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Abstract: This article undertakes a critical examination of Giorgia Meloni's self-narrative of professional success and motherhood, situating it in dialogue with the symbolic and theological constructs associated with the Virgin Mary. By drawing on Mariological discourse, the study interrogates how Meloni's articulation of her personal and political identity leverages iconic representations of femininity to reinforce or subvert established paradigms of gender and authority. It explores how Meloni draws on Mariology to shape her views on female agency and women's roles in society, analyzing the political and philosophical discourse around these themes. Using the lens of 1970s Italian feminism (Cavarero, Lonzi, Muraro), contemporary feminist theology (Forcades, Murgia), and fascist feminist experiments (Labriola), the article highlights key issues in Meloni's narrative: the uniqueness of women's roles, the appeasement of societal expectations, and the archetypal theme of motherhood as self-realization. The analysis argues that Meloni adopts a male-dominated vision of Mary, devoid of agency, which contrasts sharply with feminist ideals of subjectivity and desire. Meloni's model for women operates within a masculine symbolic order, while implying that success requires accepting these imbalances rather than challenging them. Lacking empowerment or solidarity with other women, Meloni's narrative becomes a collage of religious clichés and gendered tropes, presenting a fragmented vision of success that upholds motherhood while limiting female self-realization to destiny and individual ambition.

Key words: Italian Feminism, Sexual Difference, Conservative Feminism, Virgin Mary, Motherhood

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Almost Like a Virgin: Strategic Appropriation of Marian Symbolism, *femminismo della differenza*, and Fascist Feminism in Giorgia Meloni’s “Reverse Discourse.”

DILETTA PASETTI, NICOLETTA MARINI-MAIO

On October 22, 2022, Giorgia Meloni became the first female Prime Minister in Italian history, an achievement that could easily be celebrated as a milestone for future generations of women in politics. Her rise to power has sparked intense debate over whether she embodies a form of “feminism.”¹ However, even if this is the story of a woman who built a conservative party in her image and ideas, leading it to electoral victory, the application of the feminist label to Meloni is problematic and requires closer examination. Meloni’s own narrative of her journey to leadership remains understated. She often attributes her success within the *Fratelli d’Italia* party to a combination of exceptionally hard work and luck, deliberately downplaying any mention of talent, making it difficult for her to claim ownership of her achievements. Meloni does not aspire to be a model of feminine ambition: in her public narration, she presents herself as an ordinary woman from the *borgata*,² fortunate enough to join a political party that forged her character and career. Effort and sacrifice anointed her as the “chosen one” within her political party. Gender claims rarely find a place in this narrative. Rather than embracing feminist principles in any meaningful or transformative way, Meloni’s rhetoric manipulates traditional gender norms to support a conservative worldview. Her discourse on motherhood, for instance, draws heavily from patriarchal values that praise the sacrificial mother—values that resonate more with reactionary ideals than with feminist calls for gender equality or liberation. Through her declarations and interventions, one could infer that her connection to women centers on motherhood alone: embracing women’s destiny to create life and support the family as their highest calling. This, and only this, is the area in which she seeks influence within the women’s community. Ready to sacrifice, dedicated to a mission—political or procreative—and accepting the destiny that was determined for her: these elements of Giorgia Meloni’s chronicle seem to echo the story of one of the most widely recognized archetypes of womanhood, the Virgin Mary. Both strong and yet accommodating figures, marked by the uniqueness of their position and unattainable aura, they embody two challenging feminine models, inspiring yet nearly impossible to emulate.

In this context, Meloni’s invocation of Marian imagery becomes particularly significant. The Virgin Mary, far from symbolizing female empowerment or agency, serves in Meloni’s discourse as a cultural and religious symbol to justify her vision of womanhood as inherently tied to selflessness, reproduction, and the domestic sphere. By co-opting Marian ideals, Meloni reinforces the very

¹ The public debate on Meloni’s controversial form of feminism as a “*donna di destra*” (right-wing woman) has been intense. For a larger context, and particularly the discussion of femonationalism, see Ombretta Frau’s and Juliet Guzzetta’s “*Donne di destra / Women of the Right*,” *gender/sexuality/italy*, 10, I-II (2023-2024): 1-14. Among others, see these journalistic references: Tommaso Scandroglio, “Sulla Meloni il cortocircuito del femminismo,” *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana*, August 11, 2022; Giorgia Serughetti, “Non basta che sia donna. Perché le femministe si oppongono a Meloni,” *Domani*, August 18, 2022; Ida Domijanni, “La nave distopica di Giorgia e i suoi Fratelli,” *Internazionale*, August 26, 2022; Antonella Mariani, “L’analisi. Femminile. Ma non femminista, La leadership secondo Giorgia Meloni,” *Avvenire*, September 29, 2022; Giuseppe Di Lorenzo, “‘Di donna ha ben poco.’ Il delirio delle femministe su Giorgia Meloni,” *Il Giornale*, November 29, 2023; Fabio Luppino, “Meloni sta dov’è grazie al femminismo (altro che uomo dell’anno),” *Huffington Post*, December 29, 2023; Salvatore Merlo, “Scoop: il melonismo è il femminismo che la sinistra sogna da sempre,” *Il Foglio*, August 27, 2024; Luisa Garribba Rizzitelli, “Il fake-femminismo di Giorgia Meloni,” *Huffington Post*, September 2, 2024; Ingrid Colanicchia, “La campagna ‘Meloni femminista’ del Foglio,” *MicroMega*, September 5, 2024.

² Meloni lived for several years in an affluent residential area of Rome but relocated with her mother and sister to the Garbatella neighborhood, a working-class suburb, after her father abandoned the family. In her self-presentation, she identifies as a *borgataro*, or a woman of the *borgata*, highlighting her connection to her popular roots.

structures that feminist movements have sought to challenge and dismantle. This strategic use of Marian imagery is not an extension of feminism—conservative or otherwise—but a reinforcement of traditional gender hierarchies under the guise of defending women and families. Thus, what might be framed as “conservative feminism,” if it exists at all, operates as an ideological contradiction. It relies on repurposing feminist language while ultimately preserving the same patriarchal norms. In this way, Meloni’s narrative represents not a departure from, but rather a subtle rearticulation of, patriarchal structures, masked under the rhetoric of protecting women and traditional family values.

This article interrogates the contradictory nature of what we define as Meloni’s “reverse discourse” of feminism by exploring three interconnected threads: her alignment with the Virgin Mary as a model of womanhood, her co-optation of *femminismo della differenza* (difference feminism), and her echoes of fascist feminism, particularly through the writings of Teresa Labriola. We argue that Meloni’s self-presentation as a woman, mother, and Christian inverts foundational feminist ideals. Instead of advancing solidarity and collective empowerment, Meloni’s narrative promotes a form of exceptionalism that, while enabling her personal rise within a patriarchal system, ultimately reinforces the very structures that limit broader female empowerment.

The article begins by analyzing the theological symbolism of the Virgin Mary in both patriarchal and feminist Catholic thought, drawing on figures such as Michela Murgia and Teresa Forcades i Vila. It then examines how Meloni’s public statements and autobiography align her with Marian symbolism, appropriating a secular, political version of the Virgin’s narrative. Consequently, it interrogates Meloni’s superficial analogies with, and decisive differences from, the basic principles of *femminismo della differenza*. Finally, it turns to fascist feminist theory, particularly as articulated by Teresa Labriola, to show how Meloni’s “reverse discourse” of feminism is informed by historical ideologies that have long conflated gender with conservative values. Through this analysis, We aim to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Meloni’s political identity and its implications for the evolving landscape of gender and feminism in Italy. By framing her within the broader contexts of religion, fascism, and feminist thought, this article offers a nuanced critique of how Meloni’s politics both challenge and sustain traditional gender paradigms.

The Virgin Mary as a Symbol of Womanhood and Its Appropriation

“Io sono Giorgia, sono una donna, sono una madre, sono italiana, sono cristiana” (I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am an Italian, I am a Christian), Giorgia Meloni notoriously proclaimed during a rally with her political coalition partners, Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini, on October 19, 2019.³ In her autobiography *Io sono Giorgia* (I am Giorgia), Meloni reflects extensively on the narrative that emerged from that speech, intertwining personal identity with a Christian framework that subtly invokes Catholic, and especially Marian, imagery. Her self-narration encapsulates the way she constructs her political identity around traditional, religious values, and, more subtly, it highlights her roles as a woman and mother alongside her Christian faith, evoking a narrative reminiscent of the Virgin Mary.

This indirect allusion invokes the archetype of the self-sacrificing mother in Meloni’s public persona, a figure both revered and idealized in Catholic doctrine. Meloni develops the Virgin Mary connection by reflecting on her speech through metaphors that resonate with Catholic precepts:

³ Giorgia Meloni, “Il discorso integrale di Giorgia Meloni in Piazza San Giovanni a Roma” (Meloni’s full speech in Piazza San Giovanni, Rome), October 19, 2019. See the original footage on Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, “Meloni nel 2019: ‘Sono Giorgia, sono una madre, sono cristiana’” (Meloni in 2019: I am Giorgia, I am a mother, I am a Christian). Video, April 12, 2024.

Alcune di queste identità non le ho scelte, *mi sono state donate*; altre sono *frutto* della mia libertà. La prima identità è il mio nome. Scelto dai miei genitori. *Primo atto d'amore* ricevuto. Il proprio nome è *la prima parola* che un bambino sente nelle sue orecchie; è il suono con cui riconosce la voce della mamma e del papà. [...] La seconda identità è il mio sesso. *Scelto dalla natura o da Dio*, fate voi. [...] Mettere al centro la persona vuol dire riconoscere prima di tutto *la sacralità della vita*, l'unicità di ogni singolo.⁴

Some of these identities I did not choose; *they were given to me*. Others are the *fruit* of my own freedom. The first identity is my name. Chosen by my parents. *The first act of love* I received. One's own name is *the first word* a child hears; it's the sound with which they recognize his mother's and father's voices. [...] The second identity is my sex. *Chosen by nature or by God*, take your pick. [...] Placing the person at the center means, above all, recognizing *the sanctity of life*, everyone's uniqueness.

To be specific, her assertion that certain identities—such as her name and her sex—were “given” to her, reflects a theological understanding of life as a gift, echoing the idea of divine providence. Her description of her name as “the first act of love” she received from her parents parallels the Christian belief in the sanctity of familial bonds, with undertones of the Holy Family's significance in Catholic tradition. More noticeably, the language Meloni employs in her self-narration—specifically the use of “fruit” and “chosen by God”—is significant, especially in the context of Marian theology. These terms are not neutral; they carry heavy Catholic connotations, evoking particularly the Virgin Mary. The word “fruit” in Meloni's narrative, when she speaks of certain aspects of her identity being “the fruit of my own freedom,” recalls the biblical metaphor of Mary as the bearer of the “fruit” of her womb, Jesus. In Marian theology, and simply in Catholic prayers such as the *Hail Mary*, Mary is referred to as the “fruitful womb,” a symbol of divine blessing and chosen motherhood. This metaphor underscores the idea of motherhood as a sacred, divinely appointed role, not merely a biological function but a vocation chosen by God. By appropriating this language, Meloni casts her own identity as a woman and mother within this framework of divine selection, elevating her personal choices and status to a higher, almost sacred plane. This rhetorical move positions her as embodying a divinely sanctioned form of femininity, which is at once powerful and self-sacrificing, much like the Virgin Mary.

The figure of the Virgin Mary has long been a cornerstone of Catholic identity, symbolizing purity, obedience, and the sanctity of motherhood. In patriarchal interpretations of Christianity, the Virgin Mary is portrayed as the epitome of feminine virtue, her significance tied to her role as the mother of Christ and her submission to divine will. However, feminist theologians like Michela Murgia and Teresa Forcades i Vila have challenged this traditional image, proposing a subversive reading of Mary as a figure of agency and choice. Rather than a passive recipient of divine command, Mary is reimagined as a woman who actively participates in shaping her own destiny. In these readings, Mary becomes a symbol of autonomy and resistance, actively shaping her own destiny.

“Feminist theology is a critical theology, and critical research [...] always originates from an experience of contradiction.”⁵ Physician, Benedictine nun, and social activist Teresa Forcades i Vila highlights an idea that is both obvious and innovative: feminist theology has existed as long as patriarchal theology. Understanding the contradiction that Forcades addresses is crucial to unlocking

⁴ Giorgia Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee*. (Milano: Mondadori, 2022), ebook. Our emphasis. Giorgia Meloni's original texts are quoted in Italian and translated to English. Any other Italian sources is reported in English. English translations are ours, unless otherwise specified.

⁵ Teresa Forcades i Vila, *La teologia feminista en la historia* (Barcelona: Fragmenta Editorial, 2011), 13. When not otherwise specified, the English translations of original non-English texts are ours.

the new possibilities of diversity and inclusivity in interpreting Roman Church Scriptures. In *La teología feminista en la historia* (*Feminist Theology in History*), Forcades identifies “the impossibility of matching the lived experience of a person with the image of God as filtered through theological interpretation”⁶ as the central issue to be addressed. She emphasizes the urgency of inclusivity, long prevented by the male-oriented and rigid interpretation of Holy doctrine. In *La teología feminista*, Forcades reconstructs the history of influential women—nuns, theologians, writers—whose contributions within the Roman Church have been significant but largely unrecognized in the official accounts.

Acknowledging these dissenting voices against conventional patriarchal theology creates essential space to nurture contradiction rather than deny it, allowing for the exploration of more inclusive interpretative practices. This engagement with contradiction is also suggested by Michela Murgia in her late work, *God Save the Queer. Catechismo femminista* (*God Save the Queer. Feminist Catechism*), where she speculates on the possibility of being both a feminist and a devout Catholic. Like Forcades, Murgia critiques the limitations of a male-biased interpretation of the Scriptures and proposes an alternative, more inclusive reading of several theological concepts, such as the omnipotent God, the Holy Trinity, the Father-Son dualism, and the presence of the feminine. She reinterprets the Virgin Mary through a feminist lens, suggesting that Mary’s decision to accept motherhood was an act of self-determination, a radical assertion of agency within a patriarchal framework.⁷ Without probing deeply into theological postulates, it is important to note that both Forcades and Murgia call for broadening traditional interpretations to restore the original principles of inclusivity in Christianity. Just as feminist theology has always existed, so too has its inclusive approach. Murgia’s interpretation of the Holy Spirit as the feminine element of the Trinity challenges the male-centric paradigm,⁸ identifying the Holy Spirit as the entry point to a more diverse and inclusive community, contrasting with the archaic Father-Son binary.⁹

Murgia and Forcades’s inclination to unveil an alternative reading within Christian theology echoes the work of Luisa Muraro in *Il Dio delle Donne* (*The Women’s God*), where the philosopher proposes an idealization of a different conception of the possible as a way to make the impossible conceivable—a space for other forms of realization. In this *teologia favolosa* (*fabulous theology*), which avoids being trapped between “the arrogance of the need to control what happens and the enormity of desires that press unsatisfied,” Muraro imagines the emergence of a “maternal language” capable of undoing the world’s very structure. This structure, built on mediations that define both reality and possibility, must be unraveled to make room for the “Other.”¹⁰ This new maternal language is the tool that enabled the Virgin Mary to accept what seemed impossible—becoming the mother of God—and transformed the impossible (“How can I be the chosen one?”) into the non-impossible.¹¹ It represents the essential means by which women can reclaim their voice, creating a language that is

⁶ Forcades, *La teología feminista*, 13.

⁷ Michela Murgia, *God save the queer. Catechismo femminista* (Torino: Einaudi, 2022), 76-90.

⁸ The chapters “Un’altra Trinità è possibile” (Another Trinity is possible), “La soluzione del tre” (The three solution) and “Il potere di cambiare tutto” (The power of changing everything) condense the interpretation of the author on the topic. See Murgia, *God save the queer*, 73-86.

⁹ “Number 1 makes you lonely. If the subjects had been two, love would have been reserved for each other and kept inside, in a game of intimate rebounds. Number 2 rules it out. It was the number 3, the fulcrum, because it introduced the need for inclusion and imposed the constant shift of the gaze: every subject of the Trinity must always have the other two present at the same time. They love them both, not one at a time, and they do not do it in a scalar way, but in an equal one.” Murgia, *God save the queer*, 79-80.

¹⁰ Luisa Muraro, *Il Dio delle donne* (Bologna: Marietti 1820, 2020), 81-83.

¹¹ “How is it possible, Mary asks the Angel Gabriel who announces to her what we know, namely that she was chosen by God to become the mother of a man who will be ‘great and called the Son of the Most High’ (Luke, 1,26-38). How is it possible that I become a mother, it is her question, and the angel essentially answers: to God nothing is impossible.” Muraro, *Il Dio delle donne*, 82.

free of male prejudice. Desire made this transformation of potentiality possible: Mary became the mother of Jesus because she exercised her freedom of will. In the patriarchal version promoted by traditional exegesis, she had no choice but to say yes; in the feminist reinterpretation, she deliberately chose to accept. The Virgin thus becomes the foremother of the model envisioned by the 1970s Milanese feminist group, where desire awakens women's self-consciousness, activating a more complex and dynamic sense of self. Following the insights of feminist theology and Italian feminist thought, this openness—rooted in plurality—creates room to expand the rigid, centuries-old structures that constrain society's understanding.

Returning to the parallels between Meloni and the Virgin. “A mia madre devo la vita” (I owe my mother my life), Meloni declares at the beginning of her autobiography.¹² She recounts how her mother initially planned to terminate the pregnancy but changed her mind just before undergoing the procedure. This narrative, steeped in holiness and mythological overtones, contrasts sharply with the pragmatic and down-to-earth image Meloni often projects of herself. Reflecting on her own pregnancy, she describes her daughter as a “dono di Dio” (gift from God), attributing this to her advanced age at the time. For Meloni, motherhood is not merely a blessing but a woman's ultimate mission. She writes:

Mi sento in colpa di non poterle regalare un legame come quello che ho con Arianna. Mi sento in colpa per aver preferito concentrarmi su cose di importanza secondaria e non avere, ora, più tempo per compiere di nuovo la *missione* più straordinaria che la vita possa regalare.¹³

I feel guilty for not being able to give her a bond like the one I have with Arianna. I feel guilty for having chosen to focus on things of lesser importance and now not having the time to once again fulfill the most extraordinary *mission* that life can offer.

This maternal regret carries a profound and somewhat overpowering message: for Meloni, motherhood represents a woman's true destiny, indeed, a “mission.” Pursuing self-realization or personal desires, by contrast, appears to deviate from this higher calling and natural role. In her interpretation of motherhood, Meloni seems to align with the masculine retelling of the Virgin Mary myth—a version that diminishes Mary's autonomy, transforming her into a submissive figure with no agency or choice. This portrayal excludes the courage and individuality of Mary's revolutionary act of saying “yes,” reducing her instead to a conciliatory servant resigned to the impossible. Meloni embraces a masculine-coated version of silent acquiescence to a top-down imposition. Appeasement, another trope associated with the Virgin, is a recurring theme in Meloni's personal narrative, balancing the image of the strong woman she often performs. For Meloni, willingness equates to power, and sacrifice becomes a cornerstone of her account of success. Reflecting on her career in *Io sono Giorgia*, she states:

La disciplina è stata la mia benzina, ma anche la mia gabbia. Il grande paradosso della mia vita è che, per costruirmi la libertà di essere la donna che voglio essere e di fare le scelte che voglio fare, ho rinunciato a ogni altra libertà.¹⁴

Discipline has been my fuel, but also my cage. The great paradox of my life is that, in order to build the freedom to be the woman I want to be and to make the choices I want to make, I have given up every other freedom.

¹² Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*.

¹³ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*. Our emphasis.

¹⁴ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*.

This declaration offers a pivotal lens through which to interpret Meloni's vision of women's societal roles. For Meloni, the fight for self-determination demands the sacrifice of another form of autonomy. This echoes the male-composed narrative of the Virgin Mary, whose renunciations—from accepting Gabriel's call to be the Mother of God to enduring her son's crucifixion—are central to her role in Catholic tradition. In *Ave Mary. E la Chiesa inventò la donna* (*Ave Mary. And the Church Invented the Woman*), Michela Murgia critiques this ideal, referring to such dedication as “femminilità di servizio” (femininity of service). According to Murgia, this form of femininity “achieves self-annihilation through love for the other,” a concept also embodied in figures like Mother Teresa, who are celebrated within Catholic tradition for their sacrificial roles.¹⁵

In her political rhetoric, Meloni embraces an all-encompassing disposition to sacrifice, presenting it as the only path to self-realization for women. In her memoir, she recounts her lifelong struggle to gain the approval of her missing father or her male colleagues within the party. She reflects that this struggle planted the seed of her often feeling

inadeguata, ho paura che gli altri non mi considerino all'altezza. Ma questa paura è la mia forza, perché è la ragione per la quale non ho mai smesso di studiare e di imparare, è la ragione per la quale sento di *dover sempre dimostrare cento*, anche quando in un argomento parto da zero. È la ragione per cui sono così puntigliosa, così caparbia, così disposta al *sacrificio*.¹⁶

inadequate, I'm afraid that others won't think I'm up to the task. But this fear is my strength because it's the reason I've never stopped studying and learning. It's the reason I feel *I always have to prove myself a hundred percent*, even when I'm starting from zero on a topic. It's the reason I'm so meticulous, so determined, and so ready to *sacrifice*.

What is striking about this admission is that, while Meloni acknowledges the patriarchal system in which she operates, she does not call for its transformation. Instead, she mirrors one of the cardinal traits of the Virgin Mary and the feminine ideal she represents: an attitude of appeasement. Michela Murgia describes this education to consent, which thrived in Catholic female environments in the 1970s, stating that “the idea that opposing a refusal, whatever it may be, represents a failure in the tacit duty to sacrifice one's own will to allow another's to prevail.”¹⁷ Outside the feminist theological reading of the Virgin's story, Mother Mary could not refuse the call to become the mother of God—just as Meloni, by her own account, could not reject the role of vice president in 2006. In her autobiography, she reveals that she understood her appointment was a political strategy and felt unprepared for such a significant position due to her limited experience. Her initial response, “grazie, ma preferirei di no” (thank you, but I would rather not),¹⁸ was ignored. Even years later, Meloni does not perceive this as a situation worth denouncing. Her silence implicitly reinforces the expectation that women must accept imposed roles, perpetuating a model of conciliation and sacrifice.

In the millennia-long construction of the Virgin Mary's personality, she has come to embody “the quintessence of many qualities that East and West have traditionally regarded as feminine: yieldingness, softness, gentleness, receptiveness, mercifulness, tolerance, withdrawal.”¹⁹ This reassuring portrayal aligned perfectly with the patriarchal narrative men sought to perpetuate as a female ideal. In this context, Pope Paul VI's *Marialis Cultus* and Pope John Paul II's *Redemptoris Mater* can be seen

¹⁵ Michela Murgia, *Ave Mary. E la Chiesa inventò la donna* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011), 70.

¹⁶ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*.

¹⁷ Murgia, *Ave Mary*, 110.

¹⁸ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*.

¹⁹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983, xxxvi.

as attempts to maintain control over feminine subjectivity and agency. The promotion of female self-sacrifice as an edifying ideal is traceable to the Old Testament. For example, in one of Saint Paul's letters to the Ephesians, it is written:

In the fear of Christ, be subject to one another: wives be to their husbands, as to the Lord; for the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the Church, he who is the savior of the body. And just as the Church is subject to Christ, so too are wives to their husbands in everything.²⁰

This command to submission did little to encourage introspection or the pursuit of women's roles in society. Instead, it reinforced the necessity of appeasing patriarchal demands by ensuring that women remained within the established cultural blueprint. Testamentary traditions regarding women's roles within the family and social structures have retained their influence for centuries, shaping theological discourse, including that of recent Popes.

John Paul II, a devoted proponent of the Marian cult, openly opposed the evolving roles of women, rejected the ordination of women, and urged emulation of Mary. He argued that adopting male attitudes would harm "women's proper originality."²¹ Feminist movements and Christian doctrines intersect here in their treatment of women's "uniqueness." For the Italian *femminismo della differenza* (difference feminism) collective—which will be the focus of next section—originality was often wielded as a pretext for maintaining women in subordinate roles under the guise of an elitist label.²² By defining women as "special," they were assigned a distinct space that ultimately reinforced their isolation from societal engagement. Subjectivity, and not originality, was the philosophical transformation the groups were trying to achieve.²³ For Luisa Muraro, the privilege of being a woman lay in the unprecedented experience of existing "for themselves, not as second, pairs, or complementary to men."²⁴ This awareness of selfhood, rooted in difference and therefore uniqueness, was a prerequisite for becoming an active subject in history and society. It rejected the confinement of women to a privileged yet isolated bubble of "originality," which precluded meaningful participation in social exchange.

While Meloni's reference to her gender being "chosen by God" echoes a key tenet of Marian theology—the idea that Mary herself was uniquely chosen by God to fulfill a divine role—and could potentially intersect with these subversive, and empowering, reinterpretations of the Virgin, her appropriation of the Marian figure in her political narrative does not engage with these feminist readings. In Meloni's words, the notion of being "chosen" carries with it, simply, an aura of specialness and sanctity. By framing her own gender identity as something "chosen by nature or by God,"²⁵

²⁰ Letter of Saint Paul to Ephesians (5,21-33).

²¹ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, xxviii.

²² *Femminismo della differenza*, also known as Italian feminist theory or Italian feminism as articulated by figures such as Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero, refers to a strand of the feminist movement that emerged in Italy during the 1970s. It played a crucial role in shaping feminist discourse and activism within the country. Difference feminism emphasizes the importance of sexual difference as a basis for female subjectivity and empowerment. It advocates for recognizing and valuing the unique experiences of women, not as inferior to men, but as distinct and worthy of their own form of social and symbolic power. Unlike other feminist theories that sought to highlight gender equality between men and women, Italian feminists argued for formal recognition of the differences between genders, considering this the only path toward the discovery of women's true identity and agency.

²³ "In other words, the crux of the matter lies in the woman's ability to speak, think, and self-reflect as a subject in the proper sense—that is, as a subject who thinks independently and, therefore, achieves self-recognition." Adriana Cavarero, "Per una teoria della differenza sessuale." In *Diotima. Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*, ed. by La biblioteca delle Donne di Milano (Milano: La tartaruga, 1987), 51.

²⁴ Luisa Muraro, *Non è da tutti. L'indicibile fortuna di essere donna* (Roma: Carocci, 2011), 68.

²⁵ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*.

Meloni taps into the theological discourse, suggesting that her identity is not only biologically determined but divinely ordained. Her emphasis on motherhood as the defining feature of femininity (notably, one chapter of *Io sono Giorgia* is titled “Sono una madre,” I am a mother, and the word “madre” appears 69 times in the book) reflects traditional Catholic values, positioning her as a defender of the natural and divinely ordered roles of women in society, particularly in terms of motherhood and family.

Unlike the feminist reframing of the maternal elaborated by Muraro and the reinterpretations of Marian symbolism offered by Murgia and Forcades, Meloni’s appropriation of the Virgin reflects a conservative vision of gender roles, one that confines women to the private sphere and reinforces patriarchal values rather than challenging them. In invoking Marian language, Meloni is not merely echoing religious conservatism but is also engaging with a much deeper, strategic, and culturally potent symbolism. In her public speeches throughout her career, Meloni has presented herself as a woman who, highlighting her roles as a mother, a Christian, and an Italian, embodies the image of the idealized mother, a figure whose value is derived from her ability to nurture and protect the community of the faithful and, more politically, the nation. This strategic use of Marian metaphors allows her to appeal to conservative and religious audiences by presenting her personal and political choices as not only reflective of traditional values but as part of a divine order, thus reinforcing her authority and legitimacy within these communities (more on this in the section about “fascist feminism”).

The use of religious elements by politics and politicians is undoubtedly not new, both from an iconographical standpoint and from the perspective of the symbology and messages conveyed to the electorate. To remain within the Italian context, the performance staged by the current Minister of Transport, Matteo Salvini, with rosaries and icons of the Virgin during his pre-election rallies, is an enlightening example of religious exploitation. In a short essay written during the darkest hour of the fascist regime, Benedetto Croce offered a sharp interpretation of the reasons behind the deep connection between politics and faith.²⁶ In his view, the Christian religion has been the greatest revolution humanity has ever accomplished. He claims that the Christian religion constituted a spiritual Big Bang for mankind as it acted “in the center of the soul, in the moral conscience, and conferring emphasis on the inner and proper of this consciousness, almost seemed to acquire a new virtue, a new spiritual quality which until then had been lacking in humanity.”²⁷ In this brief essay, published in 1942, Croce argues that even for those who may not adhere to the religious doctrines of Christianity, its influence is deeply ingrained in the fabric of Western thought and culture; therefore it affects the whole society. The advent of Christianity left an indelible sign on the collective moral compass as its principles shaped broader values that became integrated into secular ethics. According to this reading, the political use of religious principles and symbols could be decoded as an efficient communication strategy to connect to the visceral aspects of humankind’s perception of reality. The conservative identity of right-wing parties makes them much more inclined to inscribe religious values into their agendas.

However, Meloni’s use of Marian symbolism also highlights the contradictions within her political narrative. Meloni presents herself as a contrastive prototype of a new woman: it appears as though she has agreed to be revered concerning the private sphere—as a mother—but is uninterested in offering her story as a *bildungsroman* for future generations. The refrain of the uniqueness of her professional achievements creates an Icarus-like inspiration, but in this idealistic proposition, the echo of the Mother of God resounds. Mary constitutes an oxymoronic icon that, for centuries, has been imposed on women through patriarchal rewriting and interpretation: a normal but exceptional woman who gave birth to the son of God while remaining a virgin, always grieving and never demanding,

²⁶ See Benedetto Croce, *Perché non possiamo non dirvi “cristiani”* (Cesena: Historica Edizioni, 2022).

²⁷ Croce, *Perché non possiamo*, 16.

never aging nor dying, and therefore impossible to equal by any of the women for whom she serves as a model. An unviable tale that—as Murgia epitomized—generates a frustrating dead end in feminist discourse: “If the always-grieving Mary who never dies represents the perfection we will never reach, if she is the goal to strive for, it means that in this game we [as women] are destined to lose anyway. [...] The sanctuary woman remains a mystery in front of which one either kneels or curses.”²⁸ While Meloni presents herself as a defender of women’s rights, her emphasis on motherhood as the cornerstone of female identity reinforces a narrow and exclusionary vision of femininity. This vision, which privileges women who conform to traditional gender roles, marginalizes those who do not fit within the confines of patriarchal and heteronormative structures. In this sense, Meloni’s appropriation of the Virgin Mary serves to reinforce the very structures that limit women’s agency to the private, domestic sphere, rather than challenging them, while also disavowing the very existence of queer identities.

The contrast between Meloni’s use of Marian symbolism and the feminist reinterpretations offered by thinkers like Murgia and Forcades highlights the broader tension between conservative and feminist visions of femininity. Feminist theologians reimagine the Virgin Mary as a symbol of empowerment and agency, reclaiming her story as one of autonomy and choice. In contrast, Meloni’s narrative draws on a traditional, patriarchal understanding of womanhood, where motherhood becomes the centerpiece of female empowerment—tied closely to conservative values and the reinforcement of patriarchal structures. Her appropriation of Marian symbolism serves a broader purpose, embedding her identity within a nationalistic and religious framework that resists modern feminist interpretations. While Murgia and Forcades suggest that the Virgin Mary’s story holds subversive potential for redefining female autonomy, Meloni instead portrays the Virgin as a compliant figure, defined by her roles as mother and protector of traditional values.

Femminismo della differenza *and* Meloni’s *Reversed Feminism*

It should be clearer now that Meloni’s political career is marked by a curious paradox: although she positions herself as a defender of women’s rights, her policies and rhetoric often contradict the foundational principles of feminism. One of the key contradictions in the storytelling that Meloni created about herself is her apparent, and superficial, co-optation of *femminismo della differenza*. The radical stance of the Italian feminist movement and the distinctiveness of its message are fully expressed in the “Manifesto di rivolta femminile” (Manifesto of Women’s Revolt), which will be presented here as a reference paradigm to better understand Meloni’s conservative, “reversed feminist” position. Published for the first time in 1970, its originality and essence are captured in the first five articles:

1. La donna non va definita in rapporto all’uomo.
2. Su questa coscienza si fondano tanto la nostra lotta quanto la nostra libertà.
3. L’uomo non è il modello a cui adeguare il processo della scoperta di sé da parte della donna.
4. La donna è l’altro rispetto all’uomo. L’uomo è l’altro rispetto alla donna. L’uguaglianza è un tentativo ideologico per asservire la donna a più alti livelli.

²⁸ Murgia, *God Save the Queer*, 33.

5. Identificare la donna all'uomo significa annullare l'ultima via di liberazione. Liberarsi per la donna non vuol dire accettare la stessa vita dell'uomo perché è invivibile, ma esprimere il suo senso dell'esistenza.²⁹
1. Woman should not be defined in relation to man.
 2. Both our struggle and our freedom are founded on this awareness.
 3. Man is not the model to which the process of self-discovery by women should conform.
 4. Woman is the Other in relation to man. Man is the Other in relation to woman. Equality is an ideological attempt to enslave women at higher levels.
 5. Identifying woman with man means erasing the last path to liberation. For a woman, liberation does not mean accepting the same life as a man, because it is unlivable, but rather expressing her own sense of existence.

The disruptiveness of this tribute to difference embodies the core of feminist philosophy: only by embracing their uniqueness and diversity can women awaken from centuries of patriarchal definitions of reality (and femininity) and uncover their authentic selves. Men and women are different, and to deny this reality while demanding equality perpetuates the social constructions that have long constrained authentic feminine agency and expression. Equality, in this view, was seen as “an ideological attempt to further subjugate women, preventing the expression of their own sense of existence and foreclosing the path to real liberation.”³⁰ In light of this brief discussion of the foundational principles of sexual difference, could Meloni's assertion of women's uniqueness be interpreted through the same lens? In other words, is it plausible that the individualistic narration of her personal experience reflects, or at least stems from, the premises of the *Movimenti di rivolta femminile*?

In fact, Meloni's interpretation of womanhood seems to recast the concept of female uniqueness that difference feminism has protected, amending its significance. When she emphasizes her identity as a woman, mother, and Christian, Meloni reminds us that:

Sono una donna, ma confesso che in tutta la mia storia politica *non mi sono mai sentita davvero discriminata*. Intendiamoci: ho certamente dovuto affrontare anche io atteggiamenti di diffidenza, e mi è capitato spesso di sentire addosso sguardi che dicevano: “Adesso vediamo un po' questa come se la cava.” [...] Ma, ripensandoci, *superare le aspettative di chi avevo di fronte* è stato meno difficile del previsto. Alla fine, tra il serio e il faceto, ho fatto mia la massima che fu di Charlotte Whitton, sindaco di Ottawa negli anni Cinquanta: “*Le donne devono fare qualunque cosa due volte meglio degli uomini* per essere giudicate brave la metà. Per fortuna non è difficile.” Sarà perché da noi *la meritocrazia ha sempre avuto il suo peso*. [...] Il fatto di essere una donna non ha impedito a nessuna di noi, a destra, di *raggiungere ruoli di assoluto rilievo*. [...] Io stessa prima di diventare presidente di Fratelli d'Italia ero stata eletta alla guida del movimento giovanile di Alleanza Nazionale nell'unico vero congresso che in quel partito si sia mai celebrato. E il punto è proprio questo: *sono stata eletta*.³¹

I am a woman, but I confess that throughout my entire political career, *I have never truly felt discriminated against*. Let's be clear: I have certainly had to face attitudes of skepticism, and I often felt the looks of people saying, “Let's see how she manages.” [...] But, in hindsight, *surpassing the expectations of those around me* was easier than I anticipated.

²⁹ Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* (Milano: Scritti di rivolta femminile, 1974), 11.

³⁰ Teresa De Lauretis, “The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy: An Introductory Essay.” In *The Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 6.

³¹ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*. Our emphasis.

In the end, both seriously and jokingly, I've embraced the saying of Charlotte Whitton, mayor of Ottawa in the 1950s: "*Women have to do anything twice as well as men to be considered half as good. Fortunately, it's not difficult.*"

Perhaps it's because, among us, *meritocracy has always had its value.*

The fact of being a woman has not prevented any of us, on the right, from *reaching positions of great significance.* [...] I myself, before becoming president of Fratelli d'Italia, was elected to lead the youth movement of Alleanza Nazionale in the only real congress that party ever held. And that's the point: *I was elected.*

This passage exemplifies Meloni's strategic self-presentation of "exceptionality," where she frames herself as an outlier in terms of gendered experience within a male-dominated political sphere. By stating that she has never "truly felt discriminated against," Meloni distances herself from narratives of female victimhood and instead emphasizes her individual success as a marker of meritocracy. This rhetorical move reinforces the idea that, despite societal and political obstacles, her personal merits and determination have allowed her to transcend these barriers. Her reference to men's skepticism ("Let's see how she manages") acknowledges gender-based scrutiny, but she quickly downplays the impact by positioning her ability to "surpass expectations" as easier than anticipated. The use of the Charlotte Whitton quote further highlights her sense of exceptionality, as it both underscores the gendered challenges women face and asserts her superiority by implying that she, and women like her, can overcome these challenges without difficulty. *Io sono Giorgia* offers a plethora of similar examples and references, as does Meloni's public narrative. Her official webpage is notably rich in celebratory pictures, interviews, videos, and carefully crafted self-presentations.³²

The feminist practice of *autocoscienza* (self-awareness)—a term coined by Carla Lonzi³³—offers insight into the interpretation of Meloni's concept of women's individualism, including her own. The practice of *autocoscienza* emphasized relational introspection, where women gathered to reflect on their personal experiences and identities within the patriarchal society. This practice aimed to dismantle internalized misogyny and create a space for women to redefine themselves outside of male-centric narratives. In this context, *autocoscienza* provided a method for women to explore their own sense of agency and selfhood in relation to others. As Luisa Muraro argues in *Non è da tutti. L'indicibile fortuna di essere donna* (It is not for everyone: The unspeakable fortune of being a woman), the process of self-awareness was not merely an individual experience but was inherently relational. The practice of discovery of the self could be "neither an individual nor a collective experience, rather always in relation with others."³⁴ The process of *autocoscienza* implied complete trust among the women within the circle of self-awareness, where everyone was encouraged to share their thoughts, experiences, and reflections. These small groups, unaffiliated with any larger organization, were composed exclusively of women who "met to talk about themselves, or about anything else, as long as it was based on their own personal experience."³⁵

Meloni's narrative represents a reversal of this feminist principle. While *autocoscienza* fostered solidarity for the recognition of women's rights within patriarchal systems and collective empowerment, Meloni positions herself as a singular figure, seemingly self-made and disconnected from the feminist ideals of sisterhood and mutual support. This stark contrast between Meloni's individualistic self-presentation and the communal ethos of *autocoscienza* underscores the

³² See Giorgia Meloni, "L'Italia s'è desta," particularly the sections "Editoriali," "Media," and "Social," <https://www.giorgiameloni.it/>. Accessed October 21, 2024.

³³ See Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel*, passim, for details on *autocoscienza*.

³⁴ Muraro, *Non è da tutti*, 40.

³⁵ De Lauretis, "The Practice of Sexual Difference," 6.

contradictions in her brand of feminism. Rather than embracing women’s empowerment, Meloni emphasizes her personal success, which is achieved within the very structures of patriarchy that feminism seeks to challenge:

Volevo dimostrare che i figli non sono un limite, ma *aiutano a superare i propri limiti*; i figli danno una *forza straordinaria*. E non c’era luogo migliore in cui farlo della città che ha come simbolo *una lupa che allatta due gemelli*.³⁶

I wanted to show that children are not a limitation but actually *help one overcome their limits*; children give *extraordinary strength*. And there was no better place to demonstrate this than the city whose symbol is *a she-wolf nursing two twins*.

Da capo di un partito [...] voglio poter scegliere le persone migliori indipendentemente dal genere. Ma non ditelo a *certe sedicenti femministe*, vi risponderanno: “Be? È pieno di uomini mediocri, perché le donne devono essere tutte perfette?” Se ci sono uomini mediocri alla guida della nazione bisogna liberarsene, non mettere loro a fianco donne mediocri. Dunque il problema non è quante siano le donne al comando, ma *quale sia il grado di comando*.

Le donne capaci devono essere messe in condizione di *competere ad armi pari*, senza spinte e senza pregiudizi.³⁷

As the head of a party [...] I want to be able to choose the best people regardless of gender. But don’t tell that to *certain self-proclaimed feminists*, they will respond: “So what? There are plenty of mediocre men, why do women have to be perfect?” If there are mediocre men leading the nation, they need to be removed, not replaced with mediocre women. So the issue isn’t how many women are in leadership positions, but *the rank of command* they hold.

Capable women must be put in a position to *compete with equal weapons*, without favoritism and without prejudice.

Meloni’s emphasis on competition and her own election to leadership positions reinforces a self-image of someone who has succeeded purely on her abilities, sidestepping systemic biases. In this sense, she suggests that her achievements reflect a broader meritocratic ethos on the political right. Her focus on leadership positions also underscores her legitimacy and empowerment within a traditionally male-dominated context, reinforcing the narrative, that she explicitly supports, that women should not benefit of gender quota-based legislatures to increase their representation in leadership positions, but thrive through exceptional capabilities. Additionally, Meloni’s use of belligerent and military-like language to describe women’s roles in society reveals another layer of her rhetoric. Terms like “il grado di comando” (the rank of command), “competere ad armi pari” (literally, compete with equal weapons, or on equal terms), and the framing of women as needing to prove themselves in a hostile environment evoke an image of battle or conquest. The image of the “lupa che allatta i gemelli” (she-wolf nursing two twins) is also deeply symbolic, evoking the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus and Italy’s foundational narrative of strength, resilience, and sacrifice. With this image, Meloni situates her rhetoric within a broader cultural tradition that celebrates endurance and the ability to nurture greatness through adversity. At the same time, the metaphor subtly reinforces hierarchical and patriarchal ideals by casting women as providers of strength and sustenance for others rather than as autonomous agents. Meloni’s metaphorical language positions strong women as warriors in a meritocratic fight, emphasizing resilience and individual triumph over systemic change. Overall, Meloni’s language perpetuates a combative worldview that equates leadership with traditionally

³⁶ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*.

³⁷ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*. Our emphasis.

masculine traits, even as she seeks to redefine women's roles within that framework. Furthermore, she claims that:

Sono una donna, e non avevo il *physique du rôle* per guidare i giovani militanti di destra, in gran parte maschi. Come ho già detto non mi sono mai sentita discriminata, però ho sempre saputo che il capo deve essere un capo, deve dimostrare che è il più forte, il più coraggioso, che è quello capace di guidare la comunità oltre le difficoltà.³⁸

I am a woman, and I didn't have the *physique du rôle* to lead young right-wing militants, most of whom were male. As I've already mentioned, I never felt discriminated against, but I always knew that a leader must be a leader, must prove to be the strongest, the most courageous, and the one capable of guiding the community through difficulties.

Meloni asserts her leadership role by adopting traditionally masculine qualities and language, explicitly employing masculine grammatical forms such as “il più forte” (literally, the strongest man), “il più coraggioso” (the most courageous man), and “quello capace di guidare” (that man capable of guiding). Her deliberate use of masculine transcends traditional gender expectations in a predominantly male political sphere, reinforcing, once again, patriarchal norms and hierarchies through a language of power rooted in masculinity.³⁹

Meloni's self-proclaimed exceptionality within the patriarchal order adds yet another element in contrast to difference feminism. In Italian feminist thought, “la pratica dei rapporti tra donne” (the practice of women's relationships) was regulated by *affidamento* (entrustment), consisting of a process by which women entrust each other with their personal narratives, fostering a community of trust and mutual recognition.⁴⁰ This dynamic exchange of experiences allows for the development of a shared understanding of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal world. As we have seen, Meloni's political discourse lacks this relational component. She presents herself as a lone figure, independent of other women's experiences, while her narrative's focus on individual achievement sidesteps the systemic barriers women face. She may break gender barriers in terms of her leadership role, but she does so by reinforcing the dominant masculine framework rather than challenging it from a feminist perspective. In fact, Meloni's alignment with feminist positions seems merely rhetorical, as she distorts the central tenets of *femminismo della differenza* to justify conservative gender roles. By positioning herself as an exceptional woman who has risen to power within, and consistently supported, a male-dominated system, Meloni rejects the solidarity and collective empowerment that are fundamental to the relational practices of the *femminismo della differenza*. Meloni's version of feminism privileges the experiences of women who conform to traditional roles of motherhood and heterosexuality.

As we have seen, among the tropes the “girl from Mostacciano” shares with the myth of Mary of Nazareth, motherhood emerges as the most significant. In the instruction manual Meloni seems to be composing about womanhood, becoming a mother is presented as the primary vocation to fulfill. In her view, pregnancy is deeply intertwined with sacredness: giving birth occupies a realm of the indecipherable. “Noi mamme” (we mothers) Meloni often repeats in her memoir, invoking solidarity in the shared challenges of motherhood.⁴¹ Yet she never says “noi mamme lavoratrici” (we working

³⁸ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*. Emphasis in the original.

³⁹ See Amanda's analysis of Meloni's language, particularly the use of masculine to address herself, in the current issue of this journal: “Il Presidente” Giorgia Meloni. Right-Wing “Feminism,” Queerness, and Gender Neutrality in Contemporary Italian Politics. *gender/sexuality/italy*, 10, I-II (2023-2024): 111-132.

⁴⁰ Libreria delle donne di Milano, *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1987), 46.

⁴¹ Meloni, *Io sono Giorgia*.

mothers). Her narrative centers on the Marian ideal of a self-sacrificing woman devoted to her family, but when it comes to the struggles of working women, she does not advocate for the same sense of sisterhood. Meloni's interpretation of motherhood echoes an antiquated vision that uses the act of giving life to divert women from pursuing their authentic selves.

This emphasis on motherhood raises a critical question: could the sacredness Meloni attributes to the figure of the mother resonate with the maternal symbolism theorized by the sexual difference groups? For Diotima's initiators, maternity is central to establishing a new symbolic order for women, one grounded in the maternal figure and her harmonious relationship with her daughter. According to these thinkers, Muraro in particular, reconnecting with the mother, expressing gratitude, and constructing a maternal genealogy enable women to break free from the male symbolic order, which confines them to roles of procreation and caregiving. This process allows women to become free subjects, capable of independent judgment and interpretation.⁴² The replacement of the paternal figure with the maternal one is key to this reconstruction, as it enables women to abandon the masculine-coded "Law of the Father" articulated by Lacan. Only through this abandonment can women access a new symbolic order and develop a language that authentically reflects their desires and subjectivity. In this framework, dependence on the mother strengthens independence, fostering what Muraro describes as "the correspondence between thought and being." As she writes, "only gratitude to the woman who brought her into the world can give a woman the true sense of self."⁴³

The creation of a female-gendered language, shaped by sexual difference, ensures an authentic exchange between mother and daughter. For *femminismo della differenza* thinkers, speaking becomes a distinctly feminine activity, allowing women to interpret the world through their own lens. Employing a new system of meaning, free from the masculine imagination, enables women to create original interpretations and gain authority as political agents. Through dialogue with the mother, women mediate meaning, transforming relational exchanges into political acts. Importantly, the theory of "the symbolic order of the mother" does not frame this change as opposing the masculine but as existing in relation to it, valuing differences positively rather than erasing or excluding them. In Muraro's theorization, authority is not about power or domination, which she identifies as the root of symbolic disorder. Instead, authority is relational, grounded in mediation and an ongoing alignment between self and world—a process of growing into what one wants to be and do.

Critics of "the symbolic order of the mother" often point out that it risks substituting the mother for the father without guaranteeing substantive change.⁴⁴ While this critique merits deeper exploration, this analysis focuses instead on Muraro's concept of mediation and authority. For Muraro, authority is rooted in relational exchange, not in the consolidation of power. Despite Meloni's rhetoric invoking universal empathy with mothers, her policies lack any real effort to foster meaningful exchanges among women. The agenda of *Fratelli d'Italia* does not aim to redistribute power, create spaces for dialogue, or promote inclusion. In this far-right framework, motherhood remains a primary social safety net, and concerns about women's employment focus on economic output rather than professional empowerment. Meloni's vision of care leaves parenthood squarely on women's shoulders, with no mention of paternal leave. As Murgia notes, this rigid division of roles echoes paradigms as old as those described in Genesis, where women toil in childbirth while men serve as breadwinners. Mary, the archetypal grieving and self-sacrificing mother, became the model of

⁴² To further investigate the concept, see Luisa Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*. (New York City: SUNY Press, 2018).

⁴³ Muraro, *The Symbolic Order*, 34.

⁴⁴ See Luisa Muraro, "The Dead Mother Complex", in *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*. Ed. by Cesare Casarino and Andrea Righi (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 161.

motherhood for generations. For decades, women's beatification has been tied to their maternal roles, unlike men, who have been celebrated for their social and political achievements.

And this is where Meloni's attitude toward womanhood places her in a sensitively divergent position if confronted with the stances of sexual difference feminism, but closer to the solitude of the Virgin's nature. The Italian Prime Minister does not long for exchanging visions and experiences with other women: she stands alone refraining on her path of success, without the urgency to share her steps to empowerment or to spread a viable *modus operandi* for others to access social improvement. This selective empowerment fundamentally opposes the inclusive principles of feminist movements and redefines empowerment as accessible only to those who meet these narrow criteria. Her rhetoric excludes women who fall outside her traditional framework, turning feminism into a tool that reinforces hierarchical and exclusionary structures rather than dismantling them. In fact, this exclusionary nature is the most radical departure from *femminismo della differenza*. Whereas *femminismo della differenza* emphasizes inclusion, solidarity, and collective empowerment among women across diverse identities and experiences, Meloni's "feminism" functions as a "reversed paradigm," one that seems to subtly appropriate feminist language while perpetuating conservative, patriarchal values.⁴⁵

This approach makes her vision emblematic of the broader ideological framework of right-wing feminism. Meloni embodies a "reversed difference," appealing to the negative uniqueness Muraro warned against: the pressure to excel individually to gain recognition and appreciation within a masculine value system.⁴⁶ Her portrayal as a self-made leader disregards the feminist critique of the systemic structures that have historically oppressed women, perpetuating the idea that success is solely a matter of personal effort. Meloni's rejection of collective female empowerment is evident in her public statements, where, as this essay has shown, she often frames her success as the product of individual determination rather than the result of feminist struggles for gender equality.

This narrative of individualism and meritocracy shares significant parallels with postfeminist discourses critiqued by scholars such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill.⁴⁷ Postfeminism, like right-wing feminism, emphasizes personal achievement and empowerment while downplaying the role of structural inequities. Both frameworks replace collective solidarity with self-reliance, prioritizing individual success over systemic transformation. However, while postfeminism often frames empowerment within neoliberal consumerist logics, right-wing feminism embeds it within nationalist and patriarchal values. Meloni's rhetoric blends these approaches, creating a hybrid narrative where self-made success becomes a tool for reinforcing traditional roles and conservative ideologies. In doing so, she offers a model of empowerment that may superficially appear liberating but ultimately perpetuates exclusionary and hierarchical structures.

In one key aspect, a convergence between Italian feminist proposals and Meloni's political performance seems to emerge: the rejection of equality as a granted right. In 1970s feminist groups, the practice of *affidamento* represented a necessary exercise to confronting power and its imbalances. This practice involved not only recognizing differences but also accepting disparities, generating objections and oppositions from various perspectives. Class struggle and the fight for equal rights

⁴⁵ This article does not aim to address the issue of inclusivity within *femminismo della differenza*, which has recently faced criticism for exclusionary discourses and practices toward the LGBTQ+ community, particularly transgender women. While these critiques are not unfounded and a distinct branch of feminism—transfeminism—focuses on the effects of patriarchy and transmisogyny on transgender women, this article is specifically concerned with Giorgia Meloni's co-optation of certain postures and language from *femminismo della differenza*. Meloni, in contrast, is openly and aggressively opposed to any expression of non-binary gender or sexuality.

⁴⁶ See Muraro, *Non è da tutti*, particularly chapter 4, titled "Un giorno sembrerà una cosa incredibile."

⁴⁷ See Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism. Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009) and Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10, 2 (2007): 147-166.

were, in fact, defining traits of other feminist movements, particularly within the Italian Communist Party. Muraro defends her stance against granted rights in *Non credere di avere dei diritti / Sexual Difference. A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. She sharply critiques the victimhood approach of mainstream feminist movements, which she terms “falsely feminist,” arguing that it misleads victims into believing that sentiments such as solidarity, respect, and compassion are owed to them by society. As a co-founder of the Diotima collective, Muraro advocated for more radical political action, calling for a new form of justice—“farsi giustizia da soli” (to take justice into one’s own hands). This approach rejects revenge and violence, instead urging individuals to “enter society fully, with their own person, engaging in a dynamic interplay of concordances and discords where we are all players rather than judges.”⁴⁸ Meloni seems to draw upon this feminist incitement to seize one’s own opportunities but reframes it within her political rhetoric. For Meloni, individual achievements do not contribute to a cooperative breakthrough for women’s social conditions or professional opportunities. Her adoption of the no-granted-rights approach is exemplified by the following public statements.

The first instance occurred in March 2023, when Meloni referenced a statement made by Elly Schlein following her victory as the first female leader of the Italian Democratic Party (February 26, 2023). Schlein had quoted the title of a book by feminist author Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn’t See Us Coming*. In an effort to adapt this reference to her own political narrative, Meloni remarked that being undervalued as a woman could be a significant advantage because, as she put it, “they don’t see you coming.”⁴⁹ This appropriation of a leftist narrative aimed to undermine its original progressive message. By doing so, Meloni transformed the need for collective empowerment into a celebration of individual achievement, distorting the original meaning. What began as a cooperative call for action rooted in sisterhood was reframed into the egocentric rhetoric of “if you want, you can.” This slogan is one of Meloni’s favorites and was echoed in an interview she gave in February 2023 to the Italian magazine *Grazia* (fig. 1).⁵⁰ Speaking directly to young female readers, she delivered the same message: everything is attainable when pursued with passion, determination, and opportunity—just as she claims to have done in her own life story:

“Ritengo da sempre che le donne abbiano una grande forza autonoma che vada liberata dai mille ostacoli che la ingabbiano, ma anche dai tabù di cui spesso le stesse donne rimangono vittime. Non credono di poterla fare a competere con gli uomini e finiscono per competere tra loro stesse, convinte che di sia un livello più basso nel quale relegare le proprie competenze. Non è così. Se si crede in se stesse, e si lavora duro, ogni obiettivo si può raggiungere.”⁵¹

I have always believed that women possess great autonomous strength that must be freed from the countless obstacles that cage it, as well as from the taboos that often trap women themselves. They don’t believe they can compete with men and end up competing among themselves, convinced that there is a lower level to which their abilities should be confined. That’s not true. If you believe in yourself and work hard, any goal can be achieved.

This portrayal of professional success presents a distorted narrative. By emphasizing chance and dedication as the sole determinants of success, Meloni intentionally overlooks the economic, social, and demographic factors that significantly impact career trajectories. The slogan “if you want, you can”

⁴⁸ Muraro, *Non è da tutti*, 22.

⁴⁹ The quote is from Giorgia Meloni’s speech to the Congress Camera on March 8, 2023.

⁵⁰ Silvia Grilli, “Ragazze, liberiamo il nostro potere. Intervista a Giorgia Meloni,” March 2, 2023, 58-67.

⁵¹ Grilli, “Ragazze, liberiamo il nostro potere,” 64.



Fig. 1 The *Grazia* magazine cover with the interview to Giorgia Meloni and emphasis on feminist keywords. Picture by Nicoletta Marini-Maio.

effectively implies “if you couldn’t, it’s your fault,” shifting the focus to individual effort while ignoring systemic barriers and community needs. By refusing to acknowledge feminist values in her achievements, she undermines concepts like sisterhood and *affidamento*. Instead, Meloni reframes her accomplishments as an individualistic narrative, rejecting any feminist interpretation that might position them as part of a collective demand for empowerment. Her stance diverges sharply from the principles of the *Gruppi di Rivolta Femminile* (Women’s Revolt Groups), which viewed justice and equality as the “essential principles of civil coexistence.”⁵² For these groups, differences among individuals were a source of collective energy, channeling the disequilibrium of reality into a rebalancing effort that benefited the community over the individual.

Meloni’s rejection of collective feminist principles is also evident in her policies, which often contradict the core goals of feminist movements. One notable example is her government’s recent law on surrogacy, labeled a “universal crime.”⁵³ Although many thinkers of *femminismo della differenza* also oppose surrogacy, their critique focuses on advocating for the rights of women in vulnerable economic and social positions who are at risk of exploitation. They emphasize the dangers of commercializing reproduction and the growing influence of biotechnology, which threaten to undermine reproductive rights and reshape reproductive narratives within a neoliberal, contractual framework. These concerns extend to the roles and relationships of parents and children, challenging the power dynamics and inequalities embedded in surrogacy and arguing that it diminishes the intrinsic value of motherhood.⁵⁴ In contrast, Meloni’s opposition to surrogacy is grounded in a broader agenda that prioritizes traditional family structures and discourages reproductive rights. Her government’s classification of surrogacy as a “universal crime” frames it not as a form of exploitation but as a danger to the sanctity of family and heterosexual parenting. By framing such policies as efforts to protect women’s rights, Meloni adopts feminist rhetoric to promote a regressive agenda. These policies fail to address systemic inequalities or protect women from exploitation; instead, they uphold patriarchal norms by limiting women’s autonomy and promoting narrow, heteronormative ideals of family and gender roles.

In Meloni’s vision of feminism, the personal surely intersects with the political, as her self-made success narrative becomes a cornerstone of her broader political platform. Her personal story serves to both validate her policies and uphold traditional gender roles. Casting herself as an exceptional woman who has risen through a male-dominated system, Meloni perpetuates the belief that women can achieve success without challenging patriarchal structures. This narrative dismisses feminist critiques of systemic oppression, instead reinforcing the myth of meritocracy and reducing the barriers to women’s success to individual shortcomings rather than structural inequalities.

Fascist Feminism and Meloni’s Ideological Framework

As the previous sections have illustrated, Giorgia Meloni positions herself in a hybrid space between two opposing models of femininity: the Virgin’s submissive appeasement and the isolationist concept of female originality promoted by the Roman Church on one side, and the active subjectivity rooted

⁵² See Muraro, *Non è da tutti*, 23.

⁵³ See, among others, Virginia Piccolillo, “La maternità surrogata diventa reato universale. È scontro in aula, Meloni: ‘La vita non è merce,’” *Corriere della Sera*, October 16, 2024, and Emma Bubola, “Italy Criminalizes Surrogacy From Abroad, a Blow to Gay and Infertile Couples,” October 16, 2024.

⁵⁴ Concerns about surrogacy are not limited to the critique put forth by Luisa Muraro, *L’anima del corpo. Contro l’utero in affitto* (Brescia: La Scuola, 2016). For instance, Michela Murgia, while raising similar concerns about the risk of exploitation, also voiced support for the practice, advocating for regulations to protect women. See Murgia, *Dare la vita* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2023).

in experience and relationships advocated by the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, or *femminismo della differenza*, on the other. In her autobiography, Meloni adopts an accommodating, sacrifice-oriented posture, yet her political career and recent government policies reflect a more assertive and uncompromising approach. As a woman navigating the patriarchal structures of power she now controls, Meloni has had to adopt the persona of a “strongman” or a “warrior” to prove that her femininity does not compromise her political leadership.⁵⁵ At the same time, she faces the need to temper her masculine attributes to reassure others that her leadership will not disrupt the existing social order. This duality bears striking parallels to another contradictory interpretation of femininity in relation to power and masculinity: the fascist archetype, which idealizes a specific female attitude in both public and private contexts.

The image of a “masculine woman” is not an innovation of the Fascist regime. Barbara Spackman demonstrates that it originates in the late-19th-century anthropological and sociological reactions to women’s emancipation movements, where “a woman who requests equality is, in body and in soul, a man.”⁵⁶ Fascism, however, amplified this contradiction with an ambiguous claim: women were excluded from public life, denied civil rights, and confined to domestic roles as wives and mothers, yet were also called “loudly to participate in political life.”⁵⁷ This dual mandate created a rigid separation between private and public spheres but paradoxically demanded that women cross that boundary. They were expected to embody an impossible ideal, preserving their feminine qualities while also acquiring “virile” traits—a “maternal heart” coupled with a “virile mind.”⁵⁸ Meloni’s approach to and enactment of women’s roles reflect a similarly conflicting vision of femininity, a dynamic that becomes especially evident when examining her experience of motherhood.

Whether this stance reflects calculated rhetoric or a deeper ideological commitment, many of Meloni’s government’s policies harken back to fascist-era propositions. Take, for example, the creation of the *Ministero della Natalità* (Ministry of Birthrate), headed by pro-life politician Eugenia Roccella. Italy’s declining birthrate (*denatalità*) is tied to a mix of economic struggles, cultural pressures, and a lack of infrastructure and government support for women and families. Precarious jobs, low wages, and the overwhelming burden of childcare falling on mothers make raising children even more difficult.⁵⁹ Meloni’s agenda frames *natalità* as a national priority, but the *Ministero della Natalità* has failed to address these systemic issues or bring about meaningful change. Instead, it serves as a platform for linking motherhood and family to women’s “natural” maternal instincts and fulfillment, as well as to preserving the integrity of Italian identity—hallmarks of fascist demographic policies.

⁵⁵ Some critics defined Meloni as a “Giovanna d’Arco” (Joan of Arc). See, among others: “De Masi meravigliato: ‘Giorgia Meloni è la Giovanna D’Arco della politica italiana,’” *La7. Attualità*, YouTube video; “Furio Colombo: ‘Giorgia Meloni è una ragazzina, una Giovanna D’Arco che marcia da sola davanti...,’” *La7. Attualità*, YouTube video. Furthermore, Meloni adamantly associates herself with Daenerys Targaryen (the Queen of Dragons from George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, adapted into the HBO show *Game of Thrones*), a character more suited to representing her belligerent personality than Éowyn from J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, a series Meloni is known to be passionate about. For an analysis of Meloni’s relationship with these fictional warriors, see Jordi Valentini, “*Eowyn* (1976-1982): politica, fantasy e genealogia femminile a Destra,” in the current issue of *gender/sexuality/italy*, 68-82.

⁵⁶ “The entering of women into the workforce during and after World War I made the threat of substitution of men by women becomes more concrete, and the discursive prohibition on entry into the public sphere became urgent.” Barbara Spackman, “Fascist Women and the Rhetoric of Virility,” in *Fascist Virilities. Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 36.

⁵⁷ Marina Addis Saba, *La corporazione delle donne: Ricerche e studi sui modelli femminili nel ventennio fascista* (Firenze: Valsecchi, 1988), 5.

⁵⁸ Spackman, “Fascist Women,” 43.

⁵⁹ For more details on demographic issues in Italy, see Titti Di Salvo, “Ministero della Famiglia, della Natalità e delle Pari Opportunità. Cosa non va? Non è la ministra,” *Huffpost*, October 23, 2022 and Andrea Carli, “Le cause della denatalità? Stipendi bassi e mancanza di servizi,” *Il Sole 24 ore*, May 15, 2023.

From her speeches at the *Stati Generali della Natalità*⁶⁰ and the establishment of the Ministry of Birthrate, it is evident that the myth of *madri prolifiche* (prolific mothers) remains an influential cultural undercurrent in Meloni's social policies. The historical context has evolved since the fascist era, but the focus on state-driven population growth continues to tie birthrate policies to cultural and political ideology, intertwined with exclusionary immigration politics and a growing pervasiveness of racism across the population.⁶¹ Ultimately, the *Ministero della Natalità* lacks substantive solutions for the real challenge: reconciling work and motherhood.⁶²

Meloni's connection to fascist-era politics in the areas of gender roles and sexuality also shows how she has little interest in pushing societal boundaries or embracing inclusive rights. Her government has launched an outright assault on the LGBTQ+ community, stripping away protections and recognition. A new directive now bars Italian municipalities from registering children of same-sex families under both parents, robbing these families of legal rights and recognition.⁶³ Another glaring example is the introduction of economic incentives for couples who marry in Catholic ceremonies, a move eerily reminiscent of the *imposta sul celibato*—a Fascist-era tax on unmarried men designed to boost marriage and, by extension, increase birth rates.⁶⁴ These measures promote a narrow vision of motherhood as a societal duty, perpetuating a model that prioritizes traditional family structures over genuine efforts to support women's autonomy and balance between work and family life.

One of the most intriguing and unsettling aspects of Giorgia Meloni's political narrative is its resonance with the historical discourse of "fascist feminism."⁶⁵ Fascist feminism, paradoxical as it may seem, was a key component of Italy's fascist regime, mobilizing women to serve the state while keeping them bound to traditional gender roles. At the forefront of fascist feminism was Teresa Labriola (1873–1941), the daughter of socialist leader Antonio Labriola. A trailblazer as the second woman in Italy, after Lidia Poët, to pass the bar exam and one of the few to secure a faculty position at the Sapienza law school in Rome—despite facing public protests—Labriola's ideological evolution is both fascinating and deeply troubling. Initially a proponent of socialist causes and suffragist movements, Labriola fought for women's suffrage as a functional right within society, family, and the state. But her growing nationalism during World War I led her to shift allegiance to fascism, where she found a vision of a rigid, hierarchical society that aligned with her belief in preserving national integrity and traditional gender roles. By the 1920s, Labriola had become a staunch supporter of the fascist regime, advocating for a form of "equality" that offered women "privileged treatment" only in

⁶⁰ A significant example of one of these speeches is "Intervento del Presidente Meloni alla terza edizione degli Stati Generali della Natalità," *Governo Italiano. Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*. May 12, 2023.

⁶¹ For a comprehensive analysis of demographic politics in Italy from fascism to the end of the 20th century, the book by Anna Treves, *Le nascite e la politica nell'Italia del Novecento* (Milano: LED, 2001) is especially valuable.

⁶² Delays in the ratification of the *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* (PNRR), or National Recovery and Resilience Plan, have led to the loss of funds earmarked for projects such as daycare center construction. The PNRR is Italy's framework for utilizing EU funds from the *NextGenerationEU* program to address the economic and social impacts of COVID-19. Focused on recovery, digital and ecological transitions, and social inclusion, the PNRR supports projects in innovation, infrastructure, education, and public health.

⁶³ See Giuseppe Luca Scaffidi, "Nell'Italia di Giorgia Meloni le famiglie omogenitoriali non sono più famiglie," *Rolling Stone*, June 20, 2023.

⁶⁴ See Valentina Menassi, "Bonus matrimonio religioso per coppie under 35: cosa prevede la proposta di legge," *Il Giornale*, March 27, 2024. For the *imposta sul celibato*, see "1927-1943 Imposta sui celibi," *MEF Dipartimento delle Finanze*.

⁶⁵ We use the term feminism for Labriola's thought because of her attempt to reconcile suffragist feminism with fascism throughout her life. In addition, it parallels Meloni's misappropriation of feminist stances and concepts.

the context of active motherhood (*maternità in atto*).⁶⁶ Labriola's concept of women's emancipation was rooted in exceptionalism. She did not call for broad gender equality; instead, she believed women could achieve recognition only by excelling in roles defined by men—as mothers and nurturers. Rather than challenging male dominance, she sought to reinforce it, asserting that exceptional women could rise, but only by serving the state's objectives. As Michela De Giorgio observes, “She was the most dynamic theorist of the ‘virile woman’: from ‘virility,’ which she understood as a universal moral category separate from ‘masculinity,’ she sought to derive new meanings for women's social existence.”⁶⁷ Labriola's ideas illustrate a chilling logic: a form of empowerment for women that paradoxically reinforces the very structures that oppress them.

Labriola, however, softened her feminist stance in an attempt to reconcile the conflicting ideals of “masculinity” and “virility.” In doing so, she “inadvertently denaturalize[d] the relation between sex and gender and end[ed] up denaturalizing maternity itself.”⁶⁸ Put simply, the Fascist ideal of womanhood was riddled with contradictions: women were expected to adopt virile traits to prove their strength and utility, but embracing those traits supposedly stripped them of their natural maternal essence, rendering them “sterile.”⁶⁹ This impossible and self-defeating model left women caught in an unresolvable paradox, one that seems to echo in Meloni's own portrayal of the ideal woman. Barbara Spackman's analysis of Labriola's work sheds light on this dynamic. Labriola, who was attuned to the contradictory demands of her time, rejected the idea of gender equality as a straightforward solution. She argued that “equality [...] masks a hierarchy that remains undisturbed,”⁷⁰ suggesting that simply leveling the playing field does not challenge or dismantle the deeper structures of inequality. This perspective, while flawed in its submission to hierarchy, foreshadowed some of the debates within Italian feminism about how to approach the relationship between gender difference and societal power.

To navigate the tension between the idea of women being “virile” (capable and strong) and the fear that such qualities would render them “sterile” (losing their maternal essence and reproductive purpose), Labriola advocated for reforms in work and education that would allow women to balance these demands. She aimed to create a model where women could participate in the workforce without compromising their role as mothers, blending public contributions with their traditional domestic responsibilities. This “solution” sought to integrate women into society while still prioritizing their maternal function, which was central to the Fascist vision of womanhood. This balance relied on redefining virility as a “universalist moral category available to all humankind,”⁷¹ allowing women to adopt its attributes without sacrificing their femininity. However, Labriola was critical of women's mimicry of masculine ideals, arguing that society's gendered order inevitably set women up for failure when attempting to emulate manliness. She maintained that “the characteristics of femininity must be sharpened only in order to arrive at the natural destination of the female sex, which is maternity.”⁷² This stance ultimately reinforced an ideological cage, confining women's agency and subjectivity to a

⁶⁶ Michela De Giorgio, “Labriola, Teresa,” *Dizionario del Fascismo* (Dictionary of Fascism), ed. by Victoria De Grazia and Sergio Luzzatto (Torino: Einaudi, 2019), 3. For more details about Teresa Labriola's parable from a law graduate, suffragist, feminist, nationalist, and fervent fascist, see Marina Tesoro, “Teresa Labriola e il suffragio femminile. Fondamenti teorici e soluzioni operative.” *Il Politico*, 60, 2, 173 (Aprile-Giugno 1995): 189-225; Marina Tesoro, “Labriola, Teresa,” *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 62 (2004), Enciclopedia Treccani online; and Spackman, “Fascist Women,” 34-48.

⁶⁷ De Giorgio, “Labriola, Teresa,” 4.

⁶⁸ Spackman, “Fascist Women,” 42.

⁶⁹ Spackman, “Fascist Women,” 35.

⁷⁰ Spackman, “Fascist Women,” 42.

⁷¹ Spackman, “Fascist Women,” 42.

⁷² Spackman, “Fascist Women,” 46.

model that prioritized motherhood above all else and denied them the freedom to define their roles independently.

Central to Labriola's vision was indeed the connection between women's roles and procreation, nationalism, and racial superiority. She viewed motherhood as a fundamental duty to the state, aligning closely with Mussolini's campaign for increasing birthrates and the glorification of *madri prolifiche*. For Labriola, women's primary function was to contribute to the "repopulation" of the nation, ensuring the continuity and purity of the race. This biological role was seen not only as a duty but as a form of empowerment within the fascist structure. In this sense, her views dovetailed with the regime's promotion of women as reproducers of the nation, responsible for securing its future. Labriola's support for Mussolini's policies, particularly around birthrate campaigns, reveals her belief in the state's need for racial purity and demographic strength. In her writings, she argues that a women's primary role is to serve the nation as mothers and supporters of male authority, emphasizing their duty to the state, particularly in raising children to serve its interests. It is evident that this view tied women's emancipation to their biological roles, framing procreation as both a service to the nation and an act of racial preservation.

The echoes of fascist feminism in Meloni's political discourse are striking and further complicate her relationship to feminism. Like Labriola, Meloni highlights motherhood as a form of national service, framing women's reproductive roles as vital to preservation of the nation's identity. Her focus on increasing the birthrate and promoting policies that privilege heterosexual, monogamous family structures lie at the heart of her political platform. In Meloni's narrative, motherhood transcends personal identity to become a public duty, intricately tied to her broader political agenda of safeguarding Italy's cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious heritage.

Meloni's self-presentation as a "self-made" woman celebrates her rise to power as a personal achievement, portraying herself as an exception—someone who has succeeded in a patriarchal system without challenging its structure. This duality allows her to appeal to conservative voters and admirers of her personal resilience, creating a political persona that bridges past ideologies with contemporary conservative feminism. However, this emphasis on individual achievement sidelines collective empowerment, reinforcing a neoliberal feminist framework that prioritizes personal success over addressing systemic barriers. Meloni's personal narrative is one of self-determination and resilience, often framed in contrast to the traditional feminist critique of patriarchal power. Her rhetoric shifts attention to individual responsibility and personal choice, particularly in how she presents motherhood, and avoids engaging with critiques of societal constraints on reproductive autonomy.

As we have already emphasized in this study, the rejection of feminist solidarity is central to Meloni's narrative. She positions her journey from a working-class *borgata* to top positions of political power as proof that women can thrive within existing power structures, thereby marginalizing those who face systemic inequities, particularly women from disadvantaged or marginalized communities. In this sense, Meloni embodies what Angela McRobbie has identified as the "neoliberal feminist subject"⁷³—a woman who succeeds within the existing structures of power and frames her success as proof that these structures are not inherently oppressive. Postfeminism frames feminism not as a collective struggle for gender equality, but as a series of individual choices and achievements. The postfeminist discourses of empowerment have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary political and cultural contexts. In the postfeminist framework, the focus shifts away from systemic inequality and toward personal success, with women being encouraged to "lean in" and succeed within the existing structures of power.

The emphasis on personal success rather than collective action or systemic reform reinforces a narrow vision of gender roles. Meloni selectively appropriates feminist language, allowing her to

⁷³ McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*, 56.

claim the mantle of a women's rights advocate while advancing a conservative agenda that upholds traditional values and excludes those who deviate from her vision of womanhood. Ultimately, Meloni's version of feminism, much like the historical discourse of fascist feminism, celebrates exceptional women while undermining collective progress. Her narrative of individual success obscures the structural inequalities that limit opportunities for most women, perpetuating an exclusionary and authoritarian vision of gender relations.

The conservative individualism that permeates Meloni's mindset is also evident in her use of language. Feminist movements have historically emphasized the importance of collective action and mutual support not only in their practices, but also in their texts, rhetoric and language. Meloni's narrative centers on herself, her family, her personal history, her individual achievements, and her singular responsibility. This individualism is particularly evident in Meloni's emphasis on motherhood as a marker of female identity. As we have seen, she frames motherhood as a personal choice and never refers to social expectations thus distancing herself from feminist critiques of the structures that limit women's reproductive autonomy.

Also Meloni's selective use of *femminismo della differenza* brings to the fore the contradictions between collective advocacy and individualistic entitlement in her political narrative. While she presents herself as a defender of women's rights, her policies and rhetoric reinforce a narrow vision of femininity that excludes those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. This exclusionary vision of feminism is particularly evident in Meloni's stance on issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and reproductive rights, where her conservative views intersect with the reservations toward non-binary identities and the restrictive approaches to reproductive autonomy voiced within *femminismo della differenza* itself. These shared limitations play a significant role in shaping Meloni's "reversed feminism" according to Michel Foucault's concept of "reverse discourse," which we will now examine in the concluding part of the article.

Conclusion: Giorgia Meloni's "Reverse Discourse" of Feminism

We conclude by returning to the beginning, drawing on Giorgia Meloni's speech to the Congress Camera on March 7, 2023:

I crossed the threshold of this building for the first time at the age of 29 and I found myself becoming vice president of the Chamber. That was one of the many times I found myself doing something apparently bigger than me. I remember the amused gazes when I sat on the highest bench for the first time, the look of someone who says: 'Now we're having fun.' [...] I have met those gazes many times in life: when I became the first female leader of a right-wing youth organization, then the youngest minister in the history of Italy; when I founded a party and even when a few months ago, with 30 years of experience behind me, I became Prime Minister. [...] Whatever I've done in my life, the majority has always bet on my failure. Does it have to do with the fact that I was a woman? Probably yes. And that's something I realized very late in my life. Why am I telling this story? I do so to state that there is something good in what may seem like a misfortune. I want to tell the women of this nation that to always be underestimated, is in fact an advantage. Because, for this very reason, often *they don't see you coming*. And we must be aware of it.[...] I want to *reverse* the message: *it is women in the first place who have to believe more in their abilities.*⁷⁴

⁷⁴ The English translation is published on the Italian Government's site. Emphasis is ours.

Meloni’s speech is a masterclass in rhetorical subversion, taking what might initially sound like feminist empowerment and twisting it into something that serves a conservative agenda. At first glance, her story of triumph—of being underestimated as a woman and defying expectations—seems inspiring. But dig deeper, and you will see how she manipulates this narrative not to challenge the patriarchal system that doubted her, but to uphold it. Her claim, “I want to *reverse* the message,” encapsulates her strategy. It is not about overturning oppression—it is about reframing it in a way that strengthens power while silencing any form of resistance.

As this article has attempted to demonstrate, Meloni’s feminism is more than a simple co-opting of feminist language; it is a calculated reversal of feminist critique itself. She does not just borrow keywords, or postures, like “empowerment” or “resilience” while supporting patriarchal structures—she goes further, weaponizing feminism’s own complexities and contradictions. Meloni has a keen understanding of the cracks within both patriarchal systems and feminist discourses, particularly those rooted in *femminismo della differenza*. Where difference feminism celebrates the unique strengths of women, often tied to their roles as mothers or their biological experiences, Meloni seizes on this essentialism to reassert traditional gender roles. Instead of using these cracks—the inconsistencies and ruptures in systems of power—to challenge authority, as Foucault’s concept of “reverse discourse” would suggest, she flips the script entirely: she uses them to dismantle opposition.⁷⁵

Unlike the relational, community-focused ethos of *femminismo della differenza*, Meloni’s political narrative is strikingly devoid of solidarity or the shared experiences that fuel women’s collective empowerment. Her outright dismissal of the core principle of *affidamento*—the trust and guidance shared between women—reveals her preference for individualism over collaboration. By casting herself as a woman who has thrived within a male-dominated system, she twists the values of sexual difference feminism, stripping its emphasis on connection and relationality down to a justification for reinforcing traditional roles. Take her framing of being underestimated as a woman. For most feminists, this would be an entry point to critique a society that systematically undervalues women’s contributions. But Meloni does not critique the system. She spins the experience as a personal advantage, a secret weapon that allowed her to rise unnoticed. It is a seductive narrative, one that shifts the focus away from systemic injustice and places the burden squarely on women themselves. If women just “believed more in their abilities,” as she says, they too could succeed. In this way, she reframes systemic oppression as a personal challenge to be overcome, absolving the structures of power from any responsibility. This is not just clever rhetoric—it is a *reversal* of Foucault’s concept of *reverse discourse*. Foucault imagined reverse discourse as a way for marginalized groups to resist power, to take the language of the oppressors and use it to undermine them. Meloni turns that concept on its head. She does not resist power; she reinforces it. She appropriates the rhetoric of resistance—empowerment, resilience, and equality—but wields it to protect and fortify the very structures that feminism resist to. It is a strategy that transforms potential sites of resistance into tools for domination.

Her originality lies in her ability to exploit the very tools of feminist critique. Feminism has long wrestled with essentialist ideas that tie womanhood to biology, and Meloni uses these tensions to her advantage. By embracing and amplifying these essentialist discourses, she creates an “alternative truth” that feels empowering but ultimately serves patriarchal values. For example, she portrays motherhood not just as a personal choice or fulfillment, but as a duty to the nation—an echo of Fascist-era policies that placed women’s reproductive roles at the center of national identity. This is another clear connection between Meloni’s feminism and the historical discourse of fascist feminism. Echoing the fascist regime’s gender ideology, Meloni’s government promotes a vision of Italy that is

⁷⁵ Michel, Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Vol. 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 101-102.

rooted in “traditional values” (based on heteronormative and cisgender precepts) with women playing a central role in maintaining the moral and cultural fabric of the nation. Furthermore, Meloni’s rhetoric often evokes a sense of nostalgia for a past in which gender roles were clearly defined and women’s primary responsibilities were to their families and communities. This vision of womanhood serves to undermine the gains made by feminist movements over the past century. By framing traditional gender roles as a form of empowerment, Meloni presents a version of feminism that is fundamentally at odds with the goals of contemporary feminist movements, which seek to dismantle the structures of patriarchy and promote gender equality. And this is not the only way she flips the script. Meloni takes another rupture in the patriarchal system—the undeniable fact that women continue to be oppressed—and reframes it not as a call to action, but as proof of women’s hidden strength. She tells women that being underestimated is an advantage, not an injustice. Oppression is no longer something to resist; it is something to embrace and conquer. In doing so, she neutralizes the feminist critique of oppression, turning it into a personal challenge rather than a systemic failure.

This is the core of Meloni’s “reverse discourse” on feminism. It is not just about co-opting feminist discourses to maintain the status quo. It is about deeply understanding both the systems of power and the movements that oppose them, and then using that understanding to manipulate and reshape reality. Like Teresa Labriola, who embraced fascist ideology while claiming to fight for women’s advancement, Meloni has crafted a discourse that appears to empower women but ultimately reinscribes their subjugation. Her brilliance—and danger—lies in her ability to make oppression look like opportunity, turning feminism’s tools of resistance into weapons for the very power structures it seeks to dismantle. This tactic becomes even more potent when seen through the lens of Marian symbolism. As we have shown, Meloni draws on the image of the Virgin Mary—not explicitly, but through the weight of the cultural and religious significance that Mary carries in Italian Catholicism. For centuries, the Virgin Mary has been the epitome of feminine submission and self-sacrifice, an idealized figure whose value is tied to her obedience and maternal role. Feminist theologians like Michela Murgia and Teresa Forcades have sought to reclaim Mary as a figure of radical agency, highlighting her consent and courage as acts of defiance within a patriarchal framework. But Meloni rejects these reinterpretations. Instead, she embraces the traditional, patriarchal Mary—a woman whose identity is defined entirely by her submission to a higher order. It is a vision of womanhood rooted in sacrifice, submission, and the sanctification of motherhood, which serves to weave Meloni’s rhetoric into a femonationalistic⁷⁶ and religious narrative that glorifies women as the guardians of traditional values and the moral backbone of the nation.

Ultimately, Meloni’s “reversed feminism” is a fragmented, contradictory construct. It borrows the language of feminist empowerment but never challenges the patriarchal systems it claims to transcend. It glorifies motherhood but offers no real support for women balancing work and family. And it clings to religious and nationalistic clichés that obscure the systemic barriers women face. By weaving together Marian symbolism, *femminismo della differenza*, and fascist feminism, Meloni crafts a vision of womanhood that feels inspiring but ultimately reaffirms the same structures of power it pretends to critique. In the end, she presents herself as a woman, a mother, and a Christian—but never a good sister.

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⁷⁶ See Frau and Guzzetta, “Donne di Destra,” and Ruth Glynn, “Giorgia Meloni: Femonationalist Matriarch?” Presentation at the American Association of Italian Studies “Giornata di Studio: 1922-2022—Italy one hundred years later. Femminismi di destra,” online, January 27, 2023.

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