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Abstract: The Guest Editors use a feminist lens to introduce and deconstruct the theme of “Donne di destra / Women of the Right” in the sociopolitical and cultural context of contemporary Italy.

Keywords: Feminism, Giorgia Meloni, Femonationalism, equality, neoliberalism, neoconservatism

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Themed Section

gender/sexuality/italy 10 I-II (2023-2024)

Donne di destra / Women of the Right

OMBRETTA FRAU, JULIET GUZZETTA

Guest Editors

The majority of women are already oppressed by both the government and by men. The electoral system simply increases their oppression by introducing a third ruling group: elite women. [...] Instead of competing with men for power, women should strive for overthrowing men's rule. Once men are stripped of their privilege, they will become the equal of women. There will be no submissive women nor submissive men. This is the liberation of women.

– He Zhen, *Problems of Women's Liberation*, 1907

Similar to the many women and people who have spent the better part of their conscious lives rooting for other women to soar in their endeavors, we experienced conflicting reactions on October 22, 2022 when Giorgia Meloni became the first woman elected to serve as Prime Minister of Italy, almost exactly one hundred years after Benito Mussolini's appointment in the same role. As feminists who come from social and economic leftist positions, those very ones from which women were largely excluded during the swell of postwar progressive movements, we disagree with the vast majority of Meloni's views on migration, human rights, economic policy, her original anti-European Union stance, domestic social services, and much more. Additionally, we are deeply troubled by her involvement as a youth in the postwar party of leftover fascists, the Italian Social Movement (MSI), which later morphed into the now-dissolved National Alliance (AN), and the ways in which those early experiences continue to frame much of her political thought and practice (e.g., from her staunch nationalism, to her self-proclaimed identity as a "soldier" for Italy, as she describes in her autobiography, which she proudly titled after one of her most incendiary and exclusionary campaign speeches *Io sono Giorgia*).¹ But Meloni can also exude warmth (as in her seemingly sincere [congratulations](#) to opposition leader Elly Schlein after her own historic political victory in 2023), and self-deprecating humor (such as her goofy melon-adorned [TikTok](#) video encouraging people to vote in 2022). What to make of a leader whose positions are anti-human on many issues (most wrenchingly LGBTQIA2S+ and migrant communities), but who also models calm poise in the typical onslaught of sexist aggression from fellow politicians and journalists?²

Allowing our conflicting reactions to lead our inquiries, we set out to investigate a number of contradictions and curiosities. Meloni's success inspires questions about her specific situation, but also crosses into the symbolic. Regardless of party, it is still a notable double-take when anyone other than the white heteronormative male holds power, particularly the highest public office of a land. The inquiry that casts the longest shadow across all the sections in our *g/s/i* volume is whether or not there is a possibility for a practice of feminism by conservative women and if so, what does it look like? Part of the motivating logic behind that idea stems from the glare of there never having been anywhere close to parity, let alone a majority of women in government leadership in Italy (or elsewhere). But now, as in a handful of instances around the world, on the rarest of occasions when that prime

¹ Giorgia Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*, 173, 190, 323.

² As an example, when she did not empower a Berlusconi crony in her government, he purposefully left a note in plain view of photographers describing her as "presumptuous, bossy, arrogant, offensive." Hounded by reporters for a response she coolly remarked she had little to say. When the journalists persisted, it was hard not to cheer for her when she [silenced](#) them, and Berlusconi, by casually adding that "he forgot one point: I'm resistant to blackmail."

leadership position has been held by a woman, she is usually from a conservative party.³ To clarify an important point, with Silvia Federici, we refer to “women” as a “political category,” that is, “all those who suffer under the material conditions that have historically been assigned to women, which includes trans and nonbinary people, intersex and agender people and queer people.”⁴ Similarly, with philosopher Chiara Bottici, we intend for “feminism” to oppose “the oppression of people who are *perceived as women* and who are discriminated [against] precisely on that basis.”⁵

We are starting, then, from a position of the imaginary. How can we fathom a society in which an equal or majority of decision-makers were women? Would it make a difference? Do different identities bring difference to the white male-constructed establishments when women progress within them? If women have been oppressed for so long, literally restrained from having a voice in decisions that concern them as women (e.g., healthcare) and as humans (e.g., education, work, migration, taxes, etc.), then surely as more women integrate themselves into the conversations that affect their lives, some characteristics of society should change. Otherwise, why have those spaces been closed to them?

One tactic which has proved advantageous for women on the right is to manipulate certain key strands of feminism so that their logic seems to support fundamentalist ideals. Presciently, in 1983, at a time when the most powerful woman in the west was tory British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the feminist sociologist Judith Stacey signaled the importance for feminists to engage seriously with “new conservative thought, for there is radical feminist ancestry to several of the themes that conservatives develop.”⁶ Indeed, this remains true in the case of Meloni and many conservative women in power today who promote neoliberalism. In order to understand those undercurrents of feminist ancestry that Stacey references, it is necessary to understand how conservative women became the victors of left-leaning achievements. How were they even in a position to manipulate classic leftist positions about a range of topics, from bodily autonomy to difference theory? As conservative women occupy the spaces that feminists helped create, the key question becomes whether or not they forge a different path, one that veers away from established feminist causes, but that nonetheless has material and philosophical benefits on women’s lives even if only to provide more equal opportunities. Equal, that is, to men, who, in this model, remain the ideal towards which to strive.

The Rise: A Critical Genealogy of Conservative Women in Italy

Just as second wave feminism in the late 1960s in Italy grew out of social movements related primarily to labor, the family and peace, so too “women of the right” emerged from a specific socio-political climate, two decades later, with the demise of the first Republic, and when conservative parties (e.g., Lega and Forza Italia) gained momentum after the failure of the left. Then, the raw and personal reaction to exclusion from androcentric discourses on progressive turns in society and politics paved the way for robust theoretical feminist premises, at first mostly advanced by members from activist groups. Beginning in 1966, collectives such as Demau (“Demistificazione Autoritarismo”) and (in 1970) Rivolta Femminile often operated in the company of each other. The philosopher Paola Di Cori underlines the importance of relaxing the tendency to contain all feminist advancements within the long 1970s (a tendency likely at least in part due to the landmark referenda in Italy for the right to

³ In part thanks to imposed quotas since [2012](#), Italy now has one of the highest shares of women in politics in the west, with around 32% representation of parliament in [2022](#), though still woefully short of mirroring their share of the population. Giada Zampano, “Italy to Push ‘Pink Quotas.’”

⁴ Jordan Kisner, “The Lockdown Showed How the Economy Exploits Women. She Already Knew.”

⁵ Chiara Bottici, *Anarchafeminism*, 2.

⁶ Judith Stacey, “The New Conservative Feminism.”

divorce and elective abortion), and rather to see the successive decades as a continuation of the important philosophical and political work that had only begun to emerge.⁷ While the groups of institutional academics and public intellectuals continued to form and redefine themselves across the country (e.g., the Libreria delle Donne and Diotima), other groups focused on pursuing important legal changes, an elective presence, and raising awareness about violence against women (e.g., the Casa Internazionale delle Donne in Rome and Nemesiache in Naples), and still others practiced a mix of philosophical and legal work, such as the Marxist sociologists who argued the “pay for housework” campaigns in and outside of Italy (e.g., Mariarosa Della Costa, Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati). All of this work was vibrant, transnational, organized, and ongoing throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, and because of the success of the women who led these many initiatives, the male-dominated party institutions began to create a space for them, which cemented the already established relationship between feminism and the left.⁸

While the alliance between the institutional left and feminism grew in practice and in popular imagination, a confluence of global and national events weakened leftist parties in the Italian parliament, as well as unaffiliated feminist groups. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union took Italy’s Communist Party with it, and as the corruption trials of the Mani Pulite efforts ended the domination of the Christian Democrat and Socialist Parties, the Lega Nord and Forza Italia assumed power. As historian Francesca Izzo argues, these new protagonists of the Italian political scene brought with them more than policy: they orchestrated ideological and cultural shifts.⁹ Both in agreement and adding to these events, Di Cori reads three moments in particular that shifted feminist momentum: terrorism during the long 1970s; the rise of Berlusconi that opened the door to conservative women; and the dominant political discourse of pornography between 2009 and 2011.¹⁰

Silvio Berlusconi, the media tycoon who first became Prime Minister in 1994, though for less than a year, regaining the position in 2001, 2005, and 2008, is a common theme in assessing the smothering of feminism, since his rise also marked the end of the left’s postwar presence. Complicating this perspective is the contradiction that at the same time as Berlusconi promoted the aggressive denigration of women in the media via humiliating variety shows, sexist name-calling, and his own public underage prostitution scandals, he upheld not only women’s role in the family, but also in the labor market, and even women’s reproductive rights. The rise of his party and the Lega created a noticeable space for conservative women such as Irene Pivetti, Alessandra Mussolini, and the young Giorgia Meloni (as the Italian Minister of Youth in 2008), some of whom even worked across political difference for important legal victories for women as we discuss in the next section.¹¹

The rise of neoliberalism enabled the rise of conservative women because they largely upheld – and uphold – the neoliberal agenda. By contrast, while progressive movements in Italy (from 1966 to 1994) shared similar philosophies to feminism, second wave feminists began to practice separatism as a result of their exclusion from reformist groups. These two very different methods, one that shared political values but was forced to create its own space, and the other that is able to assimilate into a conservative political praxis, reveal an upsetting truth about leftist politics: they are frequently

⁷ Paola Di Cori, *Asincronie del femminismo: scritti e interventi, 1986-2011*, 27–28.

⁸ Fiamma Lussana’s expansive research on the moments preceding and following the legalization of elective abortion in Italy shows the nuances between extra-parliamentary and parliamentary parties on this specific issue, though they are also representative of the climate and risks for feminists associating with establishment parties. Needless to say, they were all parties on the left. Fiamma Lussana, *Il movimento femminista in Italia: esperienze, storie, memorie, 1965-1980*, 56–73.

⁹ Francesca Izzo, “I dilemmi del femminismo nella Seconda Repubblica,” 107.

¹⁰ Cori, *Asincronie del femminismo*, 27.


¹¹ For a helpful discussion of how neoconservative (morals-oriented) vs neoliberal (free market) values resulting in differing positions on feminism during this period in Italy, see Elia Arfini, Sveva Magaraggia, and Rossella Ghigi, “Can Feminism Be Right? A Content Analysis of Discourses about Women by Female Italian Right-Wing Politicians?”

sexist.¹² That reality is a topic for a different study, but in our research on conservative women, we were less surprised to discover the nuances of how those women denounce feminism or how the men of their parties see little use in hiding their sexism or appropriating it for appearance purposes, than we were disturbed by the often specious and insincere support of women by leftist men that could vanish as they gained power. As the political scientist Jennifer Piscopo has argued, based on her analysis of a number of South American countries, “left-wing populists pursue two strategies. The first is policy mitigation, wherein they allow but then later undo feminist wins. The second constitutes defensive dismissals, wherein they say nothing about women or gender until called upon to defend their record — in which case they minimize feminists’ concerns.”¹³ Electing Elly Schlein as the secretary of the Italian Democratic Party, a young, openly bisexual, urbane and international woman, does not mean that the left is any more progressive than the far right of Meloni’s territory. In the American context, it is crucial to stress that Kamala Harris received the Democratic nomination for president thanks to Joe Biden having positioned her as vice president in 2020. The lesson for left-leaning people is that the left needs to confront its own relationship to women *as a class* with much more seriousness.

A final important aspect to understanding the currents that shifted twenty-first century Italian feminism is the presence of the Catholic church. Several scholars credit Berlusconi’s fourth Cabinet (2008-2011) in particular for “mixing neoliberal economic reforms with Italian conservative and Catholic values.”¹⁴ The space, then, that was open to women in the Berlusconi years, was one that would propagate conservative values as they affirmed Catholic ideals. This created a strange and pernicious circumstance in which several conservative women (Anna Maria Bernini, Michela Vittoria Brambilla, Mara Carfagna, Mariastella Gelmini, Giorgia Meloni, Stefania Prestigiacomo) could hold positions of power by a politics that upheld gender hierarchies and broadly oppressed women. While neoconservative morals in the shadows of the Church shape cultural dynamics, it is especially the neoliberal positions of the free market, which are less concerned with identity as long as capitalist practices continue, that have proven to be a site of possibility for women who seek traditional (patriarchal, hierarchical, hegemonic) power.

As women gained power in conservative parties, they strategically distanced themselves from any suggestion of “feminism” because of its leftist roots, while at the same time they occasionally made it seem as though there was another path forward for women who espoused power in the male model.¹⁵ In one strategy, Meloni, Daniela Santanchè and others capitalized on fault lines in some of the most important strands of thought in Italian second wave feminism such as sexual difference

¹² There is a pervasive anxiety in confronting the issue of sexism on the left, though one could argue that a number of important Black feminists inherently did so in some of the early work on intersectionality and double jeopardy as advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Frances M. Beal, and Barbara Smith. Marxist feminist analyses also reveal these issues via differing pay wages and the capitalist dependency on women’s free labor such as in the studies of Marlene Dixon as early as 1977. Nancy Fraser, among others, continues this train of thought with her analysis of care work. Finally, the author Julie Bindel addresses a number of subtle acts of leftist misogyny in her analysis of the political reactions to the horrific attack on Sara Everard in London 2021. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color;” Frances M. Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female;” Barbara Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism;” Marlene Dixon, “Left-Wing Anti-Feminism: A Revisionist Disorder;” Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care;” Julie Bindel, “The Sly Sexism of Left-Wing Men.”

¹³ Jennifer Piscopo, “ Left-Wing Populism, Democratic Erosion, and Patriarchy.”

¹⁴ Arfini, Magaraggia, and Ghigi, “Can Feminism Be Right?,” 698.

¹⁵ Even as they distanced themselves from feminism, however, many female politicians embraced and still embrace a specific portrayal of femininity. This subtly erotic energy surrounding women and power raises questions about the extent to which female politicians can ultimately control their image. The renowned historian Joan Scott offers a provocative reading of the “pleasures and dangers of transgressing social and sexual boundaries” when female orators took to the stage over the centuries, at times with penalty of death. Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, 55–59.

theory, which assumed both a theoretical and historical breadth as it aimed to devise a philosophy and existential practice that was women-inclusive. In 1987, when the Libreria delle Donne di Milano collectively penned their paradigm-shifting *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (Don't Think You Have Any Rights), quoting Simone Weil, they explained how their interest in a philosophical instead of legislative practice was based on the idea that a truly liberated existence for women “is not made possible by adherence to the liberal concept of rights—civil, human, or individual rights, which women do not have *as women*—but is generated and indeed en-gendered” by philosophical work that examines women’s writing, thought and knowledge in the company of other women (original emphasis).¹⁶ Those who were hostile to this project, which included many across both the left and right, capitalized on its separatist stance. For the left it was a hypocritical gesture, threatening to the ideals of togetherness, as if women were not already treated differently than men.

The right, and notably women of the right, manipulated the intentions of the authors for their own conservative values by exploiting its separatist stance as promoting “a binary, ontological and oppositional view of gender” thus creating an awkward opening “on which to build naturalistic discourses.”¹⁷ Even Luisa Muraro, one of the main philosophers of sexual difference, acknowledged the uncomfortable problem of sexual difference feminists who, in the words of sociologist Paolo Gusmeroli, might “weirdly collide with Catholic stances.”¹⁸ Such agreements from opposite sides of the spectrum is also clear in the debates on surrogacy, which is generally unsupported by conservatives as they see threats to the traditional family, but also unsupported by a number of feminists who see surrogacy as another instance of commodifying the female body akin to prostitution. There are plenty of other examples of manipulating ideals or slogans celebrated in the second wave such as turning “my body my choice” into an argument that supported Berlusconi’s hypersexualization of women’s bodies (as Daniela Santanchè did) or arguing that feminism is an ideology which highlights its association with leftist politics, instead of a pro-woman discourse (as Meloni has).¹⁹ One interpretation of this flip is that of “gender mainstreaming, where feminist knowledge has been converted into de-politicized technical expertise.”²⁰ In our view, however, these types of comments are construed for political gain. They serve to distance from the aspiration of liberation associated with the left, and for reframing it in a neoliberal model of corporate “lean in” equality that holds power (as opposed to, say, relations) as the ideal social political position.

The Question of Conservative Feminism

As feminists, our instincts are to work with others and find common ground to achieve shared goals. This is where the possibility of equal representation in governments, indeed seeing a government led by a woman, is seductive. But, in Meloni’s case, due to political differences, it is also very disorienting.

¹⁶ Teresa de Lauretis, “The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy: An Introductory Essay,” 2.

¹⁷ Arfini, Magaraggia, and Ghigi, “Can Feminism Be Right?,” 696.

¹⁸ Paolo Gusmeroli, “Is Gender-Critical Feminism Feeding the Neo-Conservative Anti-Gender Rhetoric? Snapshots from the Italian Public Debate,” 7.

¹⁹ For instance, according to Santanchè “Berlusconi is the victim of a neo-feminist school of thought: I do what I want with my body, I give it, and I get the maximum from it.” Daniela Santanchè, *Sono una donna, sono la Santa*, 39. Meloni has written that she proudly engages the female question as a right-wing woman, lamenting the contempt and racism she and other women have suffered by the leftwing feminists who follow ideology over substance. Giorgia Meloni, *Noi crediamo*, xiv. This is an example of how, “Different conservative political actors took the chance to redefine their narrative strategies against ‘gender theory’ by adding pro-feminist and anti-capitalist nuances to their ideological patchwork.” Gusmeroli, “Is Gender-Critical Feminism Feeding the Neo-Conservative Anti-Gender Rhetoric?,” 11.

²⁰ Arfini, Magaraggia, and Ghigi, “Can Feminism Be Right?,” 693.

With this in mind, could we consider her political success a success for all women? Or a feminist achievement? Are there ways in which conservative women in positions of power are creating better social conditions for all women? In the case of Meloni and of several of the other conservative women in Italian politics, we could identify some form of “cautious feminism,” in one that strives towards the most basic human rights, such as the right to vote and the right to work outside the home, together with other egalitarian-oriented initiatives that include the so-called pink tax or, what seems unimaginably progressive in the United States: free universal childcare.

Undoubtedly, one of the most intriguing conservative female politicians in Italy is Partito Popolare Europeo’s former member Alessandra Mussolini. Granddaughter of the dictator and niece of Italy’s biggest diva, Sofia Loren, Alessandra has been under the spotlight since a very young age. A former actress, model, and singer, Mussolini also holds a medical degree from the University of Rome La Sapienza. Her political career began in the early 1990s with the Movimento Sociale (like Meloni), but her mercurial personality brought her to change political alliances several times. After the MSI and Alleanza Nazionale, in 2008 Mussolini joined the Popolo della Libertà, eventually Forza Italia, and most recently the Partito Popolare Europeo group.

Mussolini is a conservative politician, and has been prone to scandal and controversies, for example when, in 2006, she told Italian politician and first openly transgender person in European politics, Vladimir Luxuria, “si veste da donna e crede di poter dire tutto quello che vuole.”²¹ Yet it would be hard not to think of her as a feminist. In February 1996, for instance, working with colleagues across parties (among them, PD’s Anna Finocchiaro), she was instrumental in passing a much needed law in which rape and sexual violence would be classified as a crime against a person, as opposed to an offense against society. According to legal scholar Amy J. Everhart, “For Alessandra Mussolini and other Italian women, the reclassification, accompanied by other significant changes in the law, symbolizes the recognition of Italian women as equal to men and places rape on the same level as other violent crimes.”²² More recently, in 2021, Mussolini took a decisive queer-friendly turn when she spoke in favor of the so-called DDL Zan against gender discrimination, and in early 2023 she refused a special European parliament passport on the grounds that it asked her to choose her gender as either male or female, which she found exclusive and regressive for the EU. Later that year, she even brought the suggestion of a pink tax to Brussels, arguing that all women and menstruating people in the European Union should not have to pay any tax whatsoever on sanitary products, an initiative that traverses borders both literally and symbolically as it is a law independent of citizenship or other immigrant status.²³

Like Alessandra Mussolini, Giorgia Meloni has, at times, demonstrated a seemingly feminist attitude: her 2022 political program included several elements that feminists in other countries have fought for such as lower taxes for diapers, free childcare centers on the Tagesmutter model, a defense of Italy’s abortion law, the already mentioned tax for sanitary products, and a revision of the legislation against gender violence.²⁴ However, two years into her mandate, Meloni has already been criticized for not maintaining her promises.²⁵ Meloni’s “feminist” assertions reveal a conservative and strictly binary

²¹ *Porta a Porta*, 2006. Mussolini also addressed Luxuria using homophobic language.

²² Amy J. Everhart, “Predicting the Effect of Italy’s Long-Awaited Rape Law Reform on ‘The Land of Machismo,’” 673. Amy J. Everhart, “Predicting the Effect of Italy’s Long-Awaited Rape Law Reform on ‘The Land of Machismo,’” 31, 673.

²³ Editorial Board, “Solo ‘maschio’ o ‘femmina’ sul passaporto da europarlamentare, il rifiuto di Alessandra Mussolini: ‘Non lo voglio, non considera il genere neutro’”; Simone De La Feld, “Un assorbente per Gentiloni: Alessandra Mussolini chiede l’abolizione della Tampon tax in tutta l’Ue.”

²⁴ [Fratelli d’Italia, Programma 2022.](#)

²⁵ Matilda Abate, “Tampon tax in Italia: cos’è e cos’è cambiato nel 2022.” On March 10, 2024, in her podcast *Amare Parole*, sociolinguist Vera Gheno talked about “Povertà mestruale e tampon tax” criticizing the current government’s plan to increase VAT on sanitary products from 5% to 10%.

family vision, despite her own liberties when it comes to her preference for partnership over marriage. Moreover, her often repeated commitment to Italy's abortion law, coupled with an equally often reiterated promise to help Italian women become mothers, is nothing more than a traditionalist and xenophobic strategy to encourage white Italians to have more children in order to contrast the current natality trends where Italians of color are at the forefront.

This stance is a thinly veiled manifestation of what the sociologist Sara Farris calls femonationalism, in which European nationalists invoke “gender equality (and occasionally LGBT rights) within an otherwise xenophobic rhetoric” all without actually “elaborating concrete policies of gender equality” and practicing a “masculinist political style.”²⁶ Farris’ work focuses specifically on anti-Muslim sentiment, but also demonstrates the spillover of Islamophobia into xenophobia. Importantly, she examines the ways in which Islamophobia is leveraged into a cultural imaginary that feeds off racist stereotypes and fears as practiced by many of the right-leaning parties in Italy, including Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia party and her vehement hostility to migration. As she declares in her own 2022 political program: “L’immigrazione illegale minaccia la sicurezza e la qualità della vita dei cittadini. Le nostre città sono degradate e invivibili. Periferie e centri storici sono teatro di occupazioni abusive, violenze e spaccio. Occorre una svolta politica forte per garantire la legalità nei nostri confini, riqualificare i nostri territori e rafforzare il tessuto sociale ed economico nazionale.”²⁷

Ultimately, we see this position as less of a genuine fear of the Other, and more as a neoliberal instrument in the pursuit of capitalist accumulation. Farris notes that scholars have largely treated neoliberalism as a background for xenophobic and racist policies, while she views it as more center-stage, as “a political-economic formation that ‘institutionalizes’ the femonationalist ideology as part of the functioning of the state apparatuses in order to (re)organize the productive and particularly the socially reproductive sphere.”²⁸ For us, the neoliberalism of Italy’s *donne di destra* enables a practice of corporate feminism in which women are both subject to the patriarchal exploitation of capitalism, and also leverage themselves as oppressors of other women (and anyone else), which is the only path forward in such a model.²⁹ This submission to advanced capitalist hunger is a large part of the reason that Meloni tends to desist at the gateway of the patriarchy stronghold: while she advocates for some women’s rights, for instance the right to breastfeed in the workplace, she abruptly stops when the patriarchy is threatened, when, in this case, issues such as the gender pay gap and paternity leave appear on the table.³⁰ While she will publicly shame employers who fired women who were pregnant, or express her disapproval at the lack of nursing stations at work, the reality is that “the percentage of women’s issues accounts for a remarkably small part of total observations, both in parliamentary activities and social media” of the Italian government.³¹ Even when at the behest of capital, of making it easier for women to work outside the home, Meloni all too easily capitulates on her defense of women in the workplace.

²⁶ Sara R. Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, 1. See also Elisabetta De Giorgi, Alice Cavalieri, and Francesca Feo, “From Opposition Leader to Prime Minister: Giorgia Meloni and Women’s Issues in the Italian Radical Right,” 109.

²⁷ Fratelli d’Italia, Programma 2022.

²⁸ Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights*, 14.

²⁹ Tracy Llanera has attempted to understand why alt-right women who espouse racist ideals find it so important to do so that they sustain the deeply violent misogyny often accompanying their alt-right affiliations. She proposes three “ideals of white women in racist propaganda: the goddess/victim, the wife and mother, and female activist” all three that inure women to aggressive and oppressive cultures that they accept in return for a sense of pride and duty in performing these roles. Tracy Llanera, “The Misogyny Paradox and the Alt-Right,” 161.

³⁰ Giorgi, Cavalieri, and Feo, “From Opposition Leader,” 114.

³¹ Giorgi, Cavalieri, and Feo, “From Opposition Leader,” 112.

This is where the possibility of a conservative feminism begins to unravel: at the intersection of neoliberal politics and exploitation. According to Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser this form of corporate feminism envisions “a world where the task of managing exploitation in the workplace and oppression in the social whole is shared equally by ruling-class men and women. This is a remarkable vision of *equal opportunity domination*” (original emphasis).³² The same scholars depict an individualistic dog eats dog practice that “leads to a scorched planet where human life is immiserated to the point of unrecognizability, if indeed it remains possible at all” thanks to the “exceptionally predatory, financialized form of capitalism” that is held in such high esteem today.³³ There is a contradiction in “capitalism’s need for female participation both at home and in the labour market,” and when women are able to earn money (and independence) for themselves in the labor market, they must exploit others, usually other women.³⁴ Daniela Santanchè argues that value must be understood in capitalist terms when she says: “Tu donna, tu madre, diventi pari quando guadagni quanto un uomo di successo” adding how if a mother is able to pay for a nanny after she gives birth, she becomes “equal” to a man when they both bring money home. “La parità la fanno i soldi, è questo il punto...”³⁵ This perspective is in contrast to conservative intellectual Flavia Perina, who reads motherhood as the key element that renders women second class in the workforce as generally less competitive, yet at the same time (in an unconscious nod to Catholicism mixed with neoliberal principles from Berlusconi’s last years), Perina argues that society nonetheless deeply values the status of motherhood.³⁶ This incompatible system of values – one economic, one symbolic – accounts for some of the contradictions brewing in what we thought might be conservative feminism.

Returning to Giorgia Meloni’s politics, at first her message appears, if not feminist, at least pro-women, due to those stances on work and independence that she herself models. But her choice of an economic (capitalist) and political (neoliberal) model in which any form of feminism beyond basic rights – which is more than her position can afford for some people (e.g., migrants and LGBTQIA2S+) – becomes impossible. The problem with neoliberalism is that it is always ultimately under the thumb of capitalism, and capitalism is invariably oppressive and exploitative. That is the logic of capitalism whether it has locked its gaze on human labor, non-human animals (for human use and consumption), or the environment. It can be lured away from fossil fuels but it will sniff out some other source until that too is depleted or corrupt.³⁷

In sum, with Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser we could say that “The feminism we have in mind recognized that it must respond to a crisis of epochal proportions: plummeting living standards and looming ecological disaster; rampaging wars and intensified dispossession; mass migrations met with barbed wire; emboldened racism and xenophobia; and the reversal of hardwon rights—both social and political.”³⁸ Giorgia Meloni’s model, by contrast, only furthers the practices that brought us into a crisis of this magnitude. At the moment when we need an all-encompassing, inclusive, third millennium feminism, her model still places power (and thus exploitation) as the apex of success, as it follows the lean-in corporate mentality designed to elevate an elitist group of women. As Bottici says, nodding to the turn of the twentieth century Chinese “anarchafeminist” He Zhen whom we quote in

³² Cinzia Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Tithi, and Fraser, Nancy, *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto*, 2.

³³ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, 2–3.

³⁴ Arfini, Magaraggia, and Ghigi, “Can Feminism Be Right?” 709.

³⁵ Santanchè, *Sono una donna, sono la Santa*, 131–32.

³⁶ Arfini, Magaraggia, and Ghigi, “Can Feminism Be Right?” 705–6.

³⁷ See, for example, the following studies on how the shift to electric vehicles is ravaging the seabed floor: Kathryn A. Miller et al., “An Overview of Seabed Mining Including the Current State of Development, Environmental Impacts, and Knowledge Gaps;” Laura Kaikkonen et al., “Causal Approach to Determining the Environmental Risks of Seabed Mining;” Matthias Haeckel et al., “Environmental Impacts of Deep Seabed Mining.”

³⁸ Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 Percent*, 13.

our epigraph, “in this way, feminism can easily become a form of elitism, that is an attempt by (some) women to come to enjoy the same privileges as some men.”³⁹ Where today’s feminism fights capitalist oppression, Meloni embraces a corporate ideology. Where feminism seeks out the collective, she embraces individualism.

An Army of One

In this section, we briefly investigate the relevance of two fundamental feminist principles as they relate to the failure of a conservative feminism: sisterhood and solidarity. Keeping in mind the problematic issues around the idea of sisterhood, with Sophie Rumble we could say that “Perhaps, it is time to rethink the notion of global sisterhood; rather than attempting to find commonalities between women’s experiences, we should instead embrace the difference.”⁴⁰ And yet, creating a community of women has been a vital part of feminism in which the notion of sisterhood remains an essential part.⁴¹

As recently as November 2023, Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti wondered whether Giorgia Meloni

non sa che cosa sia l’emancipazione e come funzionino i processi di emancipazione o non lo vuol sapere. [...] Il punto principale è la solidarietà con le altre donne, cioè la critica del potere sproporzionato che il patriarcato, che non è di destra né di sinistra ma trasversale, concede con poteri eccessivi ai maschi e discriminazioni eccessive a donne e al popolo LGTBQ. La Meloni fa prova di una mancanza assoluta di solidarietà con altre donne politiche. [...] Si fida solo di mamma e sorella. Ma vogliamo scherzare? [...] Mi fido di quelle vicine e quelle lontane sono tutte nemiche. [...] Seconda idea: che la discriminazione non è l’effetto di un difettuccio psicologico nella testa di qualcuno. È una patologia sociale; è un effetto di sistema; è un sistema di distribuzione del potere che gestisce sempre tutto a favore dei maschi. Anche questo trasversale, né di destra né di sinistra. [...] Terzo ed ultimo: che la libertà e l’autonomia delle donne non ha nulla a che vedere con le brave che nella vita riescono, che siano Lilli Gruber o che siano Giorgia Meloni. Le brave ci sono sempre state. È una questione di sforzi collettivi, di risultati, di progressi da condividere con tutti, che si fanno insieme. Il femminismo è di tutti e per tutti.⁴²

Braidotti’s words on solidarity echo PD’s leader Elly Schlein’s:

A me colpisce che Giorgia Meloni abbia detto nel primo discorso alla Camera che lei ha rotto il soffitto di cristallo. Ecco io non penso che tu possa rompere il soffitto di cristallo da sola. Perché è fisica, cioè non basta un punto solo di pressione se la gran parte delle altre donne del paese neanche arrivano a vederlo perché sono schiacciate da una cappa di discriminazione di genere in tutti gli ambiti di vita.

³⁹ Bottici, *Anarchafeminism*, 9. For excerpts translated into English of Zhen’s 1907 “Problems of Women’s Liberation” see He Zhen, “Women’s Liberation.” For a helpful study on He Zhen’s political theory, see Peter Zarrow, “He Zhen and Anarcho-Feminism in China.”

⁴⁰ Sophie Rumble, “How Useful Is The Concept of Global Sisterhood?”

⁴¹ Relatedly, as political scientist Ronnee Schreiber has noted, when conservative women join forces, they are not interested in building a movement together. “Conservative women in the United States are seemingly less concerned about creating their own feminist movement than they are about challenging organized feminist activism on issues and the right to represent women.” Ronnee Schreiber, “Is There a Conservative Feminism? An Empirical Account.”

⁴² *Otto e mezzo*, November 21, 2023.

Allora ogni tanto dico a Giorgia Meloni che [...] non ce ne facciamo niente di una premier donna se non aiuta tutte le altre donne a migliorare le proprie condizioni di vita.⁴³

Undoubtedly, Meloni's sisterhood seems to include only the women in her immediate family (her mother, grandmother, sister, and daughter), an attitude that could be partially explained with her upbringing.⁴⁴ Her father abandoned the family when she was an infant. As she writes in her autobiography *Io sono Giorgia*: "Quando io ero ancora molto piccola, decise di partire per le Canarie su una barca di nome Cavallo pazzo. Prese il largo e svanì dal nostro orizzonte. Non ricordo il giorno in cui sparì. Semplicemente, non ricordo di aver mai vissuto con lui."⁴⁵ Meloni's father's departure must have fostered a strong sense of reverence towards her mother and sister. Rather than shy away from this personal history, she started using it as a redemption narrative in which she is the hero who overcomes tragedy. "Se oggi sono così, è anche grazie a mio padre, nel bene o nel male. Quando è morto, qualche anno fa, la cosa mi ha lasciato indifferente. [...] Ho capito allora quanto fosse profondo il buco nero in cui avevo sepolto il dolore di non essere stata amata abbastanza."⁴⁶ Her father's departure, which resulted in her mother raising two young girls by herself, could also explain Meloni's protectiveness of her immediate family and the way she projects female camaraderie through her (female) family, which is only reinforced now that Meloni herself is a single mother of a daughter.⁴⁷ It is a contradiction that Meloni continuously brings to the forefront, promoting her lonely brand of sisterhood in her policies, while at the same time excluding most other women.

Notably, author and activist Robin Morgan, with her (in)famous anthology series,⁴⁸ and author and scholar bell hooks in her well known "Political Solidarity between Women"⁴⁹ have pioneered sisterhood studies. For a more recent analysis of sisterhood and second wave feminism, we could turn to Durba Mitra's "Sisterhood is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now," where she declares "Sisterhood seems out of synch for the politics of our present" stressing the trans-exclusionary practices of certain white American feminism, Morgan's in particular.⁵⁰ Mitra recognizes that 1970s sisterhood "offered an optimistic foundation for new international feminisms, an ideal concept that envisioned real wide scale structural change for women through the possibilities of collective action that reached across borders."⁵¹ However, from her perspective as a third millennium person of color, Mitra is highly critical of 1970s feminists posing as an "epistemic authority on global women," and condemns Morgan's attitude about "the sameness of women" for not including race and culture, while concluding that second wave American feminism's call for sisterhood was just "for cis women by cis women."⁵²

⁴³ *Breaking Italy Night*, February 18, 2023.

⁴⁴ Meloni's mother, Anna Paratore, had various careers, including one as a prolific author of romantic novels with the pseudonyms of Josie Bell and Amanda King. See also Lorenzo Camerini, "Leggere Josie Bell: come sono i romanzi della madre di Giorgia Meloni?"

⁴⁵ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*, 16.

⁴⁶ Meloni, 31.

⁴⁷ Giorgi, Cavalieri, and Feo, "From Opposition Leader," 109.

⁴⁸ Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (Vintage Books, 1970); Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (Feminist Press at CUNY, 1996); Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Forever: The Women's Anthology for a New Millennium* (Simon and Schuster, 2007).

⁴⁹ "Socialist-Feminism: Out of the Blue." For a succinct analysis, also see Sophie Rumble, "How Useful is the Concept of Global Sisterhood?"

⁵⁰ Durba Mitra, "Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now." Mitra recalls Morgan's 1973 "infamous event cited as the origins of contemporary trans exclusionary feminist visions of women's rights, (...) where she [Morgan] condemned and decried the participation of a transgender woman singer" (438).

⁵¹ Mitra, "Sisterhood Is X", 432.

⁵² Mitra, "Sisterhood Is X", 436, 441, 442.

If we turn to 1970s Italy, we need to make a few important distinctions having to do with the fact that a conversation on feminism in Italy had to take into consideration issues of class and the differences between women from the north and less privileged women from the south. Giorgia Meloni was born in 1977. Growing up in modest conditions, Meloni was bullied in school and found a community in the Movimento Sociale youth group which, as a neo-fascist party, would not inspire a feminist position or interest in joining a sisterhood. And yet, in a highly performative and theatrical bow, during her inaugural speech in October 2022, Meloni recognized the privilege of being the first woman prime minister of Italy by paying homage to a small cohort of powerful Italian women who paved her way:

Tra i tanti pesi che sento gravare sulle mie spalle oggi, non può non esserci anche quello di essere la prima donna a capo del governo in questa Nazione. Quando mi soffermo sulla portata di questo fatto, mi ritrovo inevitabilmente a pensare alla responsabilità che ho di fronte alle tante donne che in questo momento affrontano difficoltà grandi e ingiuste per affermare il proprio talento o il diritto di vedere apprezzati i loro sacrifici quotidiani. Ma penso anche, con riverenza, a coloro che hanno costruito con le assi del proprio esempio la scala che oggi consente a me di salire e rompere il pesante tetto di cristallo posto sulle nostre teste. Donne che hanno osato, per impeto, per ragione, o per amore. Come Cristina (Trivulzio di Belgioioso), elegante organizzatrice di salotti e barricate. O come Rosalie (Montmasson), testarda al punto da partire con i Mille che fecero l'Italia. Come Alfonsina (Strada) che pedalò forte contro il vento del pregiudizio. Come Maria (Montessori) o Grazia (Deledda) che con il loro esempio spalancarono i cancelli dell'istruzione alle bambine di tutto il Paese. Eppoi Tina (Anselmi), Nilde (Jotti), Rita (Levi Montalcini), Oriana (Fallaci), Ilaria (Alpi), Mariagrazia (Cutuli), Fabiola (Giannotti), Marta (Cartabia), Elisabetta (Casellati), Samantha (Cristoforetti), Chiara (Corbella Petrillo). Grazie! Grazie per aver dimostrato il valore delle donne italiane, come spero di riuscire a fare anche io.⁵³

It is a well-balanced group of women, dead and alive, from different parts of Italy. It includes Catholic, Jewish, atheist, liberal and conservative women with a literary, political, and scientific background. However, it is also a list that does not represent today's Italy, or today's Italian feminist movements, as it proposes a traditional idea of sisterhood not ethnically/racially/trans inclusive. In 2020, for instance, journalist Elisabetta Moro reflected on the need to “trovare un punto di unione fra le donne, nonostante diversità e divisioni.”⁵⁴ The tricky question is to find the common ground that truly brings women together: as Moro, among others, posits, women today don't just have their physical issues in common, or their being at a disadvantage in society (a victim status that bell hooks strongly rejected). Instead, Moro states that “Scegliere il confronto tra donne, anche quando è destabilizzante e sembra minare l'idea romanticizzata di unione è, in realtà, l'unico modo per andare a fondo e costruire una solida sorellanza basata su rispetto e intersezionalità.” She concludes that “Se costruita come esplorazione, problematizzazione e impegno, la sorellanza può davvero diventare un punto di forza e una base di partenza per sviluppare un pensiero femminista sfaccettato, approfondito e inclusivo.” For Giorgia Meloni, embracing sisterhood and solidarity would mean to embrace everything that her political party does not stand for: a multicultural, multiracial Italy, and a growing LGBTQIA2S+ community. It would mean embracing intersectionality.

As a consequence, to fully understand the weight of Braidotti's and Schlein's words, we need to unpack the notion of solidarity and sisterhood in the third millennium with all its implications. When we do this, we realize that Giorgia Meloni cannot be part of a movement of universal solidarity without disowning what her politics represent. According to *Gender and Development* former editor Caroline Sweetman, “Feminist solidarity can be defined broadly as the principle of mutual support

⁵³ Giorgia Meloni, “Inaugural Address.”

⁵⁴ Elisabetta Moro, “Non ci può essere femminismo senza sorellanza.”

between individuals, groups and organizations working on gender equality and women’s rights.”⁵⁵ It is important because it encourages women to come together and creates new opportunities for independence while also supported by a community of friends and mentors. Through solidarity, marginalized people can find the support they need to move away from toxic situations, and through solidarity anyone can join a “collective action” to improve their lives.⁵⁶ While it is legitimate to imagine that Meloni would have no reservations about what we state above, a more diverse feminist idea would threaten Meloni’s political positions and would, therefore, be irreconcilable with her public, political persona. The idea of women and other marginalized groups working together in a “formula for solidarity and shared action which sees difference not as a challenge, but as an integral part—and, further, a strength—of women working as a movement” would be unacceptable for Meloni’s politics.⁵⁷ So, perhaps, the question is not so much about the relevance of an updated and inclusive form of solidarity for the third millennium, but about the fact that Meloni cannot or would not be part of an inclusive cohort of women.

Because it is still in equal parts shocking and thrilling to see a woman hold such a high office, because we so want to believe that with different lived experiences will come different learned leadership, because we are tired of all the subtle ways in which we experience sexism, and horrified by the continued violence against women, because of the concrete ways in which Meloni’s government and even more extreme right-leaning women policy-makers invoke their gender to create laws that appear (and only appear) to benefit women, and, finally, because it feels like a betrayal not to support a woman who has persevered and won, at times we wondered if what we were really attempting to do with this issue, and even with the Giornata di studio, was to open a space for a middle ground.

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⁵⁵ Caroline Sweetman, “Introduction, Feminist Solidarity and Collective Action.”

⁵⁶ Sweetman, 18–19.

⁵⁷ Sweetman, 226.

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