Antigender in 280 characters

A Feminist Netnographic Study of Matteo Salvini and
Giorgia Meloni's Online Discourse

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Abstract

In the past years, antigenderism has become a growing coalition that has moved from being a monopoly of the Vatican to being picked up by Catholic associations and politicians, quickly reaching the general public. The word "gender" has become an empty signifier to attack queer and feminist agendas, sexual and reproductive rights but also gender studies scholars and courses. A big role in the spread of antigenderism has been played by social media, and Twitter is one that stands out among them for the immediacy of communication that its 280 characters limit requires. This non-participatory political nethnography, with the help of some tools of feminist critical discourse analysis, will aim at finding discursive patterns in the antigenderist tweets by Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, the two faces of the Italian right wing. Framed by a Foucauldian theoretical framework, operationalized with theories of othering and countermovements, this thesis will identify four discursive patterns associated with Salvini and Meloni's antigenderism. Namely, epistemic power, appeals to the traditional family and the protection of children, whataboutism and femonationalism. These patterns will be guiding the theoretically informed analysis of the politicians' tweets in order to gain a deeper understanding of the Italian antigender movement for the purpose of taking a first step towards challenging its discriminatory nature.

Keywords: Antigender; Nethnography; Twitter; Meloni; Salvini

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Problem: Antigenderism

"In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these—I will call it clearly by its name—is [the ideology of] 'gender'" (Corredor, 2019, p.1).

These are the words of Pope Francis, in 2016, in one of a series of speeches that attack gender discourse, defined as a "great enemy" in a "war of ideologies". Speeches that claim the existence of a gender ideology can be traced in the Vatican since the early 1990s with the same narrative thread: an opposition to the recognition of gender as a social construct that threatens the so-called traditional family, which is supposedly being replaced by the erasure of the differences between men and women, the promotion of homosexuality and gender confusion (Corredor, 2019). This religious trend quickly made its way into the realm of politics. Il Popolo della Famiglia (The People of the Family) was the first party in Italy to have an antigender agenda in 2016, with the slogan "No gender in schools", and was promptly followed by mainstream parties such as Lega and Brothers of Italy, who went from using antigenderism vocabulary from time to time to including it in their official programs (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

In this sense, the word "gender," has been redefined and is being used to undermine all of those policies that have characterized feminist agendas in the last decade such as reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and matters concerning gender-based violence (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). "Gender" has lost its meaning as the simple English translation of the Italian word "genere" and has become a

stretchy and disorganised category that expresses a collective urge to reaffirm the "natural" heteropatriarchal hierarchies (Corredor, 2019).

Technological advances such as social networks are means that have undoubtedly facilitated the spread of conservative world views (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). The use of social media, allows political leaders to directly address their public (Bracciale et al., 2021), and they have indeed become a site of political participation with great influence on political behaviours and opinions (Graham & Dutton, 2019).

This search for reaffirmed power relations by right-wing parties through social media in Italy is what I will be researching in this thesis, looking at Meloni's (leader of Brothers of Italy and Italian Prime Minister) and Salvini's (leader of Lega, one of the parties in the government coalition) Twitter profiles. More concretely, I aim to explore the interaction between the two far-right governmental figures and themes of gender and sexuality where antigenderism tendencies are expressed.

1.2 Aims and Research Questions

In order to address the research problem, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. Which power relations are involved in the online discussions made by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini when supporting the antigender ideology?
2. Which patterns can be identified in the tweets by the two politicians on topics of gender, sexuality and reproductive rights?

This thesis aims to develop a framework to investigate the way in which online discourses that start from antigender claims perpetrate dynamics of power that generate knowledge in Foucauldian terms. In other words, how the way of speaking about sexuality and gender-related issues shapes the perception of reality

and truth about them. With the support of the theoretical framework that has been developed, the power relations and their dynamics will be operationalised and investigated, starting from tweets by Meloni and Salvini. Lastly, an achievement of a deeper understanding of the relations between power and language through the use of the theoretical framework will be aimed at, in order to challenge the inherent discriminatory features of antigenderism.

In terms of the contribution this study could give, the hope I have for this thesis is to give insights that can function as a first step towards the deconstruction of these forms of hate speech. A report from GATE (2023), the Global Action for Trans Equality has shown how the spread of antigender ideas can have, and has already started having, serious consequences in terms of policies and legitimization of the spread of discriminatory language and actions. In particular, Europe has started seeing members of antigender groups taking seats in governmental bodies, trans and gender-diverse individuals have expressed the feeling that their human rights situation has worsened in the past year. In Italy in particular, the perception is that the antigender movement has continuously grown larger, verbal attacks legitimized by the antigender movement have increased, reports of harassment moved by antigender feelings to authorities are not effective and the consensus antigender ideas are having from the political realm is worsening and validating the situation (GATE, 2023).

I believe the understanding of what forms these kinds of discourses can take can be a first move towards its deconstruction. Feelings of anger and fear about the spread of these ideas are behind this thesis. However, this emotional involvement I felt while reading about antigenderism motivated my feminism even more. I hope I can transmit these feelings and contribute to the growing body of research that hopes to inspire resistance against these discourses and the negative effects they have.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

After this introductory chapter, where some context on the Italian antigender movement will be given, a literature review will follow in order to place this study in a field of research and give an overview of what has already been said about the topic. The third chapter is where the theoretical framework is outlined, a fundamental step for this thesis since the intent is to have a heavily theoretically-informed analysis. The fourth chapter is an overview of the methods that have been selected to conduct the analysis. In this chapter topics such as my positionality as a researcher, the research design and possible limitations deriving from sampling and the choice of methods are also addressed. The fifth chapter consists of findings and data analysis. The findings section of this chapter will function as a guideline for the rest of the analysis and some general findings will be reported. In the data analysis, some examples of tweets will be reported and analyzed with the help of the theoretical framework. The discussion chapter will then bring the analysis together and bring up some new theoretical perspectives on it. The seventh and final chapter is the concluding one, where findings have been summarized and limitations and suggestions for further research will also be addressed here.

1.4 History of the Antigender Movement in Italy

Even though the antigender movement shares similar characteristics worldwide, there still are some relevant country-specific differences that arise from different historical and socio-political backgrounds. For example, Norwegian antigenderists speak up mainly in response to the progress achieved in medical sciences and legal fields concerning gender and sexual minorities, critiquing social constructivist ideas of gender (Engebretsen, 2022) but from a different perspective than the one the Polish antigenderists have, for instance. In Poland, the antigender

matrix is based less on an attack on science and more on the defence of a nationalist Catholic identity (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Even different is the movement in Sweden, where antigender discourses have the peculiarity of being often connected to anti-Islam ones through the belief that gender ideology distracts authorities from handling issues related to migration, terrorism and so on (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022).

With all of these country-specific differences, why do we still talk about "the antigender movement"? If we consider the definition of social movement given by Blumer (1995) in Social Movements

They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on the one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living (Blumer, 1995, p.60).

Furthermore, social movements do not have to necessarily be organized and can be in some way undefined, as long as they share this sense of dissatisfaction with the same form of life (Blumer, 1995) in this case, the "gender ideology". For this reason, in this thesis, I will use the expression "antigender movement" to refer to those who share the feeling of threat by the so-called gender ideology but are not necessarily an organized movement.

Still, it remains necessary to acknowledge that the Italian antigender movement needs to be contextualized for its own singularities. To understand the main features of the movement in Italy it is then inevitable to start from its Vatican origins. The start of the antigender campaigns that now see the involvement of Catholic and conservative associations, parties and individuals can be allocated in the 1990s in the Vatican, with the aim to contrast those theoretical and political approaches that are not consistent with an idea of a natural gender division and of a traditional family (Bellè & Poggio, 2018). The analytical notion of gender is seen by the Catholics, and passed on accordingly to their devotees, as

a threat to Divine Creation, which has led them to define it as diabolic (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016). The analytical notion of gender however is only the tip of the iceberg. 'Gender' in 'gender ideology' stands for much more than just the idea that gender roles are social constructions and the hetero-patriarchal family is not the only possible model. 'Gender ideology' has gradually started to be inclusive of a good range of reproductive rights (of which abortions is just one) same-sex marriage and child adoption, sexual education in schools and any norm concerned with sexuality are all topics that have been reconducted to 'gender ideology'. The word 'gender' has become an empty signifier that includes a wide range of issues that makes it difficult to identify precisely what exactly antigenderism goes against (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016).

These declarations from the clergy quickly made their way to fundamentalist Catholic associations, two of the most known -but not the only ones- are Pro-Vita e Famiglia (Pro-life and Family) and Manif pour Tous Italia (from French: Protest for All) (Bellè & Poggio, 2018). Pro-Vita e Famiglia describe themselves as an organisation that aims at protecting children and spreading the values of life and family and they concentrate mostly on anti-abortionism. Manif pour Tous Italy is the Italian branch of the association founded in France in 2012 to oppose same-sex marriage and sex and gender education in schools. Both of these associations inherited from the Vatican the idea of a 'gender propaganda' to stop (Bellè & Poggio, 2018).

As it will be shown throughout this thesis, antigenderism has moved from the Vatican to movements into conservative political groups. The adoption of antigenderism by political parties in Italy can be traced back to a political event that consolidated the relationship between them and the above-cited movements: the debate on the Cirinnà bill (Almagisti & Capretta, 2021). The Cirinnà bill, now law, aimed at allowing same-sex couples to be juridically recognized and have the same rights and duties as heterosexual couples. However, it ended up being voted in its compromised version that excluded the mutual obligation of fidelity and the step-child adoption, because otherwise it would not have been voted by the right (Guizzardi, 2017). While this law was still being debated, the rhetoric of

antigenderism started being picked up from right-wing political parties, sealing the alliance with antigender movements. The alliance became undeniable when some of the members of the movements became members of the government alongside Lega (Almagisti & Capretta, 2021). A more recent debate that showed Lega and Brothers of Italy's use of antigenderist rhetorics was the discussion around the Zan Bill in 2021, a bill against homotransphobia, gender-based discrimination and ableism (Almagisti & Capretta, 2021). The bill never passed but was a topic of public debate for some time and dragged antigender discourses during the last electoral campaign in 2022. These two events that particularly marked the antigender features in party leaders Meloni and Salvini are what determined the timeframe of this thesis.

1.4.1 Lega and Brothers of Italy

In order to understand the choice of Meloni and Salvini as research subjects, it is necessary to delve into the political contexts that shaped their parties' ideologies and policies regarding gender issues, and why they can be traced back to antigenderism.

Lega has its origins in the 80s when its name was still Lega Nord (Northern League). It started as a set of independentist leagues in some regions in Northern Italy with the idea that the North should be independent of the South, as they had the most flourishing economy. Southern regions were described as parasitic and polluters of the authentic Italian identity (Ignazi, 2018). With the European elections of 1989, the various leagues presented themselves as Lega Nord in the national political scene for the first time, gaining more and more consensus until they left the path of an electoral roll and became one party in 1991, under the leadership of Umberto Bossi (Ignazi, 2018). What makes Lega's history peculiar is its initial ideological potpourri, which saw some of its members openly xenophobic and some strongly pro-Europe, some were for a neoliberal economy and some distrustful towards it. Even the theme of civil rights was characterised by ideological heterogeneity, some had progressive ideas, they

believed in opening up towards equal rights for everyone and others were closer to what became antigenderism, with the idea that the traditional family could be the only alternative. This incoherence did not stop the party from gaining consensus as it was voted on because of a general sense of scepticism towards the traditional parties due to widespread corruption. Lega's strength was in its coherence about the independentist ideas for Northern regions and in its populist characters, presenting themselves as representatives of the common people. Furthermore, their ability to sell ideological incoherence as an ability to satisfy anyone was for sure helpful for their growth (Ignazi, 2018). At the end of the 90s is when Lega started becoming closer to what we know them for today. The southern matter left space for an agenda defined by strong xenophobia, a limitation of rights to unmarried heterosexual couples and a complete rejection of LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights, in defence of a Catholic identity that had by that point substituted the Northern Italian identity (hence, the change of name from "Northern League" to only "League"). These standings were even more radicalized after 2013 when Lega lost some consensus and decided to elect a new secretary: Matteo Salvini. Salvini's strategy to regain the electorate was that of urging on these new themes and abandoning more and more independentist ideas to get a grip on the whole country, the South included (Ignazi, 2018). Even though anti immigration seems to be Salvini's dearest topic, radical antigenderism is definitely present in his communication and political program, as this research will address.

Much newer and more ideologically coherent is the history of Fratelli D'Italia. Brothers of Italy was founded in 2012, when Giorgia Meloni, together with Ignazio La Russa, separated from Alleanza Nazionale, a post-fascist party, to create a new one (Ignazi, 2018). The name of the party, which recalls the first three words of the national anthem, already suggests the importance of the Italian identity for the party. Recognisable is also the typical populist rhetoric that counterposes the people to an élite that is trying to damage it, in line with the theories that are going to frame this research. In particular, "the people" are menaced by outsiders who are putting at stake their security and traditional ways

of living. The security menace is represented by migrants, against which Meloni's party bases a significant part of its propaganda. In terms of lifestyle and culture, a traditional view of society and of the individual is presented to face the "decline" of the globalized post-modern society: abortion rights as well as topics on procreation, LGBTQ+ rights and "gender ideology" are all themes that in Brothers of Italy's programs find grounds in Christian and traditional values, in the triad Dio, Patria e Famiglia: God, Homeland and Family (Ventura, 2022).

In terms of placing the two parties on the left-right political spectrum, well-fitting is Mudde's (2019) definition of the right in "The Far Right Today". The far right is hostile to democracy that doesn't identify with the idea of popular sovereignty. The radical right, on the contrary, accepts it but takes positions against some elements of liberal democracy like the safeguard of the rights of minorities (Mudde, 2019). While Lega is closer to Mudde's idea of the radical right, Fratelli d'Italia could be placed among those parties that combine elements of both the radical and the far right because of its tie to their post-fascist history and at the same time the consideration of popular sovereignty and consensus as important (Ventura, 2022).

The success of both Fratelli d'Italia and Lega cannot be detached from the figures of their leaders Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini and their ability to create a popular image of a comforting leader for their electorate (Ventura, 2022). The two parties share themes and an affinity with radical and far right in the Italian political scenario, and their leaders share a strong personalization that results in an immediate link between the party and the leader (Ventura, 2022). The leader represents the party, but the party is represented by the recognizable leader and these two are hardly ever separated. Therefore, this research will focus on the way Meloni and Salvini speak about the matter of gender in the frame of the indistinguishable tie between party and leader.

2. Previous Research

This section presents literature on the expression of antigenderism by political leaders online. However, as research on such a specific topic is limited, literature on broader topics such as the use of social media by political leaders and antigenderism in a broader sense were included in this review. This choice was driven by my curiosity to explore if research about the use of social media by political leaders mentions antigenderism and vice versa if research on antigenderism brings up the spread of antigender ideas through social media. Furthermore, this literature review will aim at locating this study in a theoretical context, looking for theoretical frameworks that have been used before to conduct similar pieces of research.

2.1 Research on Politics and Social Media

For the most part, in the literature that has been considered for my aims here, research on social media does not mention antigenderism as a frequently discussed topic by political leaders. Despite the lack of recognition in this field of research given to the role of political leaders in perpetuating antigenderism via social media, it is still pertinent to report it here to seek confirmation that their posts can have a significant impact on the formation of public opinion and discourse.

In this field of studies, theories of othering are frequently used to frame pieces of research that specifically target the use of social media by right-wing populist actors (Bracciale et al., 2021; Martella & Bracciale, 2022; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Other relevant features of these pieces of research have been

found in those pieces of literature that were looking for explanations as to why political leaders use social media. The conclusion, among others, is that they do so to create narratives and shape worldviews (Barberá & Zeitzoff, 2018) or to look approachable to their followers, creating again some kind of othering, generating an "us" that can only exist with a "them" (Bracciale et al., 2021). Even if, among the research considered for this review, Foucaudian theoretical frameworks could not be located, othering and countermovements theories are frequently mentioned (Bracciale et al., 2021; Martella & Bracciale, 2022; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Their incidence in research on politics and social media shows that creating a sense of belonging through the practice of othering is relevant to the scope of this thesis.

Some research expands on the emotional charge that comes with othering as a discursive process (Martella & Bracciale, 2022). However, when talking about emotional charge, a big focus in the research on the use of social media by political figures is given to populism (Bracciale et al., 2021; Ernst et al., 2019; Martella & Bracciale, 2022). Populism as a concept is relevant when talking about antigenderism, and can be found in research on antigenderism and antigenderism in social media as well (Bellè & Poggio, 2018; Bladini et al., 2021; Engebretsen, 2022; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018) and the relevance of its features and communication strategies are recognized throughout this project. However, I have decided to not present it as a key concept because the Foucauldian conception of power, which will be further explained in the chapter about the theoretical framework, implies power relations by every actor of an interaction, so defining a particular communication style like the populist one would not be relevant given the theoretical framework. In other words, if the politicians I am enquiring about were not populists, their discourses would still be permeated with power dynamics in a Foucauldian sense. Furthermore, given Mudde's (2004) definition of populism "An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p.543), I believe

that theories of othering already grasp this characteristic and better suit the theme of power dynamics I am researching.

2.2 Research on Antigenderism

Research on antigenderism is very likely to be about the Italian context (Cossutta & Habed, 2021; Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019) or to have at least a section dedicated to the country (Garbagnoli, 2016; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Trappolin, 2022) which shows the significance this topic has in Italy. Something else to notice is that research on antigenderism often mentions the role social media play in the spread of these ideas, even when the research is not specifically designed to explore the role of online platforms (Case, 2019; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Korolczuk, 2020; Trappolin, 2022). Furthermore, three of the pieces of research taken into consideration have explained antigenderism through the notion of countermovements (Corredor, 2019; Cossutta & Habed, 2021; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022), the same approach that this thesis will have towards it. An interesting approach that is worth mentioning is the anticolonial framework that some authors have chosen to give to their research. Some authors have pointed out how discursive constructions around antigenderism tend to appropriate the language of anticolonial discourses (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). Research that talks about the use of the anti-colonial frames shows how this is a meta-discourse that stresses the need to protect ordinary people against an élite, similarly to othering discourses and countermovements, by equating fights for gender equality with colonization, but also with totalitarianism in the 1900s, global terrorism or deadly viruses (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). This interesting approach to antigenderism points out that "anti-colonial antigenderists" appropriate colonial discourses without subscribing to a postcolonial theoretical strand, but rather use it as a strategy aimed at victimhood signalling. This means that the anti-colonial frame does not

necessarily have to be connected to colonialism, but can function as a metaphor and a discursive device (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018).

2.3 Research on Antigenderism in Social Media

Previous research on antigenderism expressions through social media has been done. In the majority of the cases, however, they are about users of the platforms more broadly, so they might not correspond to political leaders (Evolvi, 2022; Igareda et al., 2021; Martinsson & Ericson, 2022; Ozduzen & Korkut, 2020) or they examine blogs and websites for antigender groups that do not correspond to political parties (Bellè & Poggio, 2018; Ottaviano, 2017). Literature on this topic can be found set in Turkey (Ozduzen & Korkut, 2020), Norway (Engebretsen, 2022), Sweden (Martinsson & Ericson, 2022) and Italy (Bellè & Poggio, 2018; Bladini et al., 2021; Ottaviano, 2017; Righetti, 2021; Wallaschek et al., 2022). The Italian branch of this kind of literature is the closest to this thesis, not only because the country where the research is set is the same, but also because antigenderism looks different in Italy than it does in countries such as Sweden and Norway where the Catholic Church is not as present. Righetti's (2021) "The Anti-Gender Debate on Social Media. A Computational Communication Science Analysis of Networks, Activism, and Misinformation" focuses on the use of Facebook to spread antigender ideas, and even though it does show a consistent involvement of right-wing parties with antigenderism, it does not research particular leaders' profiles, and the research is closer to a quantitative one since there is no analysis of the content of the posts (Righetti, 2021).

Bellè and Poggio's (2018) "New Faces of Populism: The Italian 'anti-gender' Mobilization" and Ottaviano's (2017) "An attack called defence: The communication strategy of 'gender opponents' in Italy" both fall under the category of research on the antigender movement online in Italy, but they both analyze blogs and association's websites. Even if a lot of the concepts of these two pieces of research -along with the others mentioned in this section- will be

critical for understanding the development of an antigender discourse, they differ from this thesis because they do not have much on the politician's involvement on the matter. Finally, the closest research is by Bladini et al. (2021) and it is titled "Anti-Gender Hate Speech in Populist Right-Wing Social Media Communication". It is pretty extensive research as it engages with the antigenderism of right-wing parties in five different countries (Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Germany and Spain). The section dedicated to Italy is on the Twitter profiles of Salvini and Meloni, but it limits itself to looking for antigender features in tweets regarding specific events: the unauthorized disembarkation of the Sea-Watch 3 led by Carola Rackete in an Italian port and the trafficking of Nigerian women reported in a local newspaper. What emerges from this research is the instrumentalization of specific events to target migrants and feminist movements. Theoretically, Bladini et al.'s (2021) research is focusing on the communication styles of politicians online based on the speech act theory, which is similar to Foucauldian's definition of power in its belief that speech is an act that is inherently a powerful one. However, I did not engage with this theory because, differently than Foucauldian discourse, it theorises the formation of a hierarchy and power is not considered productive. The whole premise of speech act theory is that the population that is being targeted has no agency and can be indoctrinated by any stimulus they receive, a statement with which I do not agree with and which would have taken away the aspect of resistance of this thesis. Another difference with this thesis is the methods used to carry out this research: a mix of both qualitative and quantitative analysis aimed at a more descriptive analysis rather than a theory-informed one (Bladini et al., 2021).

On balance, all the research on antigenderism, social media and politics and antigenderism in social media will function as a precious resource for my purposes in this thesis, and I aim to relate to them by drawing concepts, methods and theories from these different but connected pieces of research. These can be considered a first step towards a deeper understanding of the power relations that lie behind the language used by Italian party leaders Meloni and Salvini talking about 'gender ideology'.

3. Theoretical Framework

This thesis will make use of several theoretical contributions that will be framing the study and contribute to addressing the research questions. Namely, the theoretical framework will draw from the Foucauldian conception of power, theories on othering and the notion of countermovements. Theories of countermovements will then be covered more in-depth with Carl Schmitt's (2008) and Chantal Mouffe's (2005) contributions that allowed me to define the relationship between movement and countermovement more profoundly.

3.1 Foucauldian Conception of Power

The Foucauldian elaboration around power essentially states that power is what generates the social world, and a big role in this is played by the ways in which the social world is talked about: knowledge goes hand in hand with power and is directly connected to discourse (understood as the way of talking about something) (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Power is seen by Foucault as something that does not exist outside of social relationships because it is exercised through social interactions. Then, the reason why power is closely connected to discourse is that the ability to influence the way something is talked about is a form of power (Gauntlett, 2008).

As shown in "The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I" (1990), power exercised through discourse generates knowledge, which is a generally believed truth about something. In this case, knowledge about topics of gender and sexuality is so ingrained in society that is perceived as an actual truth and not an effect of a constraining power (Foucault, 1990). "Indeed, it is in

discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." (Foucault, 1990, p.101). The exercise of power through the way of speaking about something is what I will investigate in this thesis, which makes Foucault's conception of it suitable to the research's aim, as I will argue in the next paragraphs.

3.1.1 Foucault and RQs: Operationalization

Firstly, the use of Foucault allows me to address the assumptions that I make in the first research question "Which power relations are involved in the online discussions made by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini when supporting the antigender ideology?". Being discourse, in Foucauldian terms, means of the exercise of power (Foucault, 1990), the use of "which" is justified in place of asking if power relations are involved at all. In other words, the use of Foucault's conception of power makes it implicit that discourses involve relations of power.

In terms of operationalization of Foucauldian power, to address this and the second research question, "Which patterns can be identified in the tweets by the two politicians on topics of gender, sexuality and reproductive rights?" the importance Foucault gives to repetition is a key aspect. In line with the purpose of the first volume of The History of Sexuality (1990), exploring the way in which discourses on sexuality constructed a certain "truth" on identities (Gauntlett, 2008), I will make use of the association between power, knowledge and discourse. I will be doing so by leaning on Foucault's (1980) idea that power is sustained by reiterations. In other words, looking for patterns in the way of speaking (discourse) about gender-related topics that are indeed repeated, and so they perform as truths (knowledge). These repetitions of patterns, framed by othering and countermovements theories, are going to represent the exercise of power (Foucault, 1980).

3.1.2 Foucault and the Choice of Methods

Furthermore, the importance given to discourse by Foucault gives grounds for the use of tools from discourse analysis in the choice of methods, where I will further discuss this. In this section, it is sufficient to mention that both political netnography and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are methods that are grounded in the idea that political discussions are discussions of power (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). That is to say that a netnography based in CDA enquires about the use of language by the research subject, and its expressions of power (Villegas, 2020). The choice of methods is both fitting to the Foucauldian framework in its aims and is also a method that requires a definition of what is meant by "power", which I have given above.

3.1.3 Foucault as a Positionality Statement

Previous research has shown that antigender movements have recently started seeking epistemic power other than political hegemony (Korolczuk, 2020) by attacking theories produced by gender studies scholars in an attempt to create their own philology (Garbagnoli, 2016). Epistemic power has been defined by Archer et al. (2020) as both the ability to influence what people believe and at the same time disabling others from gaining epistemic influence by discrediting them (Archer et al., 2020). The purpose of gaining epistemic power is that of justifying social and political inequalities (Collins, 2022). The basis for this characteristic of the antigender movement is the belief that all those theories that denaturalize the sexual order - like Foucault's belief that it is constructed through discourse rather than innate - are accused of not being scientific but rather the outcome of the work of ideologues that put the "traditional family" in danger (Korolczuk, 2020). The condemnation of social constructionism by antigenderists is part of the reason why I chose to frame this research in Foucault, being a gender studies student and a feminist myself, this research cannot refrain from being inherently political. Basing my research on the theory that antigenderism goes against is one of the

ways in which I will acknowledge my positionality and my political standing in this research.

3. 2 Othering

As previous studies have investigated, theories of othering are essential to understand antigender movements. Exclusionary othering can be defined as the opposition between an "us" and a "them" with inherent relations of domination and subordination. Individuals and groups who are othered are so perceived as a threat to a certain social order (Canales, 2000).

In line with the definition of othering, common rhetoric that has been shown within antigenderism is the establishment of a binary that opposes a "corrupt élite" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022) which is supposedly threatening those who want to defend themselves from an ideology that disrupts their moral values of a traditional and natural understanding of gender-related issues (Corredor, 2019). The purpose of discourses of othering by the antigender movement is to construct negative feelings by emotionally-charged appeals against the other and at the same time idealizing "the people" in a cohesion-generating manner. Antigender actors have been shown to use othering techniques in order to present themselves as justice bringer and defendants of ordinary people (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

The relevance of theories of othering is strengthened by the fact that it is not only used by scholars who write about antigenderism, but it also has a role in research on new digital media (Bellè & Poggio, 2018). It has been shown that the use of othering is adopted by political leaders in social media to gain consensus and attention thanks to the emotional charge that is inherently present in these processes (Martella & Bracciale, 2022). As shown by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018), othering is also used by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini in their social media (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018).

Othering then becomes an essential analytical tool for this thesis insofar as emotionally charged appeals against "the other" are going to be the subject of inquiry as an expression of power relations and establishment of truth in Foucauldian terms.

Othering is also suitable with the choice of methods. In regards to online ethnography it is clear from the statements above that othering is recurrent in online political communication. For what concerns Critical Discourse Analysis, a method from which I will borrow some tools for the analysis, othering has been defined by Jensen (2011) as a discursive process which shapes identity formation (Jensen, 2011), making this a theory that pairs up well both with Foucault's conception of power and knowledge and with the use of CDA.

3.3 Countermovements

Parallel to othering theories, the concept of countermovement will be another important element of this theoretical framework. As the self is understood through the existence of the other (Canales, 2000), social movements that are the result of opposition cannot be understood without the acknowledgement of the movement they are opposing (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). The term 'countermovement' has been proposed by social theorists to define those movements that react against a pre-existing movement (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012).

In this sense, antigenderism is understood by many as a response to emancipatory declarations about gender and sexuality and the consequent policy interventions related to queer and feminist agendas (Corredor, 2019; Korolczuk, 2020). Theories of movement and countermovement have pointed out how these two interact in conflict with each other, and political actors may intervene along one of these sides (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996).

Other theorists of countermovements have also stressed the importance of defining a countermovement beyond the mere political alignment, considering the

continuous relationship of conflict between the first movement and the reactive one (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012).

Theories of countermovements also connect back to the Foucauldian power insofar as Foucault has theorised the fact that power always entails resistance (Foucault, 1990). He wrote, "In order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations." (Foucault, 1982, p.780). For this reason, Foucault insists on the vision of power as a productive force since everybody contributes to its nourishment (Foucault, 1990), which means that even if my inquiry for discourses of power will limit itself to the antigender movement, the opposed movements will be acknowledged and their importance will be addressed. This approach has stressed the significance of looking at the interactions between movements since only looking at the countermovement would be reductive of the phenomenon (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). This means that the context behind tweets and their dialogical dimension with other movements and events will not be overlooked.

3.3.1 Countermovements as Antagonists: Chantal Mouffe and Carl Schmitt

In order to deepen the concept of countermovement and better define the nature of the conflict between the movement and the countermovement, two other political theorists that are in dialogue with each other will be used: Carl Schmitt (2008) and Chantal Mouffe (2005).

Carl Schmitt has defined the criteria of the political as a friend/enemy relationship, a relationship based on an opposition of a "we" and a "they" that are functional to the formation of a collective identification (Schmitt, 1976, as cited in Mouffe, 2005). The "enemy" for Carl Schmitt is then simply "the other" and essential to the concept of "political" (Schmitt, 2008). There are two reasons why I think Schmitt's contribution and Mouffe's expanding on it are useful and

coherent to my theoretical framework. The first one is the way in which Schmitt's theory is parallel to both othering (the opposition of an "us" to a "them") and countermovements and it directly connects them to political conflicts. The second reason for the choice of these authors is to be found in the interpretation Chantal Mouffe makes of Carl Schmitt. Not only she defined the relationship between the 'us' and 'them' in a deeper way, but she was also able to apply Schmitt's theory, who wrote in the 1930s, to modern times.

In Mouffe's (2005) book "On the Political", she made a distinction between agonism and antagonism. Agonism is an us/them relationship where the two parties recognise there is no solution to their conflict but they are able to recognise the legitimacy of each other. In this case, they are adversaries rather than enemies in Schmittian terms. Antagonism, on the other hand, is an us/them relationship in which the two sides do not share common features and are in conflict with each other with no intent to legitimize the other (Mouffe, 2005). The modernization of Schmitt by Mouffe lies in her belief that antagonism has taken the form of friend/enemy relations on the basis of morality claims. When this relationship is based on moral terms rather than purely political ones, it can only be between 'enemies' rather than 'adversaries' making this relationship an antagonistic one (Mouffe, 2005).

Antigenderism is a discourse that is clearly full of morality claims. This was well described by Graff and Korolczuk (2022) in "Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment", where they extensively explained how political parties use antigenderism discourses to moralize political conflict to both demonize their political opponents and to stress their moral legitimacy in front of conservative voters (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Additionally, the idea of a friend/enemy relation based on morality marries well with the idea of emotional charge in theories of othering. On this basis, the notion of antagonism will be an additional tool to address the research questions and go deeper into the notion of countermovements, where the expressions of the power dynamics can be operationalized with the help of the characteristics of antagonism laid out by Chantal Mouffe.

4. Methods

The main method through which this research will be conducted is netnography (or online ethnography), particularly non-participant observation. Since language plays an important role I will be drawing some tools from Critical Discourse Analysis as well. This chapter provides an overview of my positionality in regards to the topic, the research design, data collection and analysis methods with their limitations and ethical considerations that were used to answer the research questions.

4.1 Positionality

In line with the Foucauldian idea of knowledge as discursively produced, the premise of this research will make use of Haraway's (1988) conception of situated knowledge guided by the acknowledgement of my positionality and the idea that objectivity does not need to be "neutral" in its positivist sense[1] (Haraway, 1988). As this is a feminist research, it is important to address the challenge to positivist notions of objectivity and truth on which feminist theories tend to agree (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002).

Knowledge and knowledge production are understood as situated because produced in specific circumstances and from specific positionalities that inevitably have an influence on them (Rose, 1997). It is then vital to provide the

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[1] "Positivism adheres to the view that only "factual" knowledge gained through observation (the senses), including measurement, is trustworthy. In positivism studies the role of the researcher is limited to data collection and interpretation in an objective way." (Business Research Methodology, n.d., p.1)

readers with the positioning of the researcher with respect to the research topic, to clarify where the knowledge production comes from and what is it that influences it (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002).

One could argue that my positionality with respect to the topic of this research is influenced by my field of studies, my political ideas and my identity, and these influences may have a negative impact on the findings due to biases and experience-based assumptions. However, as I agree it is a given fact that my standpoint can result in a bias in the interpretation of the results, I do not think they influence the validity of the results in this sense. Firstly, because one of the aims of this thesis is to understand the antigender movement in order to challenge its circulation and deconstruct its narrative, and not to give a neutral report of its ideas. Second of all, this logic implies that each and every study is carried out from a particular standpoint, and my own positionality will be my unique contribution to the diverse research universe that exists on the topic, and that is made up of different pieces of research written from different standpoints that make it possible for each study to bring up a different perspective. For these reasons, I think that considering the broader perspective, diverse standpoints can be viewed as an asset rather than a drawback in academia.

4.2 Research Design

Considering Heale and Twycross's (2018) definition of a case study as "an intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community or some other unit in which the researcher examines in-depth data" (Heale & Twycross, 2018, p.7) and my research questions, my thesis can be defined as a case study that aims to identify power relations involved in discourses made by supporters of the antigender ideology and how these dynamics are expressed online by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, the two politicians being what is defined in case studies as the unit of research. Using a case study approach allows me to take the wide phenomenon of antigenderism and narrow it down to the

Italian case of two politicians and their online communication, making my research questions more attainable and time-efficient.

This thesis will have a theory-informed approach, I will observe patterns that can explain which power dynamics are more frequent in the discourses, and every step of the analysis, such as the coding of the empirical material, will take the theoretical framework into account. Not only, but the development of a theoretical framework was also fundamental in order to make coherent methodological choices and develop research questions. For this reason, the following sections will often refer back to the chapter on theory when providing a more detailed analysis of the selected methods, going deeper into how this thesis is based on a theory-informed case study approach.

The importance of theory for this research, made it so that it can be defined as a deductive research since a lot of choices and most of the analysis were guided by theories. However, while coding the tweets and defining themes for the analysis, to explain some of the identified patterns some new concepts and theories came up inductively, and had to be conceptualized along with the analysis.

4.3 Political Netnography

Social media was chosen as a place of enquiry for this thesis because of its role in spreading antigender ideas. By providing a platform to reach a wider audience, social media like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, allowed a great and fast means for the circulation of these ideas. The advantage social media gave to movements first and politicians after lies in their suitability for the use of a simple and casual communication style (Bellè & Poggio, 2018), characteristics that are even more accentuated in Twitter, where the 280 character limit makes it so that the messages are even more immediate. Social media's role in the spread of antigender ideas, and in particular in Twitter's outstanding in this purpose, has also been confirmed in GATE's (2023) report, where Twitter is on the podium as

the most used media channel by the antigender movement globally (GATE, 2023). This style fosters a sense of community that is conducive to creating the "us" versus "them" mentality typical of othering and countermovements. In addition to facilitating the spread of antigenderism, social media platforms have also proven to be highly effective for conducting social research. According to Mejova et al. (2015), collecting "digital footprints" has enabled a better understanding of human behaviour and social interaction because it has added the possibility to study them in ways that were not possible before. Among all social media, Twitter stands out for its large and easily accessible online data on human behaviour and social interactions (Mejova et al., 2015).

Hence, I have decided to conduct a non-participatory netnography - also called online ethnography - on Twitter. Netnography is a method that applies the principles of traditional ethnography to virtual interactions (Nascimento et al., 2022). For instance, it draws the idea of explaining a phenomenon through its social context in an immersive way from ethnography. Among different kinds of nethnographies, that depend on the level of participation of the researcher and range from auto-netnography to participant observatory netnography, this thesis' method will be an observatory netnography (Sibai & de Valck, 2015), since I will not be participating in the interactions.

Netnography being a relatively new method, to make this a feminist methodological choice the concept of feminist nethnography will be derived from the principles of feminist ethnography. In line with queer-feminist methodologies and the theoretical framework, this study aims at a perspective that brings together theories of discursive constructions around identity formation and a (n)ethnographic approach to the discursive practices that generate knowledge about identity (Browne & Nash, 2010). In this regard, attention should be drawn again to this being theoretically-informed research. Theory has been employed to offer insights into the netnographic evidence, and a feminist approach to netnography, borrowed both from feminist theory and feminist ethnography, enabled the interrogation of power relations (Browne & Nash, 2010).

Even if the literature on feminist nethnography is derived directly from feminist ethnography, the concept of political netnography developed by Villegas (2020) has been particularly useful for my aims. The author has defined political netnography as "a qualitative research method that can give us deep insights about conversations related to power and resource distribution" (Villegas, 2020, p.111). Political netnography is further described as a type of netnography that studies political issues that are impacted by social media (Villegas, 2020), and antigenderism is an example of it. The subjects of political netnography can range from many different categories, like political parties and, in this case, social movements and political candidates (Villegas, 2020). :

4.3.1 Netnography and CDA

Because of the pairing between power and discourse in Foucault, it is crucial for this thesis to consider discourse -which in Foucaudian terms can be explained as the way of talking about something - as an important element for the analysis of the data (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For this reason, although the main method remains netnography, some tools from critical discourse analysis are necessary for a coherent analysis of the data. Precisely, I will make use of a particular branch of Critical Discourse Analysis: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA).

Critical discourse analysis (or CDA) is concerned with the study of the link between discourse and the social realm (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) and has been associated by Villegas (2020) with political netnography. Given his definition of "political" as anything that has to do with power, a political netnography based in CDA investigates how the use of language by the research subject expresses the dynamics of power online. The researcher has to ask the text if the use of the language by the group or actor in question provides signs of power inequality or abuse to other groups, or in this case if signs of power in the Foucauldian sense. CDA also lends itself well to research on Twitter since discussions on power mediated through social media are for the most part in textual format (Villegas, 2020). Furthermore, accordingly to the premise of my

positionality, CDA requires the researcher to be critical, but is not meant to be politically neutral, on the contrary, it is an approach that is innately politically bound to social change (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), so it doesn't require political neutrality of the researcher.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis does not differ much from the combination between political netnography and CDA, since it is also concerned with the study of power relations through the analysis of language (Lazar, 2007). As a method, it can enrich this research because of its focus on how discourse generates dynamics of power by reproducing hetero-patriarchal normativity (Lazar, 2007), something that is at the core of antigenderists' way of thinking (Corredor, 2019).

4.4 Empirical Material: Data Collection

As for the empirical material, I will collect tweets from the personal accounts of Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni. In the initial design of this thesis, I would have been looking for Instagram posts as well. I chose not to research them anymore firstly because of the inconvenience of searching for posts, there is no advanced search and the only option seems to be scrolling down accounts that post daily, which would have taken away too much time. The second reason is that I noticed a pattern in which politicians tend to post the same thing on all of their accounts. Posts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and so on inevitably all look very similar. Obviously, not all posts look the same so this decision took away some empirical material, and this is why I have chosen to look at tweets for a longer period of time. The chosen period goes from 2014 to 2022. 2014 is the year in which the Cirinnà law (that allowed civil unions between same-sex couples) started being discussed in Italy, making gender and sexuality a popular topic, while 2022 is the year of the last electoral campaign at the end of which Giorgia Meloni became prime minister with Matteo Salvini's party in her government's coalition.

4.4.1 Data Coding

I have collected the tweets via the advanced research function on Twitter. Logically, I started by looking at the keyword "gender", and from there I tried to understand which other words are used to express antigenderism and I came up with a list of keywords (see Appendix). Further explanations as to why some keywords were added and considerations for keywords that did not give the expected results will be addressed in the findings chapter (section 5.1.1).

Once the keywords were selected I have used the advanced search function directly on Twitter, which allows you to look for tweets containing certain keywords from specific accounts by typing "keyword (from:username)" in the search bar. For example, if I wanted to look for tweets by Giorgia Meloni that contained the keyword "gender", I was able to do so by searching "Gender (from:GiorgiaMeloni)". Once the search was done, I took a look at the tweets to see if they would have been relevant for this thesis, and when they were, I exported the tweets in an Excel file using Apify Console, a website which allows the download of all the tweets from a Twitter link. In this case, the link was generated through the advanced search. The Excel file was then imported into Nvivo as a dataset.

When the tweets were in Nvivo, I started coding them. I first read all of the exported tweets briefly, to identify general themes. I initially coded a total of five themes, to then select the final four themes, since the extra one could be merged into the final four. The four identified themes are: epistemic power; protection of children and traditional family; whataboutism and finally femonationalism. The fifth deleted theme was "migration", which I was able to merge into both femonationalism and whataboutism. These coded themes are what have guided the data analysis.

For what concerns the thematic analysis that followed the coding, I took some example tweets that represented the theme and translated them into English. This means that all of the tweets reported in the analysis are my own translation. The translated tweets in the analysis will be distinguished from the rest of the text

by being italicised and in block format, as a free-standing paragraph with double spacing. To contextualize the analysis I leaned on my own experience and knowledge of Italian politics and, where applicable, on articles, videos and pictures attached to the tweets in analysis.

4.3 Limitations of the Methods

Even if the choice of many to use social media has amplified the possibility to study social interactions, new methods like nethnography can also bring new limitations in social science research (Golder & Macy, 2014). One of these has to do with the impossibility to generalize findings in online studies to the "real world". Supporters of this position claim that interactions that happen online cannot be compared to interactions that happen offline (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). In the case of this thesis, for example, the discursive patterns that will be identified in the findings could not be claimed to be the same patterns of antigender discourses offline, of political speeches for example. However, generalizations to spheres outside of Twitter are not the aim of this thesis.

Furthermore, the fact that the research cannot be exhaustive of all the tweets could be considered a weakness. The selected keywords might not be comprehensive of all the tweets that would be relevant for the research, some other tweets that could be considered expressions of antigenderism might have been left out due to possible missing keywords.

The biggest limitation of this research, however, is the absence of an analysis of the replies and interactions with tweets by Salvini and Meloni with other users. As already mentioned, the initial idea for this thesis was to include the replies in the analysis, but for reasons of space and time, they had to be taken out. First of all, the replies are very large in number, and a big selection would have had to take place. Most importantly though was that already at first glance, original tweets and replies had very different characteristics, making it difficult to come up with a way of coding the tweets in a comprehensive way, but mostly the

analysis would have needed much more space and time. I decided to only conduct my research on the tweets by Salvini and Meloni to be able to make a deeper analysis. This choice certainly resulted in a limitation, as the aspect of resistance to antigenderism by the general public and the dialogical dimension of Twitter interaction are not going to be fulfilled. However, I have tried to compensate for this fault by contextualizing the tweets as much as possible to show they are in dialogue with events from the outer world and with other actors that are not directly being analyzed. The aspect of resistance has been partially compensated in the discussion chapter, where I brought the feminist perspective to the analysis.

Something else to mention is the discordance there still is for ethical concerns regarding this relatively new method (Morais et al., 2020). One of the often mentioned limitations is that in a netnography the researcher is the one who selects what is relevant and what can be overlooked (Morais et al., 2020), this is a bias that can result from any qualitative research, and I have tried and limit this by being as transparent as possible in the steps I took to select the data.

5. Findings and Data Analysis

In this chapter the findings will be discussed in a general way, to both note some interesting results and to describe the rationale behind the data analysis, which will then follow. There, examples of tweets will be reported and analyzed. In particular, I will show the othering processes of the tweets throughout the analysis.

5.1 Findings

The following analysis of the findings will be divided into four different themes, which have been determined based on patterns I have identified in the way Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni talk about topics ascribable to antigenderism. The tweets that have been considered for this analysis, selected from those found with a keyword-based search based on relevance to the enquiry and taking the theoretical framework into consideration, are 209, of which 89 tweets are from Meloni and 120 from Salvini.

First of all, the fact that I was able to identify some repetitive patterns is already a sign that power in a Foucauldian sense is present. That is to say, the repetition of a certain way of talking about something generates a discourse of truth. This is emphasized if we note that both politicians contribute with their Tweets to each of the defined themes. I will expand on this argument in the discussion chapter after having shown concretely via my findings how these repetitions of patterns represent an exercise of power by performing as truths.

The identified themes that will guide the investigation of the findings are epistemic power, appeals to the protection of children and traditional family,

whataboutism and femonationalism. Before going through each theme, I will go through some general observations I came across while coding and analyzing the selected Tweets.

The first section on epistemic power will show a different attitude towards the topics of "gender ideology". In these Tweets, the topics are faced with claims of higher knowledge, with an attitude of showing how they should be talked about and confronted.

In the section about children and traditional families, I will show how an often-used antigenderist argument is the protection of children from gender ideology, which is another manifestation of othering processes, where right-wing politicians depict themselves as protectors of the weak category of children from the othered "gender promoters".

The whataboutism chapter will show how the two politicians share the narrative of showing there are bigger problems that they feel need to be addressed before LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights and so on. Here is where theories of othering are verified, as I will show, these tweets always contain a sort of attack on their antagonist, namely, the spreaders of the gender ideology, the left, some political figure who is promoting a law on these topics and so on.

Femonationalism will refer to the practice of borrowing discursive tools from feminist frames to express Islamophobia and xenophobia, which was found in some Tweets by Salvini, but especially in Meloni, who during the electoral campaign in 2022 insisted on being the first female president in Italy to take up feminist frames to bring forward her government agenda.

In all of the sections, some examples of tweets will be shown, and attention will be given to the use of words and the tone of the tweets, framing the analysis in the theories I have chosen in my theoretical framework (Foucaudian conception of power operationalized via othering).

5.1.1 General Findings

Some general findings worth to note before going into the heart of the analysis already came up while looking for tweets via the keyword searching. For instance, some keywords I was expecting to give results did not actually produce that much. Searching the word "donna" and "donne", "woman" and "women" a narrative of praise to "women in uniform" namely, women in the armed forces, was much more frequent than discourses on gender-related issues. A similar thing happened when I searched for the word "anti", no results relevant to antigenderism came up. Analogous was the search for the word "affitto", rent, to look for referrals to surrogacy (often referred to as "uterus for rent"), although some relevant tweets came up, logically, the ones on the situation of the housing market were overwhelmingly larger in number. Since, as will be exemplified in the next chapters, most of the tweets concerning surrogacy and referring to it as "uterus for rent" also contained other keywords I used for the search, this one keyword was in the end left aside for time-related reasons.

Other examples were the words "trans" and "transgender", which were used very few times. I noticed instead they preferred referring to transgender identities by talking about the act of "cambiare sesso", "change sex", hence I added the keyword "sesso" to my search. "Sesso" turned out to also be useful in the finding of tweets about issues related to sexuality, since homosexual couples were often referred to as "same-sex couples". Another keyword that was added while I was collecting the data was "pensiero unico". I was not aware of this before this research, but the way the ideas of the left are often addressed as is "Only thought", an ironic expression to imply that they do not accept any other way of thinking. This expression is used to generally refer to leftists, but the "gender ideology" is also often referred to as Pensiero Unico.
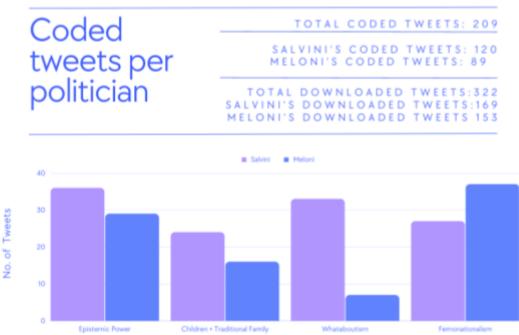
There are two other general observations that I want to include in this section. Firstly, I noticed how the topics of the tweets generally changed during times of electoral campaigns. While generally, the tweets were news item-based, commenting on current events or declarations of others, during the electoral

campaigns the tendency was more to give general thoughts on more generic issues. If the topic was migration, they would report a news piece that had a migrant as a subject and comment on it during regular times, while during electoral campaigns they would directly state their takes on the migrant flows without the need for support from current events reporting. Another interesting trend, that will be demonstrated better during the analysis, is that there is always an effort by the two politicians to show they are not discriminating but they constantly try and re-define the notion of discrimination.

In the end, out of the 322 tweets I was able to download via the keyword search, 209 tweets were coded, 89 from Meloni and 120 from Salvini. 65 were coded for epistemic power (29 from Meloni and 36 from Salvini), 40 were coded for traditional family (16 from Meloni and 24 from Salvini), 40 were coded for whataboutism (7 by Meloni and 33 by Salvini) and finally, 64 tweets were coded for femonationalism (37 by Meloni and 27 by Salvini). In the next sections, some examples from each code will be analyzed to make general conclusions about the selected themes.

Figure 1

Bar graph showing the number of coded tweets per politician. Created on Canva.com

5.2 Data Analysis

5.2.1 "Let me show you how it works": Epistemic Power

"*The Democratic Party has buried a law against hate and discrimination, it has even ignored the Vatican's appeals, but it is possible to start again from the centre-right's text that does not involve children, does not put the freedom for education at risk, does not introduce gender theories in schools and does not limit freedom of expression. The common objective is to punish those who discriminate, hate and insult.*" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2021c)

This is the text of a tweet by Matteo Salvini on October 28th 2021. That day, the Italian Senate voted against DDL Zan, a proposed law that would have recognized violent acts based on sexual identity, gender identity and disability as a hate crime (Zan: Italy senate votes down anti-homophobia bill - Wanted in Rome, 2021). Salvini is here blaming the Democratic Party because the Italian Parliament usually uses a recorded vote, however, a secret vote can be used if enough senators request it, as in the case of this law (Bin & Pitruzzella, 2017). Out of the counted votes, there were 16 more than the ones declared by the right against the approval of Zan law, which were suspected to come from some members of the Democratic Party (Sorrentino, 2021). The most discussed clause of this law stated that a thematic day in schools for the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Lesbophobia and Transphobia would have been instituted (Sorrentino, 2021). This last one is what Salvini is referring to when he accuses the law of introducing gender theory in schools, while the Vatican appeal he mentions refers to the unprecedented step the Vatican State took against Ddl Zan of sending a formal complaint to the Italian government, stating that it could curb the religious

freedom of the Catholic Church (Zan: Italy senate votes down anti-homophobia bill - Wanted in Rome, 2021).

This tweet is only one of the 65 I have identified as expressing declarations for epistemic power. Considering the definition of epistemic power by Archer et al. (2020) as the ability to impair others from exercising epistemic influence by discrediting them (Archer et al., 2020), and Fouacult's idea that power can be exercised by influencing the way something is talked about, in this section I will analyze the narrative of proposing alternatives to look at matters such as LGBTQ+ rights and reproductive rights, with the intention to show that discrimination can be fought against without the spread of "gender ideology", as they claim their opponents do. Later on, I will also show how this same narrative is used to talk about the concept of progress.

The tweet cited at the beginning of this section can be taken as an example of this narrative since it implies that the alternative text of the law proposed by the right would still take action against hate and discrimination, take into account the Vatican's opinion and cancel anything that has to do with education on the topic in schools. It is saying that the "right" way to address the problem is what the centre-right proposes, discrediting the left's proposal, which seems to go too far.

Another example from Giorgia Meloni can be traced back to 2015 when the introduction of affective and sex education since preschool was being debated.

"*#Discrimination cannot be fought with the diffusion of #gender theory in #schools*" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2015)

said Fratelli d'Italia leader. Again, what Meloni seems to want to make clear is that her party is against discrimination, and wants to fight it in its own way, which does not have to entail what she understands as the spread of gender theory. Something else to notice about the way the two above-mentioned tweets are formulated is how "gender theory" in schools is treated as something that goes too far, something that is not necessary to fight against hate and discrimination. This

implicit claim is notable firstly because it reinforces the common belief of antigenderism that "gender theory" is an ideological propaganda that needs to be stopped. Secondly, it shows an attitude of wanting to explain how discrimination can actually be fought, implicitly discrediting others who think that, for instance, sex education from an early age is a functional tool to reduce it. This way of speaking about the struggle against hatred is both an example of epistemic power gained by questioning their political adversaries, but also an act of othering. In the case of epistemic power, acts of othering and the creation of an "us versus them" are expressed through the display of the view that "they want to fight it like this, while we know that it is not necessary and this other solution we propose is better suitable".

Epistemic power is not only displayed when talking about schools and education. Another topic where I have located the same traits of proposing alternatives and showing the unreasonableness of their opponents is the topic of the adoption of children by same-sex couples.

"*Assaulting or insulting someone because they are gay or lesbian is crazy. But (I say) no to adoptions for homosexual couples*" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2015)

is one of Salvini's tweets on the topic. Meloni, on the same line, tweeted

"*In @Open_gol's opinion I would be favourable to discrimination against gay people? Fighting discrimination does not necessarily mean being favourable to homosexual adoptions, uterus for rent or parent 1 and parent 2 instead of mom and dad. I understand they're trying to depict a monster, but I do not think it's that difficult to understand*" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2019c).

Attached to the tweet is a screenshot of a post by Open, the online newspaper cited by Meloni, in which they point out the incoherence of a past declaration against LGBTQ+ discrimination and present declarations against changing "Mother" and "Father" into "Parent 1" and "Parent 2" in school documents and modules. In these two tweets from the politicians, they are unfolding their idea that being against the adoption from same-sex couples or surrogacy does not mean to discriminate. Salvini, for example, is implicitly saying that his definition of discrimination is to attack someone, verbally or physically, on the basis of their sexual orientation. As he explains further in another tweet

"*The State shall not go into the bedroom, I am and will always be against gay adoption*" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2016a)

the topic of adoptions is described with the metaphor of the government "entering the bedroom" as something private that should be left out of the discussion when legislating on LGBTQ+ related topics. Tweets about adoptions confirm the display of epistemic power via the explanation of how certain topics should be discussed in their opinion and discrediting that of their adversaries. However, epistemic power is also displayed in the way of perceiving the concept of family, which will be talked about more in-depth in the next section on traditional families and children.

A similar narrative is detectable in Salvini and Meloni's way of talking about progress. What progress means for them is explained by disavowing the idea that others have of it.

"*WHAT COMES AFTER IS NOT ALWAYS PROGRESS. If #gender ideology is progress, I am proudly old-fashioned.*" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2016)

tweeted Meloni with a sarcastic tone in August 2016, attaching a screenshot from her own Facebook post where she explains further

"Gender ideology demands to instil the idea that concepts like men and women have to be overcome" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2016).

In this tweet othering processes that oppose a specific way to look at a concept - in this case, progress- is once again framed by the rejection of someone else's opinion, in this case, the "spreaders of gender ideology". Furthermore, here we can note another way to disclose epistemic power, which consists of attacking epistemologies that fall out of the binary way of conceptualizing gender and with the choice of the verb "instil" implying they are indoctrinating rather than progressive. Of similar tone is the tweet from Salvini on September 2021,

"Uterus for rent, hired mothers, kids for sale on catalogues. This is not the future, this is madness" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2021b)

referring to surrogacy, linking an article about the topic from Avvenire, a Catholic newspaper. Salvini here chose to show his opinion on surrogacy by comparing children and mothers to objects for sale to underline the absurdity he sees in the practice and in the thought of it being something progressive, othering them.

Many other examples of displays of epistemic power can be found in tweets by leaders of Fratelli d'Italia and Lega, some of them will be cited in the next sections as the selected categories can overlap in some tweets.

5.2.2 "Protect our children": the Traditional Family

"Gender dictatorship in schools! Drag queens, gender identity, gay sex education: here are the "lectures" programmed for the school assembly in a high school in Bologna. Am I the only one to think it's absurd that students are obliged

to be subjected to the usual ideological propaganda so dear to the single-minded[2]?" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2020)

A big role in the antigender campaign is played by the narrative of protecting children from indoctrination. The idea that "gender theory" is dangerous for children started from the Catholic associations, some of them even have the safeguard of children in their bylaws (Bellè & Poggio, 2018). When this narration is taken up by politicians, I found, it serves as a tool for identity formation, helping to create an "us" that identifies in the (usually Catholic) Heterosexual Italian Family. At the same time it others the supporters of what they call gender ideology identifying them with something children need to be protected from. The tweet cited above is a good example because the students are depicted as victims, as the choice of words such as "dictatorship" and "obliged" show. Simultaneously, Meloni depicts herself and those who think like her, via the question she asks her followers, "Am I the only one who thinks [...]?" as the rational individual, as opposed to the "absurd", who knows what is right for the students. Attached to the tweet is an image titled "Gender ideology in schools" with a collage of some posters made by the students with LGBTQ+ flags and definitions of terms such as pansexual, genderfluid and transgender and the programme of this assembly.

Of a similar tone is the tweet by Salvini on the topic of sexual education in primary schools:

"We should let kids play, study, get to know themselves and grow up like kids. With re-written and denied fairy tales, gender theories, "fluid" register logs and neutral bathrooms, they are really exaggerating." (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2022a).

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[2] "single-minded" is another way I translated "Pensiero Unico", referred to elsewhere in this thesis as "only thought"

Children are again victimized, the image he is trying to put forward is of kids who are being deprived of their childhood. This tweet is an example of othering in so far as it shows there is a "them" who is "exaggerating" by taking away children's lightheartedness and targeting them with topics he thinks are not appropriate to their age, and so they should be protected by the "we" who want to let them be children.

The topic of family is also functional to the perpetuation of a Catholic identity, to promote a natural and traditional idea of the family. Like the tweets in the previous chapter, the idea is to show innocence and philanthropy when it comes to verbal and physical discrimination, but at the same time express disagreement with the idea that same-sex couples, for example, can have children. With this topic, children become once again the main subject. The victimization of children and the appeal to their protection seems to be a way not to attack directly homosexual couples but instead depict themselves as the protectors of the weak, while at the same time condemning non-traditional family units. For example, in May 2020 Matteo Salvini, in a thread[3] declared

"I believe in freedom, always. And so, I believe everyone has the right to love whoever they want, kiss whoever they want and live with whoever they want. Without discrimination on the streets, in schools, in the workplace or anywhere else. The only topic on which I will never change my mind has to do with children: adoptions from gay couples and uteruses for rent won't ever see me agreeing with them, children need a mom and a dad. Instead, we should make faster and less expensive adoptions for thousands of couples that, for years, have been waiting to give a future to an abandoned child. Hooray for life, hooray for love!" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2020).

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[3] Multiple tweets in reply to one another, usually used when the character limit is not enough to say what you want to say.

There are multiple aspects that can be highlighted in this thread to represent the common narrative Meloni and Salvini use to talk about family-related matters. It starts off with an appeal to free love and a statement against his idea of discrimination, which is implicitly defined as physical and verbal harassment ("discrimination on the street") or unequal treatment in environments such as school and work. He then moves to express his opposition to same-sex couples having children both via adoption and surrogacy. The combination of the first statement against discrimination and the disapproval of homosexual couples having children is implying the message that not allowing child rearing for queer people is not something that fits in his definition of discrimination. Furthermore, the way the statement is phrased makes it so that children become the main subject, and the focus is moved to their need for a mom and dad and moved away from the LGBTQ+ community per se. He is here presenting himself as the defendant of the weak category of children and as a spokesperson for what he believes are their needs. Finally, he ends with a positive message, moving the attention again to another problem that he thinks needs to be resolved. I will talk more about the practice of moving the attention to other problems in the section on whataboutism.

Figure 2

Picture attached to Meloni's tweet. The text says "let's defend our children no to gender ideology" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2018)

Much more direct on how children need to be defended from "gender ideology" is Meloni with her tweet during an electoral campaign:

"*Let's defend our children. No to #gender ideology #VoteforGiorgiaMeloni*" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2018)

attached is an image (Figure 1) with the same sentence " Let's defend our children from gender ideology" and a smiling heterosexual family as background. No further explanation is given as to what gender ideology is or why it is harmful to children, still the message of urgency and menace comes through very strong.

Finally, the sense of urgency to defend the traditional family is often also framed by the idea of maintaining a Catholic identity. On December 2014 Meloni tweeted

"In Piacenza, a gay Nativity scene is being sold: with two Joseph and no Mary. We have reached the delirium. Fortunately the objections were able to get it withdrawn." (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2014).

The definition of a gay nativity scene as a "delirium" does not refer to the historical inaccuracy of the Nativity, but rather the matching of a religious image to a queer matter. Even if there is no direct appeal to the traditional family or against non-heterosexual family units, this tweet is symbolically relevant, as it depicts the introduction of LGBTQ+ characters in a religious context as the ultimate blasphemous act. We already know Meloni is against same-sex couples having children from other tweets and declarations, but contrary to other tweets on the topic, there is no effort to show the unwillingness to be discriminatory, the tone is here to show that a limit has been violated via the expression "we have reached the delirium". The traditional family par excellence has been desecrated by the promoters of what she would elsewhere call "gender ideology". Even if there is no explicit attack on a specific group, the idea of othering is still there, outlined by the "us" as the protesters against the selling of the Nativity, and the "them" as those who were selling it and participated in some way to the cultural and social processes that led to such a thing being possible, enclosed in the words "we have reached", which give the idea of a peak reached at the end of a timeline, a striking event that has been forerun by a crescendo of other similar happenings.

5.2.3 "These are not our country's priorities": Whataboutism

"The European Union is the notably absent one: too busy thinking about gender or futile matters to show up to the meeting with history." (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2022)

By "whataboutism" we mean either the discursive practice of defending against criticism by criticising the accuser back or the strategy of raising an issue that is perceived as more urgent in response to the one brought up by the accuser (Dykstra, 2020). This tweet is one of the 40 examples I have found in antigender tweets by Salvini and Meloni. The tweet refers to the Russo-Ukrainian war as being predictable and avoidable. Indeed, attached is a video of Maurizio Belpietro, a journalist for a Catholic right-wing newspaper, talking about the topic, with the caption "The conflict between Russians and Ukrainians is not new, but we pretended nothing was happening. This is the depiction of EU's failure" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2022). The choice of words "too busy thinking about gender" is peculiar here because gender issues are not the main topic, but Meloni still took the opportunity to remind her followers and electors why she is anti-European. The othering formulation of "they think about these (irrelevant and less important) issues, while we are trying to address these other (more urgent and meaningful) matters" is the structure at the base of the tweets enquired about in this section.

Almost all of the tweets coded for whataboutism were by Salvini (33 out of 40). For example, in July 2022 he tweeted

"If the left insists on free drugs, easy citizenships and ddl Zan, we will show them what Lega is made of. Enough! Emergencies are the rise of salaries and pensions, they are employment and cuts on taxes, they are autonomy and the battle against illegal migrants" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2022b).

The whataboutism here does not refer to a specific event, but this tweet was posted during the last electoral campaign so he's referring more generally to the proposals of the left and the proposal of his party. He is comparing the electoral programs by calling that of the left with terms that ridicule them. The legalisation of soft drugs becomes "free drugs", Ius Soli, the law that would give automatic citizenship to those who are born in Italy becomes "easy citizenships" and the ddl Zan stays the same, maybe to indicate it doesn't even need an epithet because it is ridiculous in itself. The tease-y tone soon turns into almost threatening with the expressions "we will show them what Lega is made of" and "Enough!". Afterwards, he proceeds to give a list of what he thinks are real emergencies, implicitly saying that while the left is wasting time thinking about the aforementioned issues while his party prioritizes more urgent matters. This combination of ddl Zan, Ius soli and sometimes legalization of soft drugs has been repeated in multiple tweets by Salvini to show a scarce ability to prioritize by his adversaries.

Of similar structure is Meloni's tweet that reads out

"Little money for schools and universities, but before announcing his resignation, minister #Fioramonti allocates 1 million to promote gender ideology. Grillism is a mixture of hypocrisy and incompetence, let's hope 2020 will bring for Italians a government worthy of representing them" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2019d).

Fioramonti is ex vice-minister of education, a member of the Cinque Stelle party (camera.it, n.d.), who, according to the article attached to the tweet, increased funds to promote education about gender and sexuality (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2019d). The tweet starts by indicating what is the problem that should be addressed, missing funds for universities and schools, to then criticise Fioramonti's allocation of funds, alluding to the fact that this money

should be used in a different manner. The argument is strengthened by accusing grillism (a term that indicates the line of thought of the Cinque Stelle party, from its first leader Beppe Grillo) of hypocrisy and incompetence. Meloni then ends by expressing hope for a new government for the following year, one that is worthy of representing Italians, suggesting that the promotion of gender and sexuality education is not something that the population wants.

Sometimes what should be prioritised in the politician's opinion is not specified and they limit themselves to just stating that there are other bigger problems, like in Lega leader's tweet from 15th of May 2016

"Do you really think it's normal that with all the problems we have in Italy, the parliament has been blocked for months because of gay unions?" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2016b).

Even if no other problem is brought up, the approach stays the same. The use of the word "normal" immediately de-normalizes the othered subjects, in this case, members of the parliament who are discussing civil unions for same-sex couples, ridiculing them on the one hand, and the topic of gay unions on the other. The fact that in Salvini's opinion, civil unions are a waste of time for the parliament is then reinforced by the statement that Italy has a lot of other problems.

Another way I noticed whataboutism is expressed is by trying to show that even the target group of a specific measure, for example, gay people when talking about civil unions for same-sex couples or women when talking about abortions, do not care as much as the left or whichever other opponent is proposing for them.

"Naples: the mayor came up with a municipal counter for gays, lesbians and trans people. I think everyone, gays and lesbians included, have other priorities" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2014a)

posted Matteo Salvini in September 2014, and similarly in October of the same year

"*For EVERYONE, Italian or regular migrant, heterosexual or gay, the emergency is #UNEMPLOYEMENT*" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2014b).

This way of performing whataboutism plays down the matter even more, while the feeling in the tweets mentioned earlier was of moving the attention to problems that are in his opinion more urgent or that would target more people instead of a minority, here he is taking the role of spokesperson for a category he is not part of. Saying that not even the LGBTQ+ community would want what is being proposed inherently implies an even stronger diminishment of it than just saying there are other priorities. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea typical of antigenderism that some measures only have a propagandistic scope and are not functional to their targeted audience. Remarkable in this tweet, but in all of the tweets that have been coded for whataboutism, is that the message is less aimed at bringing up other problems that are not being addressed at all. Rather, they seem to be aiming at showing that the issues they are labelling as futile are taking time away from other issues that would otherwise be solved faster or more efficiently.

5.2.4 "Where are the feminists?": Femonationalism

"*#Talibans announce the prohibition for women to travel for long distances; they will only be able to do so if accompanied by a man of their family. I wonder if our feminists will have the courage to condemn every form of discrimination that results from Islamic fundamentalism*" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2021)

What comes after the full stop in this tweet is a sentence that fully sums up what Farris (2017) has defined as femonationalism. The term stands for "feminist and femocratic nationalism" and it is used to describe how conservative parties and individuals conceive gender equality in a way that is instrumental to condemn Islam and Muslim men (Farris, 2017). Giorgia Meloni has been taken as an example of a femonationalist ever since Sara Farris coined the term, but examples from Matteo Salvini are also traceable, in fact, 27 out of the 64 tweets coded as femonationalism were from Lega's leader. The structure of these tweets can vary, however, the majority of them is reporting a piece of news and denouncing the silence of feminists and other movements or political group about it. The one cited above, for instance, as the picture attached to it taken from an Italian newspaper suggests, refers to the forbiddance to women in Kabul to travel over 75km without a man (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2021). The comment Brothers of Italy's head made on the news is not on the event per se, but on the supposed silence on it from local ("our") Italian feminists. As a reaction to a more and more widespread intersectional feminist agenda that fights for equality not only among genders, but also, in this case, religious beliefs, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini are to take the opportunity to show the feminists the "dangers" of Islam. Feminists become in these tweets the othered ones, the "them" that are shown to be ignoring battles that Salvini and Meloni recognize as essential for gender equality, or their interpretation of it, and opposed to the "us" that are on the other hand careful and aware of them. In line with other antigenderist narratives, feminism -and especially an intersectional understanding of feminism- is depicted as a line of thought that is closer to an ideological propaganda than functional to really addressing gender-related issues.

"*#Iran, (they) HUNG a 26 years old woman: she killed the man that wanted to SEXUALLY ASSAULT her. Where are the outraged feminists? Zero space for an #Islam that kills!*" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2014c).

In this tweet, Salvini chose to highlight the words "hung" and "sexually assault" to underline the absurdity of the case he is bringing up. Right after briefly explaining what happened in Iran, he proceeds to ask where the feminists are, to indicate they are not angered by cases like this. It is almost like he wants to underline how feminists are engaged and outraged with matters that are not as significant as the one he is pointing out to his followers. After the critique of feminists he proceeds to employ the same case to bring about his anti-immigration campaign. The words "Zero space" point to a declaration of unwantedness for migrants of Muslim beliefs, because Islam is a religion "that kills". In fact, femonationalism is not only used by Salvini and Meloni to express their Islamophobic views, but similar narratives can be found to frame anti-immigration and xenophobic declarations. In April 2019, Meloni tweeted

"Defeated by the law enforcement agencies the gang devoted to the trafficking of Nigerian women destined for prostitution. Brothers of Italy has always denounced the proliferation of the Nigerian mafia. Opposing illegal immigration is also necessary to save these women. But do not tell the feminists…" (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2019b)

Again, she started by reporting a news item, in this case, the main subject is a Nigerian gang. The claim that her party has always denounced that similar cases are on the rise is a way to show the coherence of Fratelli d'Italia ("always") on the one hand, and on the other hand, contextualized with the rest of the tweet is a way of saying that Brothers of Italy is on Nigerian women's side. However, at the same time, she takes the chance to express her aversion to illegal immigration, by saying that contrasting it is also beneficial to these cases of exploitation. She then ends with an ironic extortion to not "tell the feminists" that the opposition to immigration is beneficial for these women, alluding to the fact that feminists are

pro-migration. She is hinting at the fact that, in her opinion, feminism does more harm than good for women when it is welcoming to migrants.

Something else to note in femonationalist tweets from Salvini and Meloni, but in general from tweets that mention feminism, is that there is never a direct identification with feminism but always an effort to show they are on the side of women.

Figure 3
The picture Salvini is commenting. Caption: "Mary in the form of a vagina: shocking procession by "feminists"" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2021a)

LA MADONNA A FORMA DI VAGINA: PROCESSIONE CHOC DELLE "FEMMINISTE"

"Rome, parade by "feminists" (???) with a picture that I will let you judge. With respect to everyone, these seem to be behaviours brought to the limit of annoyance. Women deserve defendants that are altogether different. What a pity." (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2021a).

Attached to the tweet is an image from the parade (Figure 2), where the demonstrators are holding a fercolo, a statue carried above the crowds during Catholic processions, with a statue of a vulva that substitutes the Virgin Mary. It is immediately clear that Salvini is particularly disturbed by the image, which he

sees as blasphemy, an "annoyance". The word "feminists" is put in inverted commas and followed by three question marks, to show that what he thinks of as real feminism would never take on such images. However, when he makes an appeal for women's defendants with other morals, he is talking in the third person, showing he is giving his opinion of what feminism should look like, but still keeping himself distant from it. Similar behaviour in wanting to give the example of what "good feminism" should take up but at the same time dissociating from feminism is shown by Giorgia Meloni.

"With @KatalinNovakMP, Minister for Family and Youth Affairs in Hungary, to talk about #birth rate and family policies. Meanwhile, nowadays feminists yell in squares against the #family, some women fight for the future of their Nation." (Giorgia Meloni [@GiorgiaMeloni], 2019a)

tweeted Giorgia Meloni in March 2019, attaching a picture of the minister and herself. Again, Meloni is attacking an intersectional approach to feminism, while in the tweets above she is trying to show that to be on the side of women a rejection of migration and Islam is necessary, here she is hinting at the rejection of non-traditional families. Feminists are othered to show they are fighting the wrong battle, they are against the (traditional, natural, Catholic) family, while she is discussing birth rate and family policy. They are "yelling in squares" while she is fighting for the future of the nation, namely working towards birth rate policies. What makes this othering narrative interesting is the teaching attitude towards feminists, the claim for epistemic power in showing what being "on the side of women" really means for her. On the other hand, however, this effort to show she is the real feminist, the one who knows what's best for women, lands in a contradiction when she detaches herself from the label of "feminist". It appears

she is trying to show that she will not identify with feminism because feminists are causing harm to women by allowing the othered Muslim men to abuse them, the othered migrants to exploit them and the othered gender promoters to erase the traditional idea of motherhood.

6. Discussion

In this discussion chapter more general considerations than the ones in the analysis will be made. This is where theories of countermovements will come up and the relationship between movement and countermovement will be analyzed in antagonistic terms, with the help of Mouffe's (2005) conceptualization of it. Here is also where the research question will be addressed and answered more directly. The purpose of this chapter is to tie the findings and their analysis together and make some final theoretical considerations.

6.1 Foucauldian Power: Answering the Research Questions

In Foucault's conception of it, power is sustained by reiterations (Foucault, 1980). Hence, to answer the first formulated research question "Which power relations are involved in the online discussions made by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini when supporting the antigender ideology?" a second one was developed "Which patterns can be identified in the tweets by the two politicians on topics of gender, sexuality and reproductive rights?". Consequently, the idea of discovering discursive patterns was the main guideline for the analysis, and four of them were identified.

In a Foucauldian analysis, these patterns correspond to the discourses that shape the perception of certain topics, and consequently, means of the exercise of the power relations involved in the online discussions. Therefore, being power not something one possesses, but rather something that is exercised in particular

processes and interactions, the way I was able to analyze power relations using a theoretical framework that considers power as productive (Gauntlett, 2008) but without taking replies in analysis, was to focus on the reiteration aspect.

In other words, each identified narrative pattern is a "truth" in Foucauldian terms precisely because it is a pattern, something repeated. For instance, the topic of the traditional family has shown that the perceived truth is that children are victims of the gender theory and need to be protected from it. From another example out of the tweets under the section of whataboutism, we can conclude that one of the perceived truths is that antigenderism sees what they call "gender theory" as something that takes time away from other, more urgent, matters. For femonationalism, we could say a truth that is shown through is the belief that to really be on women's side, migration of Muslim populations should not be supported. And finally, an example of Foucauldian truth presented in the tweets coded as epistemic power is related to the definitions of concepts like discrimination and progress. However, these patterns are in constant interaction with each other, the next section will explore how these narratives overlap and intersect.

6.2 Overlapping Themes: Exploring the Intersection

"*Among my commitments, an investigation committee on foster homes to drive out those who make business on children. Yes to mom and dad, yes to faster adoption, no to uteruses for rent!*" (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2019b)

"*P.s. To some "feminists" that have it on the family, I suggest worrying about that*

kind of Muslim extremism that wants women to be submissive, humiliated and maybe even beaten." (Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi], 2019a)

In this thread posted by Salvini during an electoral campaign, an overlap of all of the four themes is noticeable. The topic of children, their protection and an appeal to the traditional family, epistemic power for the topic of adoptions instead of surrogacy, and femonationalism to incite feminists to think about extremism instead of family matters, which is also an expression of whataboutism at the same time. These are not the only tweets where multiple themes can be identified at once. Some of the tweets cited in the sections above were chosen to exemplify one theme but could have been used for other themes as well. This is both because the tweets might contain more than one, but also because the themes overlap with each other in many different ways.

First of all, as it has been shown throughout the data analysis, all of the themes can be interpreted as a form of othering. Claims for epistemic power other those who are discredited in order to exercise epistemic influence. Appeals to the traditional family and the protection of children others those who fight for the rights of non-traditional families and those who are, in the politicians' opinion, not working for the best interest of children. Whataboutism others the subject whose prioritization is being questioned. Finally, femonationalism others both feminism and other things that are being depicted as dangerous for women's safety, like Muslims or migrants.

Appeals to traditional families and the protection of children from "gender theory" is a topic that can be touched on by using any of the other themes. As we have seen from the examples reported above, for instance, sometimes surrogacy is opposed with whataboutism, proposing adoption as an alternative in the name of the children who are waiting to be adopted. In femonationalist narratives, the protection of children is called on when accusing feminists of thinking about topics like the adoption from same-sex couples instead of ways to increase birth rates in heterosexual families. Epistemic power is claimed by discrediting the idea

that discrimination can be fought with the teaching of sexual and affective education in school, which is presented as an indoctrination process.

Another intersection can be located when femonationalism is expressed alongside whataboutism, when it is used to show that feminism is concerned with topics that are considered not as important as other ones to be on the side of women. In fact, one of the characteristics of femonationalism, as conceptualized by Farris (2017), is its Western exceptionalism, the idea that gender inequality is brought about by non-western cultures and spread in the West by migration flows (Farris, 2017). Inequalities are thought to be an outcome of other cultures and religions, and we have extensively seen this in the definitions of discrimination, inequality and progress given by Salvini and Meloni. Whataboutism is one of the ways they use to express this, to bring up the idea that Western culture and Catholic religion should be left alone to focus on other cultures and the harm they are doing to gender equality in Italy. At the same time, the attitude of showing feminism what problems it should be concerned with is a way of gaining epistemic power by discrediting the topics they believe are taking time away from fighting what they consider more worthy battles. The vilification of migrants because of their culture or religion inherent in femonationalism is functional to this message of Western exceptionalism. However, this nationalist discourse reinforces hierarchies constructed around not only racial stereotypes but also gendered ones. The image that is being constructed is of a threatening male migrant figure, shaping a racialized understanding of gender equality that at the same time falls back into a binary idea of gender that brings along a reinforcement of norms of femininity and masculinity, promoting patriarchal and heteronormative values, in accordance to antigenderist intentions (Colella, 2021).

Whataboutism is a form of epistemic power also when it is not concerned with femonationalism because it is a way to show how to prioritize topics and policies, discrediting their adversaries by ridiculing or depicting as a waste of time what they are interested in. Considering Collins's (2022) conceptualization of epistemic power, it is functional to justify inequalities in social and political landscapes (Collins, 2022). The attempt with whataboutism is to reaffirm those

hegemonic ideologies that are being, in their narratives, attacked through the spread of the feared gender ideology. Whataboutism, as shown in the previous chapters, is an endeavour to re-gain epistemic power by showing that the feminist paradigms about gender and sexuality are futile matters to think about, and other issues should be addressed instead.

Although the four identified patterns can certainly be separated and appear by themselves, it is more likely that they appear intertwined with each other.

6.3 Antigenderism as a Countermovement: the Dialogical Dimension

In this final section of the discussion, I will highlight the dialogical dimension of the tweets taken into analysis. Even though the tweets by Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini were analysed by themselves, without taking the replies from other users into consideration, it is still important to note that they are still tweets that need to be contextualised to external events and declarations. Most of the tweets taken into analysis were in fact responses, declarations and expressions of opinions in relation to something happening in the Italian political context or in response to someone else's statements or actions, like parties and individuals from the left, the feminist movement or those that have often been called "the spreaders of gender theory".

In this regard, the theorisation of the antigender movement as a countermovement is consistent with the analysis of the tweets. The prefix "anti-" in front of anti-gender already suggests the movement is against something, opposing someone. Theories of countermovements show that those movements, like the antigender movement, that are inherently an opposition movement, can only be understood if the opposed movement is acknowledged (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). As it is notable from the analysis, the majority of the tweets have this opposing trait, whether they are opposing a policy, a declaration, a

consolidated movement or a less defined group of people that think in a different way than them. Bringing back the Foucauldian idea of power, this acknowledgement of the opposition trait of the antigender movement makes even more sense when reflecting on the productive property of power. This means that while the regime of truth we saw being developed by the tweets of Meloni and Salvini is being formed, there is also another side which is resisting by bringing about its own formation of truth.

If the two politicians have to make an effort for gaining epistemic power on concepts like progress and discrimination, for instance, it means that there is someone who believes that discrimination can be fought with sexual and gender education in schools or that blocking adoptions for homosexual couples is a form of discrimination. If they have to stress the value they give to the traditional heterosexual family, it means that a more inclusive family model is being more and more accepted. If they have to make use of whataboutism as a discursive tool, it means that there is someone that is actually prioritising queer and feminist agendas. If femonationalism is spreading, it means that a feminism capable of intersectionality and inclusion of other religions and races is also becoming more popular. Without these, the antigender movement would have nothing to counterpart, and it would simply not exist.

We can see then, that the antigender movement is in constant dialogue and relationship with someone. From the analysis, it can also be concluded that the relationship can be read in terms of antagonism as it has been conceptualized by Chantal Mouffe (2005). Theories of othering have largely been discussed while analyzing the tweets, which means the first passage that leads to Mouffe's conceptualization of antagonism, namely the Schmittian development of a friend/enemy relationship which corresponds to an "us versus them" orientation (Schmitt, 2008), has been extensively validated through the unpacking of othering processes. Mouffe has then extended this by further categorizing the political relationship. In this case, the relation antigenderism has with whomever they are opposing (for instance, feminists, queer rights proponents or the left more in general), can be confirmed to be an antagonist one. An antagonist relationship is

characterized by the unwillingness to compromise with the other or legitimize their stance (Mouffe, 2005). This is evident, for instance, when claims of epistemic power are made, where not only there is no willingness to find a meeting point with the counterpart, but the intention is even to make their ideas prevail. Another relevant characteristic of Mouffe's antagonism that can be applied to antigenderism is that it is a relationship that has it does not have its basis on merely political terms but on moral ones (Mouffe, 2005). The moral nature of antigenderism is quite straightforward in the tweets presented during the analysis. For instance, tweets coded in whataboutism are implicitly claiming that it is immoral to prioritize policies on gender and sexuality over what they claim is more urgent. Another example of morality terms is in femonationalism, where moral codes that derive from other religions and cultures are delegitimized when it comes to gender equality matters. In the appeal to a return to the traditional family model, then, it is clear how the Catholic and heterosexual morality is deemed to be the only right and possible model to pursue and promote. We can see then, that the constant dialogue of opposition by antigenderism that results in the moralization of political conflict confirms the antagonist character of the relationship the countermovement has with the movement that is being opposed.

7. Conclusions

In this concluding chapter, I will briefly summarize the findings and their discussion, I will then move to talk about some limitations of the study and, finally, I will be making some suggestions for further research.

This thesis aimed to show the ways in which Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni talk about topics that are relatable to antigenderism on Twitter. The main research question was about power relations, which were operationalized in a Foucauldian framework to be identified in discursive patterns. This was possible with the help of the second research question, which was aiming at identifying these patterns. Given the research questions, theory was the core tool for the analysis that was carried out in this thesis. A theory-informed approach is what allowed the reasoning behind the analysis to be constructed, framing it in Foucault's conception of power, which was operationalized thanks to theories of othering and countermovements.

The chosen methodology was a non-participatory netnography, a method which allows the enquiry for power-related issues on online platforms like Twitter. The choice of this method has been explained and justified also in terms of the importance social media have had in the spread of antigender ideas. Furthermore, since discourse was an important aspect of this thesis, some tools from Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis were also used.

The findings have shown that the discourse could be divided into four patterns: epistemic power, traditional family, whataboutism and femonationalism. In the chapter on epistemic power, we saw how one of the narratives is that of trying to stop their counterpart from gaining epistemic influence by discrediting them. Appeals to a traditional family, and the protection of children in particular, is another common narrative that has been shown to be used by Salvini and

Meloni to depict themselves as the protectors of these values. Whataboutism, the third identified discursive pattern, showed how the topics under investigation for this thesis such as queer and feminist agendas, are often treated by the two politicians as a waste of time. At the same time, whataboutism is used to show that they are instead focusing on other matters they consider more important. Finally, femonationalism has been identified as a pattern of using feminist discourse -without ever identifying with it- in a way that is instrumental to expressing anti-Islam and xenophobic statements. These four themes were analyzed to show how they can be identified with discursive othering.

The answers to the research questions were already hinted at from the beginning of the findings section, but were answered more directly in the discussion chapters, where I talked about Foucault's idea of reiteration and its relation to power. The fact that I was able to identify some discursive patterns is already per se sufficient to say that dynamics of power in a Foucauldian sense are present. In the same chapter the narratives have been shown to hardly ever being independent, but mostly overlapping. In the final section of the discussion on the findings, it was shown how the antigender movement can be analyzed as a countermovement and how its relationship with the movement it is opposing is an antagonist one.

As for the limitations of the study, apart from the low generalizability of a case study and a possible bias already discussed in the positionality chapter in the methodology section, the biggest absent is the resistance to the antigender movement. However, some hope for resistance was captured in the chapter on the dialogical dimension of the antigender movement, where I showed how its existence necessarily implies the existence of the opposite way of thinking. Furthermore, I strongly believe that talking about hate speech and understanding its structure is the first step towards its deconstruction. This leads me to suggestions for future research that could take this first step further.

The first question that can raise from this study is about Salvini and Meloni's followers and all of those that interact with them on Twitter. It would be interesting to see explored whether or not the identified patterns are mirrored by

other users. If this happens to be the case, then, more work would need to be done to identify the characteristic of the relationship between the politician and their followers in different ways. One way would be to apply the same theories of this thesis to see if the relation of countermovement with an antagonist nature is persistent. Another way could be to identify the origin of the discursive patterns, are the followers picking up from the politicians, vice versa or a mix of both? Do these patterns instead come from the antigender movement of other settings like the Vatican, associations with an antigender scope or from the antigender movement of other countries?

As we have seen from the introduction until this last page, the antigender movement is largely spreading online, with its terrible effects offline. Only during the time it took me to write this thesis, an Anti-Drag bill has passed in Tennessee, a bill banning "queer propaganda" is about to be submitted in Georgia, same-sex couples' children have stopped being registered in Milan, the Hungarian government has prohibited topics of gender identity and sexuality to be even mentioned in schools, with the support of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Brothers of Italy's government is discussing in the Italian parliament a law that would universally criminalize surrogacy, taking away the possibility for couples to go through the practice abroad and have their children recognized in Italy. There is no time better than now to understand what this movement is about, as identifying the source of hate speech is, I believe, the first step to being able to resist it.

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Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi]. (2021a, marzo 8). Roma, processione di "femministe" (???) con un'immagine che lascio a voi giudicare. Con tutto il rispetto per tutte e tutti, mi paiono comportamenti al limite del disturbo. Le donne meritano ben altre paladine. Che pena... Https://t.co/s5svk0oBVE [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1368986290880974850

Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi]. (2021b, settembre 9). Utero in affitto, madri a noleggio, bimbi in vendita sui cataloghi. Non è "futuro", è follia. Https://t.co/SZwzzTbPND [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1436007321272991747

Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi]. (2021c, ottobre 28). ...La teoria gender e non limita la libertà di espressione. L'obiettivo comune è punire chi discrimina, odia e insulta. Il muro contro muro voluto da Letta non ha pagato.[Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1453777134447693828

Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi]. (2022a, maggio 30). Lasciamo che i bimbi giochino, studino, si conoscano e crescano da bimbi. Fra fiabe negate o riscritte, teorie gender, registri scolastici "fluidi" e bagni neutri, stanno proprio esagerando. [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1531346424780275712

Matteo Salvini [@matteosalvinimi]. (2022b, luglio 4). Se la sinistra insiste con droga libera, cittadinanza facile e ddl Zan, faremo vedere di che pasta è fatta la Lega. Ora basta. Le emergenze sono aumento di stipendi

e pensioni, sono lavoro e taglio delle tasse, sono l'autonomia e la lotta all'immigrazione clandestina. Non altro. Https://t.co/Rtv2bLf37m [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1543940223394095104

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Appendix

In the following table, the left column is the list of keywords I used to look for the tweets and the right column represents a translation into English for the keyword, and, where necessary, a few lines of context as to why that keyword was chosen.

Keyword	Translation or brief explanation of the keyword's meaning/relevance
Gender	Gender
Femminismo	Feminism
Femminista	Feminist
Femministe	Feminists (feminine plural)
LGBT	LGBT
Gay	Gay
Lesbica	Lesbian
Lesbiche	Lesbians
Zan	[Proposed law that was banned in 2021 "DDL Zan". The main aim of the law would have been the recognition of acts of discrimination based on sexual identity, gender identity or disability as hate crimes]
DdlZan	[same as above; Ddl is the acronym for "Disegno di legge", "proposed law", it would sometimes be typed together with Zan as one word]

Cirinnà	[Law that allowed civil unions between same-sex couples (approved in 2016)]
Transgender	Transgender
Trans	Trans
Sesso	Sex [added to look for topics related to trans issues. Transition is sometimes referred to as "cambio di sesso", "change of sex"]
Drag	Drag
Aborto	Abortion
Pensiero Unico	Expression translatable as "single minded" or "only thought" [Salvini and Meloni usually refer to leftists with this expression]
Donne	Women
Donna	Woman
Anti	Anti
Affitto	Rent [used to look for tweets that contained "uterus for rent", a derogatory expression to refer to surrogacy]