inclusion and exclusion are fundamentally gendered’ (Bonjour, Mügge and Roggeband 2016, p. 304). The traditional focus of the discipline on the machinery of government, elections and party politics rendered women invisible (Celis et al. 2013). Historically, (white, rich and educated) men were the only ones who were active in the public sphere, while women were excluded because of their supposed inferiority and inability. However, male-dominated politics regulated women’s access to abortion and sexuality, intimate and family issues. This ideological and artificial separation between private and public spheres was strongly contested by the mobilization of feminism and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) activism, which together broke the gender division and brought about a rethinking of traditional concepts and political questions.

Gender and sexuality research has shown the extent to which conventional traditional political science concepts are gendered, such as democracy, voting behaviour, citizenship, representation, state and party politics (Goertz and Mazur 2008). The early works of feminist scholars focused on the traditional topics of political science with the inclusion of women: the study of female voting behaviour (for Italy, see the pioneering work of Weber 1977), the electoral system’s gendered effects (Dahlerup 2006), and the impact of male-dominated party politics and the recruitment process on women’s political representation (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; for Italy, see Guadagnini 1993 and Del Re 1999). Following the inclusion project (aimed at integrating women in the traditional areas of political research), gender and politics scholarship took three broad research directions (Celis et al. 2013): the study of women in politics on their own terms (with a focus

on women's political mobilization); the study of gender regimes, gendered states, institutions and policies, given that they reproduce gender (in)equalities (Mazur 2002) and finally, the 'gender trouble' (Butler 1990) effect as a key to exploring the interplay between diversity and identity politics struggles to fight against discrimination and exclusion based on colour, race, class and sexuality.

Gender and politics scholarship also introduced new specific concepts, such as patriarchy (Walby 1989), state feminism (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995), intersectionality and multiple inequalities (Verloo 2006), in mainstream political science. Feminist contributions also brought about methodological pluralism (Ackerly and True 2010) and attention to the role of social actors inside the political system in promoting instances favouring and opposing gender equality (Ferree 2006). After decades, the division between the public and private spheres was openly contested, and the issues of body and sexuality increasingly became the object of political science attention and research, giving rise to LGBT and queer political studies (Paternotte 2018; Thiel 2019; for Italy see Prandelli et al. 2019)

It took time for feminist research contributions to receive recognition within political science, which remains a largely male-dominated and masculinized discipline. In the context of Europe, feminist scholars have experienced a variety of modes to 'gender mainstream' a resistant discipline (Vickers 2016). On taking stock of the situation, we see that some elements appear crucial in evaluating the gendering of political science. The first is the number of women, given that gender-related courses are mostly taught by women: recruiting more women means increased attention to gender issues. In the last two decades, the status of women in political science has improved in terms of the number of women (full) professors; women's presence in major disciplinary handbooks; women's participation as authors, editors and reviewers in relevant disciplinary journals, and women taking leading roles in the profession (e.g. presidency of a professional association).

Table 1. Establishment of Women/Gender and Politics sections across some professional associations.

Professional Association	Section/ Research committee	Year of foundation
UK Political Studies Association	Women and Politics	1970s
American Political Science Association	Women and Politics	1986
German Political Science Association	Gender and Politics	1992
Spanish Association of Political and Administrative Science	Gender and Politics	1997
Austrian Political Science association	Gender and Politics	1997–1999
Italian Political Science Association	Gender and Politics	2018
European Consortium for Political Research	Gender and Politics	1985
International Political Science Association	Gender Politics and Policy Women and Politics in the Global South	1979 1992
International Sociological Association	Women, Gender and Society	1973

Source: Mügge et al. 2016 (with author's updates and integration)

Another element supporting the academic recognition of gender studies is the foundation of a section on Women/Gender and Politics within national professional

organizations and European, transatlantic and international umbrellas: the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), the International Political Science Association (IPSA) and the International Sociological Association (ISA) (see Table 1). The aim is to diffuse the study of gender and politics, to support gender equality in the profession and to facilitate contact and communication between scholars engaged in the study of gender and politics by organizing group conferences and workshops, panels at general conferences and other events, and awarding prizes.

Following this broad scenario of what is meant by gendering political science, now we turn our attention to the field of political science in Italy to reflect on the state of gender research.

3. The weak institutionalization of gender research within Italian political science

In Italy, as elsewhere, gender research emerged in response to the issues brought up by the rise of the Italian feminist movement in the late 1960s and the progressive inclusion of feminist scholars within academia. In their initial stage, gender studies were integrated in the education system in a ‘hidden way’ (Di Cori 2013), as gender-related teaching was mainstreamed into the general social science curriculum, including political science. Given the institutional context of female academic underrepresentation and of curricula rigidity, many feminist scholars managed to introduce a focus on women into their courses, integrating new issues such as female electoral behaviour, female political representation and women’s movement activities. Starting in the 1990s, gender studies centres and gender scholar groups formed at the university department level. This had the support of national initiatives such as the decision of the then Minister of Equal Opportunities, the sociologist Laura Balbo, to sustain gender studies within academia and that of the central government to subsidise universities in organizing the course ‘Women, Politics and Institutions’ in the period 2006–2013 (Saraceno 2010). Today we count at least 20 centres developed in many universities across Italy and they are a key venue where seminars and conferences are organized, research on women and gender issues is conducted and training courses and advanced education are provided. A more recent development was the recruitment of a younger generation of female scholars, formed abroad or members of international gender research networks (Pravadelli 2010). Taken together, all these developments led to a process of institutionalization of Women’s and Gender Studies in the early 2000s, despite the rigidity of the Italian university system and a decline in public funding.

What about gender in our discipline today? Political science is quite a young discipline in Italy compared to other social sciences, with a community of around 238¹ members, of which 77 are women (32%). The female presence registers minoritarian numbers in the highest positions of full (10 women out of 52, 19%) and associate professor (37 women out of 95, 39%). It is no surprise, then, to note that most teaching materials and syllabuses are still gender blind and the main findings of feminist scholars are disregarded. As Padovani and Vingelli (2016, p. VI) remark, ‘the reflection [on

¹ Data taken from the website of the Italian Minister of University and Research, 21 December 2019: <http://cercauniversita.cineca.it/php5/docenti/cerca.php>.

the potential of promoting and supporting gender-aware approaches to political science research and education] is ongoing across Europe and beyond. Yet the Italian political science community has not been attentive to these debates; and (...) most of the above issues have seldom been addressed in our professional circles'. From the areas of party politics to public policy analysis, from comparative politics to European and international politics, the gender perspective has been absent, or without consistent and permanent scholarly activity, for a long time. The first generation of Italian feminist political scientists did not establish a tradition of gender studies, mainly for two reasons: either they were marginalized within the discipline, with their work unacknowledged or undervalued as 'unscientific', or they decided to be outsiders to the Italian community, preferring to build and be part of international research networks, where gender studies were recognized and funded. However, their pioneering work was precious for the succeeding generation of gender scholars who acknowledged their research and prosecuted it in an academic context which was more favourable to gender equality. Such a context was also increasingly open to collaboration with researchers across countries (see the establishment of international gender research networks such as the Research Network on Gender, Politics and the State RNGS launched in the late 1990s and which brought together more than 50 researchers to investigate and generate theories about the effectiveness of women's policy machineries) and was supported by political science institutions such as ECPR, IPSA and others.

In the last two decades, gender perspective has been slowly integrated into social sciences (for example, economics, history, sociology, law, literature, psychology), and a growing number of young (female) scholars with an interest in gender studies have achieved academic positions in Italian universities. These changes have led research activity, supported by EU funding, to focus on the place of knowledge production, i.e. academia, and to question its supposed gender neutrality.² As in other workplaces, the results show the persistence of sexism and gender inequality within the university system, with a masculine (almost) monopoly at the highest level (*professore ordinario*) of the academic hierarchy, negatively affecting the realization of justice and equal opportunities in the recruitment process. Scientific knowledge and the environment where it is produced are not gender neutral, then, and this awareness underlies the recent equality measures adopted by some Italian universities (among others, the University of Trento in 2014 and Scuola Normale in 2016) aiming to increase the number of women in academia, from the early to the last crucial stages of their academic careers. The greater the efforts to fill the gender gap in academia, the more the presence of women numerically increases, and so it is reasonable to expect that gender studies will be reinforced in the near future.

In this context of 'structural gender awareness', there are some, albeit small, positive signs of de-masculinization and of recognition of gender and politics research within the discipline. First, the Italian Political Science Association (*Società Italiana di Scienza Politica* SISP) has a female president for the second consecutive time since 2015. Second, gender and politics topics have started, very humbly, to be incorporated in mainstream textbooks (see paragraph on female political representation in Capano

² Among others; see, for example the EU funded project GARCIA – Gendering the Academy and Research: Combating Career Instability and Asymmetries (<http://garciaproject.eu/>).

et al. 2014). Finally, after decades of scattered panels on gender issues, the foundation of the Gender and Politics Standing Group (GPSG) of the SISP in 2018 is good news (albeit with a significant delay in comparison with other European countries, as seen above in Table 1). Thanks to the commitment of a group of about 30 gender scholars from different Italian and European universities and the support of the SISP organization, the GPSG was built to give visibility to gender and politics research, to reunite gender scholars coming from different disciplines periodically and to organize seminars and panels during the SISP annual meetings, with the overall goal of bringing about significant change in the knowledge and education of the mainstream discipline. The GPSG was active in organizing a plurality of gender panels at the 2018 and 2019 SISP annual meetings (with six panels in total, plus a roundtable), thus becoming a key reference institution for gender and politics scholars. The establishment of the GPSG might represent a further step towards the mainstreaming of gender within Italian political science, as has already happened in other countries. Much will depend on the capacity of their members to build alliances with other standing groups within SISP, to diffuse gender awareness across thematic fields, to collaborate with other national and umbrella professional organizations and to work with scholars of other disciplines, reinforcing the interdisciplinarity of gender studies.

It has taken a long time for Italian political science to reach this early stage of institutionalization. Compared with other European countries, our discipline is a latecomer in recognizing the contributions of gender and politics research. Things are slowly changing, thanks to the initiatives pursued over the years by a group of committed actors today and in the past within political institutions, political science associations and universities in favour of the institutionalization of gender and politics research. A critical point remains the weak inclusion of gender in university education³, political science courses included. Moreover, there are great disparities between subfields within the discipline in the types and amount of gender scholarship that has been done. For example, International Relations is a subfield where feminist contributions remain largely ignored despite the increasing amount of gender research available on topics such as international security, human rights and international political economy (on this debate see Tickner and Sjoberg 2011). Hence, the main challenge for the future will be to increase the supply of gender in political science curricula at undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels to equip students, future scholars and policymakers with a gender lens to understand power and politics and identify gender inequalities.

Gender studies need solid and consolidated roots to better contrast recurring gender backlash. Today more than before we realize how institutionally weak this research field is in times when gender research and scholars have been contested and attacked by social and political actors. We will explore this last development in the next section.

³ In 2012, 16 universities out of 57 offered at least one module on gender studies (Antonelli, Sarra and Sorrentino 2013).

4. The contestation of gender research and scholars outside the discipline

As anticipated in the introduction, in many European countries gender studies are under attack, especially since the anti-gender movement – a constellation of conservative and religious associations and organizations acting in defence of a supposed ‘natural’ gender order – has converged with the anti-gender discourses of populist radical right and conservative party programmes (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). In Hungary, France, Germany, Poland and Slovakia (Kováts and Pöim 2015), the political agenda of populist radical right parties has been reframed in such a way as to intercept the claims of religious fundamentalist movements, with the establishment of a strategic alliance against so-called ‘gender ideology’. The latter is a label that represents the ‘symbolic glue’ behind which, attacks occur against the feminist project of equality and social justice (Verloo and Paternotte 2018). The rise of far-right populism in Europe has meant a backlash against gender equality policies and academic gender studies programmes.

Italy has not been immune to this cultural backlash since Lega, under Matteo Salvini’s leadership, was transformed from an ethno-regionalist to a populist radical right party (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). Gender scholars have pointed out that populist radical right parties can be characterized as conservative with respect to family values and traditional gender roles (Köttig et al. 2017), and Lega is not an exception. Its 2018 electoral manifesto included the centrality of the natural patriarchal family as the fundamental unit of society and the need to defend it; the urgency to promote demographic growth policies; the exclusive role of parents in choosing the kind of education given to their children; and the necessity of alternative measures to abortion. In Lega’s view, gender equality represents a threat to social values, contrasted with Christian civilization, and it is considered the cause of the demographic crisis, the emergence of alternative family models, the diffusion of the practice of abortion and the disappearance of traditional male and female roles in society. Hence, according to Lega, the heterosexual family is the institution of moral values, currently under attack by liberal and secular ideas and elites.

The conservative agenda and populist discourse of Lega overlaps with the fundamentalist positions of the Italian anti-gender movement (Lavizzari and Prearo 2018), and this explains the alliance between the two actors and why some members of Catholic organizations decided to run for office under the Lega flag in 2018 (Donà 2020). Close relationships were also previously established at the local level (where Lega holds government positions) in contrast with the diffusion of so-called ‘gender ideology’ (*ideologia gender*). It suffices to mention a few examples of anti-gender radical right populism campaigns which confirm that we are not talking about isolated events, but about the result of a deliberated political strategy aiming to (re)politicize gender issues and counter the progressive policy changes introduced in the areas of LGBT, reproductive and sexual rights. What follows is not an exhaustive list of events.

In May 2018, a workshop organized by the research centre *Politesse* of the University of Verona on ‘Asylum Seekers, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity’ was cancelled due to protests from extremist and fundamentalist Catholic groups against gender (orsato 2018). In November 2018, the Lega Minister of University, Marco Bussetti, stopped an academic study on homophobic attitudes in education conducted by the

University of Perugia on the (undemonstrated) basis that the questions on sexual orientation exposed students to gender ideology (Drogo 2018). In December 2018, gender equality programmes promoted for secondary school students under the scientific supervision of the Centre of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Trento were cancelled (and never reactivated) by the Lega local government because they were accused of promoting gender ideology (Baldo 2018). A contested event happened in March 2019 when the XIII World Congress of Families (WCF) took place in Verona as part of the activities of the International Organization for the Family, a Christian fundamentalist movement.⁴ Since the first conference held in Prague in 1997, the subject of the WCF has been the ‘natural family’ to mobilize against LGBT people’s rights and school programmes on gender and sex education. The event was sponsored and endorsed by Lega politicians from local (the governors of the Veneto region and Trento province) and national government, including party leader Salvini together with Lorenzo Fontana (then Minister of Family and Disability) and Bussetti (Minister of University).

All these initiatives were promoted in the name of the family, Christian identity, and ‘real people’, not only to attack existing equality policies, but also to discredit the scientific standing of gender research and gender scholars. Radical right populism and religious fundamentalism, for different reasons, are on the same side in the battle against ‘gender imposed on the people’, and they are acting together to contest gender studies and gender scholars, accusing them of destroying the ‘natural’ gender binary and the ‘natural complementarity of men and women’, thus weakening the basis of the ‘natural family’ made up of a man and a woman and, consequently, the ‘moral order’ of the nation itself

4. Conclusions

We are facing a paradoxical situation today. On the one hand, gender has started to be mainstreamed within Italian political science and academia, while on the other, a growing opposition to gender studies has emerged outside academia. The fact that populist parties and religious factions contest and attack a research field in the name of ‘ordinary people’ is of immediate concern to those who do gender research.⁵ When a research field is under attack for political reasons, it should ring alarm bells for the entire academic community (Corbett and Gordon 2018). At stake here are scholarly knowledge, university autonomy and academic freedom.

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⁴ For more information about the organization, mission and activities see the institutional website <https://www.profam.org/mission/>.

⁵ Today grouped in the Rete italiana degli Studi di Genere, Intersex, Femministi, Transfemministi e sulla Sessualità (GIFTS), <https://retgifts.wordpress.com/>.

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