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Abstract: Gender neutrality has recently entered the discourse on and within Italian language and culture while the war among genders is still unresolved. Teaching genderneutral/nonbinary Italian is a form of activism, and a way to teach inclusively while responding actively to changes occurring in both US and Italian culture. In this context, which shows how a portion of Italian speakers wants to move towards inclusion and modernity, the Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, born and raised in Rome, elected in September 2022, chose to be addressed with the masculine title “il Presidente.” In this article I discuss the implications of this choice, while presenting an overview of a range of linguistic choices for feminine and genderneutral forms of address in the first part of my analysis. Meloni is the most important political figure of a country in deep tension between right-wing conservatism, and pushes for change, incarnated by the new secretary of the Democratic Party (PD), Elly Schlein, a Jewish-Italian born in Switzerland and holding Italian and American citizenships. As I show in the second part of the article, while Meloni embodies locality and “Roman born and bread” culture, Schlein embodies a dynamic Italy nurtured by progressist ideas, internationalism and interculturalism. They represent very well, in both political ideas and speeches, the tensions and polarities of contemporary Italian culture, once again divided between modernity and tradition, between campanilism and internationalism.

Keywords: feminism, right-wing ideology, gender neutrality, fascism, Italian politics, queerness.

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“Il Presidente” Giorgia Meloni. Right-Wing “Feminism,” Queerness, and Gender Neutrality in Contemporary Italian Politics

AMANDA MINERVINI

Preamble: Nuances, Challenges, and a Call for Reflection

On October 22, 2022 a shiny metallic gray Audi pulled over in front of the Palazzo del Quirinale in Rome. The valet in uniform opened the door for a blond woman, her hair cut in a shoulder-length bob, wearing an all-black pantsuit. Her right wrist was visibly circled by a diamond bracelet, paired with a sizeable diamond ring, according to the unspoken rules of the Roman high bourgeoisie. The woman’s black high heels resonated loudly on the black and white tiles of the entrance hall of the historic building as she made her way in. This is how Giorgia Meloni made her statement entrance to be sworn by President Mattarella as the first woman to ever be elected Prime Minister in Italy. It was admittedly a smoother entrance to the Government than the one the Romans had witnessed in late October of 1922, and yet Meloni’s entrance was not without similarities with that other fateful October in Italian politics.

Compared to other countries, Meloni’s election came very late, especially if we consider that Vigdís Finnbogadóttir won the Icelandic presidential elections in 1980. Is a woman PM necessarily a champion of women’s rights? Looking at historical precedents, this is a question whose answer cannot be taken for granted. Immediately after her election, Meloni released an official document (“Circolare a tutti i Ministeri”), with which she required to be addressed with the masculine form “il Signor Presidente,” (Mister President) instead of “la Signora Presidente” (fig. 1). Later, Meloni, perhaps thinking that three masculine words (an article and two nouns)

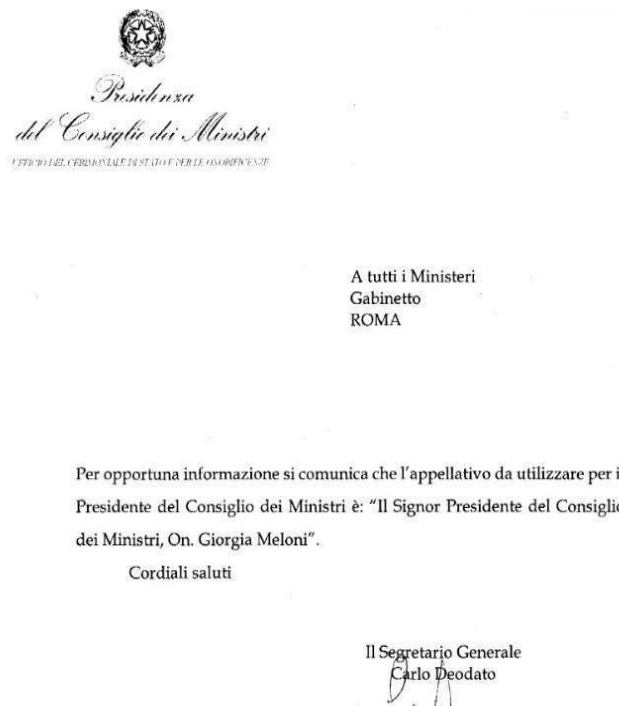


Fig. 1 – Meloni’s official request to all the Ministers to be addressed as “Il Signor Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri.”

might have been overkill, dispensed with the appellation of Mister, but made sure to preserve the masculine article “il.” The first Italian *woman* to be elected PM hence chose to be called “Il Presidente,” with what the writer Nadia Terranova defined as “the most relevant linguistic fact of 2022.”¹ This choice became the source of renewed polemics a little over a year later, when, on December 29 2023, the right-wing newspaper *Liberò* proclaimed Meloni “(uomo dell’anno),” reinforcing Meloni’s own initial choice to refuse feminine titles (see fig. 2):²

Giorgia Meloni ha superato la prova del 2023 (...) (Meloni è) uomo dell’anno perché prima di tutto ha cancellato la guerra dei sessi vincendola, pensando differente, essendo divergente, superando la boria dei maschi e lo sconfittismo delle femmine. Non ha rotto il tetto di cristallo, lo ha dissolto. Meloni ha proiettato gli avversari in una dimensione di eterno rosicamento, schiumano che è fascista, leader del patriarcato, femmina ma non femminista. Quante chiacchiere, il problema è risolto: Giorgia è uomo dell’anno.

Giorgia Meloni overcame all the challenges thrown at her in 2023. The PM is man of the year because, first of all, she has erased the war of the sexes by winning it thanks to her thinking outside of the box, by being different, by overcoming the conceit of the men and the defeatism of the women. She did not break the glass ceiling, she dissolved it. Meloni condemned her adversaries to eternal envy, they are drooling with envy when they accuse her of being a fascist, the leader of patriarchy, a woman but not a feminist. It’s just nonsense, the problem is solved: Giorgia is the *man* of the year (emphasis mine).³

Meloni turned into the *man of the year* is a thought-provoking transformation, considering how in the opening of one of her most famous, viral speeches, Meloni declared without the shadow of a doubt: “I am Giorgia, I am a woman.” But more on this later.

Liberò justified the choice by referring to the American magazine GQ and their choice to proclaim Kim Kardashian as “man of the year”(Fig. 3).⁴ While Meloni’s cover photo for *Liberò* is that of a perfectly feminine smiling woman, wearing a serious white blazer with golden buttons and a pink sweater underneath, Kardashian dominates the cover of wearing a man’s suite and tie, but holding a bag of Cheetos while sucking on her thumb, never giving up the Kardashian sexualized modalities (see images below). Both Meloni and Kardashian are staring straight at the viewer, unashamedly: the times when women who looked back at the onlookers were signing their death sentence seem far away,⁵ even if patriarchy is alive and very well in both Italy and the US.

¹ See Terranova, “Chiamatemi ‘il presidente’: Meloni e il potere al maschile.”

² Sechi, “Uomo dell’anno. “Giorgia Meloni ha superato la prova del 2023.”

³ Sechi, “Uomo dell’anno.” My translation.

⁴ *Liberò*, “Meloni uomo dell’anno, ‘e questa copertina?’ Sinistra zitta,” December 30, 2023.

⁵ This is of course a reference to Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay on “the male gaze,” also discussed by Marcus in *Italian Film in the Shadow of Auschwitz*. Although in the book, Marcus does not make this general point explicitly, she said so in a talk at Smith College, when analyzing the scene from De Sica’s *The Garden of the Finzi Continis*, in which Micol (Dominique Sanda) in the garden shed looks back at the camera. More recently, see Padva and Buchweitz (eds), *Sensational Pleasures in Cinema Literature and Visual Culture: The Phallic Eye*.

The front page of the December 29, 2023 issue of *Libero* magazine features a large portrait of Giorgia Meloni in a white double-breasted jacket. The main headline reads "UOMO DELL'ANNO" (Man of the Year). To the left of the portrait, the sub-headline says "Giorgia Meloni ha superato la prova del 2023" (Giorgia Meloni has passed the 2023 test) by Mario Sechi. To the right, another article is titled "Nel 2024 sul tavolo avrà tre sfide" (In 2024 she will have three challenges on the table) by Daniele Capezzone. Below that, another article is titled "E ci ha evitato il fantagoverno di Elly e Conte" (And she has avoided the fantasy government of Elly and Conte) by Francesco Specchia. The magazine's masthead "Libero" is at the top center, flanked by "Clemente" logos. At the bottom of the page, there are several smaller promotional banners for other articles and products.

Fig. 2 - Front page of *Libero*, hailing Meloni as “man of the year.”

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Fig. 3 - Kim Kardashian’s Instagram post announcing GQ’s choice to award her the “Tycoon of the year 2023” title.⁶

Many polemics followed, which are not relevant for the scope of this article, but I begin with a closer look at Meloni’s initial choice. Electing to be addressed with the masculine article “il” for the title of “Presidente” is especially significant because in this particular instance the masculine article bears 100% of the gendered information since “Presidente” is a less common example of “sostantivo epiceno,” such as “dentista,” “presidente,” “gorilla,” which is to say nouns that can be either masculine or feminine. The Treccani encyclopedia defines the sostantivi epiceni as “ambigenere”⁷ (holding both genders), but in order to continue my personal battle against gender binaries, about which I will add more later, I suggest intending this kind of nouns as genderneutral. Back to Meloni’s title, it would have been quite easy, and natural, so to speak, for a female-identifying person, to ask to be addressed as “la Presidente,” using the same invariable title accompanied by the feminine article “la.” This choice shows how Meloni went a long way to retain all the masculinity that a two-letter article could bear. But why? In an interview with the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Vera Gheno identifies a not uncommon dynamic whereby women who achieve positions of power “si mascolinizzano” (“undergo a process of masculinization”), and sometimes become “ancora peggio del peggiore dei maschilisti maschi”

⁶ The Instagram post refers to the front cover of GQ. Kim Kardashian is represented on one of the three versions available.

⁷ “**epicèno** agg. e s. m. [dal lat. *epicoenum* (*genus*), gr. ἐπίκοινον (γένος) ‘(genere) comune,’ comp. di ἐπί e κοινός ‘comune’]. – In grammatica, ambigenere: (*il*) *coniuge*, (*la*) *coniuge*; *il pesce*, *la sentinella*.” In *Treccani*, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/epiceno/>.

(“even worse than the worst male chauvinist”).⁸ This idea of women replicating the worst traits of men when they gain power, is also at the basis of a frequent conflation between masculine women in position of power and right-wing politics, an understandable conflation but undermined by its entirely binary and heteropatriarchal nature.

This is not an isolated phenomenon. On December 29, 2023, the online version of *LaRepubblica* reported yet another gender-based linguistic skirmish between Democratic Party representative Cecilia Guerra and Forza Italia party member Giorgio Mulè: in opening her intervention, Guerra addressed Mulè as “Signora Presidente,” using the feminine title for a male-identifying person. Mulè interrupted Guerra immediately, multiple times, to rectify what he perceived as disrespect and clarifying that his identity was not in question (“la mia identità quella è,” he said in colloquial Italian). Guerra patiently explained that since Marco Perissa of Meloni’s party, had previously addressed the secretary of her party, Elly Schlein (who is female-identifying) as “il segretario,” hence electing to use the masculine, she then should be free to use whichever gender *she* prefers to address Mulè. “In the same way that you care for your gender, I care for mine!” Guerra added. A loud applause ensued.⁹ In this instance, queering and a gender reversal was used to make a point and in self-defense. In principle I disagree with a politicized use of gender in language but in this instance Guerra resorted to an emergency solution which seemed effective in making her point with people who do not accept to reason abstractly about grammar and gender, and had to be pushed in an extreme situation to feel it on their own skin. As a reminder, this exchange happened in the Italian Parliament on the very same day in which *Liberò* proclaimed Meloni “man of the year.” It may not be lost on those familiar with the history of Italian fascism, how the leader who was given power in October 1922 was often addressed, including in the American press, as “the man of the hour.”¹⁰

Despite what one can see happening in the Italian Parliament, Italy is a country where many (still uncounted) speakers have been open to both feminine titles and, more recently, gender neutral ones. Against, precisely, this cultural environment, what does then Meloni’s choice of the masculine title “Il Presidente” say about and to these progressive speakers? How does it affect an evaluation Meloni’s “feminism,” her participation in a supposed “sisterhood,”—and about her gender identity? In this cultural climate, divided between restorative moves and claims for change, Meloni’s election, and her choice of title, appears to be a typical restorative move, exactly when “threatening” discussions about gender neutrality in Italian language had started leaking through the sealed walls of academia to become mainstream: in TV shows, social media posts, and even on graffiti in various Italian towns, the attentive observer can now spot adjective endings in “*” or “schwa” to signal gender neutrality.

Gender neutrality in the Italian language is a delicate and crucial point that needs to be highlighted as a matter of linguistic justice and human rights. This right, of course, does not apply only to nonbinary people. Being addressed in a way that aligns with one’s gender identity should be considered a human rights issue for everyone. However, even in simpler binary terms, this right is currently not safeguarded, including within the Italian Parliament. The masculinization of Giorgia Meloni is a clear example of this, as she—as I explained—presents herself and is often referred to using masculine titles and forms of address, which disregard her

⁸ Multiverso Letture, Vera Gheno, “Femminili singolari. il femminismo è nelle parole,” interview by Araneo Also see Gheno, *Femminili Singolari: Il Femminismo è nelle Parole*; and by the same author: “Nomi professionali femminili: singolarità o normalità?” On shifting gender roles in positions of power, see Luyt, Starck, *Masculine Power and Gender Equality: Masculinities as Change*.

⁹ “Botta e risposta alla Camera,” *La Repubblica*.

¹⁰ For a discussion of Mussolini as the “man of the hour,” see Minervini, “Mussolini Speaks. History Reviewed.”

gender identity and reinforce the dominance of masculine norms in public discourse. I will discuss more this masculinization in the next section. Meloni’s choice is also happening at the very moment in which Italian speakers have been questioning progressively more loudly gender binaries, and have been looking for more inclusive linguistic solutions.

The objective of this article is to be a word of caution against categorizing any nonconforming language choice, especially regarding gender, as inherently “right-wing.” In fact, similar or even seemingly identical linguistic choices can stem from radically different positionalities. Simplistic categorizations, polarization and overlooking critical nuances risk perpetuating the very fascist tendencies they aim to counter. To more effectively resist these tendencies, it is crucial to examine and challenge the potential “fascism” within one’s own thinking and disrupt habitual modes of thought that might obscure a more nuanced understanding.

Allow me to indulge in a discussion of feminine and nonbinary titles and forms of address in contemporary Italian language and culture before I circle back to “il Presidente Meloni” and the ideological implications of various forms of masculinization of power.

Gender-Appropriate Forms of Address as a Human Rights Issue, and the Italian Case

Currently, female-identifying people adopt a variety of solutions when it comes to pick their titles. “Presidente” is not even part of the (still!) debated feminine forms for (heteropatriarchally) more traditionally masculine titles such as “avvocato,” “medico,” or “ingegnere.” For some especially hard-headed speakers of Italian, these feminine forms pose a problem, even today, because they are brought to believe these forms are not contemplated in the Italian language, hence “avvocata” or “avvocatessa” still sound awkward to them. Sociolinguist Vera Gheno, along with the earlier work by Alma Sabatini to which Gheno refers, as well as many others, have been explaining for ages how these forms are perfectly correct and have been advocating for more widespread usage. I agree with Gheno and Sabatini, and it seems a bit absurd, as an Italianist in the US, that Italian speakers in Italy still show some resistance to using a completely correct term such as “avvocata,” I also believe that it is a personal choice if a female attorney prefers to be addressed as “avvocata” “avvocato” or “avvocatessa,” and I would caution anyone from jumping to conclusions based solely on the choice of title. As I declare myself squarely on the side of Sabatini, Gheno, and other fine linguists sharing these views, I also wish to push Gheno and Sabatini’s argument further in order to include actively people whose gender identity might be nonconforming, fluid, nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, bigender. What are these speakers going to do when choosing titles and forms of address? For the scope of this discussion, and for brevity, I will refer to nonbinary and genderfluid identities, but with this choice I do not wish to exclude anyone with a different position on the gender spectrum. I should also clarify that I prefer to use the term “genderneutral” when referring to language and objects (such as “a genderneutral watch,” “genderneutral clothing,” “genderneutral pronouns”). From a more nuanced perspective informed by gender studies, we should also ask: what happens when an already masculine woman—a masc, tomboy, butch, or any other variation on that spectrum—achieves power? You might wonder: Are these individual relevant? How many people are we talking about, anyway? Nonbinary/genderfluid people are estimated to make up 2% of the population in the US, India, Italy, Brazil and Russia; they constitute roughly 3% in Germany and Sweden. There are about 85 million native Italian speakers worldwide; 2% of this population

amounts to 1.4 millions. To this, we should add the non-native speakers, estimated conservatively at 2 millions (conservatively), 2% of which is at 40,000. Therefore, nonbinary/genderfluid speakers of Italian in the world might number almost 2 millions at this time. These numbers do not include intersex people, as I was unable to disaggregate the numbers of intersex and nonbinary people (which, of course, do not necessarily overlap). In the US, the intersex population, which is much more common than usually thought, is estimated to be about 1 in every 100 persons, but the numbers vary widely depending on the definition of intersex (another open and heated debate).¹¹ It is not just because of numbers, of course, that nonbinary/genderfluid people belong to a part of the population that should not be ignored. Regardless of numbers, it is appropriate to frame the discourses on gender-appropriate forms of address and language inclusivity in terms of **human rights**: gender equality (though not gender fluidity) was made part of international human rights law by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN general assembly on December 10, 1948. It is time to actively include gender, as well as nonbinary/genderfluid people, in human rights law because what is at stake is the right to be addressed and conceptualized as closely as possible to one's own gender identity. The right to be thought and addressed correctly, the right to exist in language.¹²

The Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that “*all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*” (article 1), and that “everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status” (article 2).¹³ The declaration discusses equality among human beings (everyone, not just women/men), and humanity is not framed in binary terms. This is my point of departure to propose to add “gender” to the list of nonexclusions, also suggesting to interpret gender always as a spectrum, which will include nonbinary/genderfluid conceptualizations of gender.

Conscious of the objectionable lag of the Italian language in adopting both feminine professional titles and nonbinary forms, a lag that I would ascribe more to the Accademia della Crusca than to the speakers, and sensitive to the needs of students living in the anglophone world, for many years I have been invested in introducing gender neutrality in the teaching of Italian language in the US. As a Romance language, many Italianists believe that Italian simply cannot become a genderneutral language. In fact, Italian does not even need to become such: speakers simply need to recognize existing spaces and open up some *new, more conscious spaces* for grammatical and cultural gender neutrality, and equality. If native speakers of Italian could pause for a bit from their “fish-in-water” perspective of familiarity with the language, many would see that even as a gendered Romance language, Italian already includes a degree of gender neutrality. Consider the class of adjectives in “-e,” which only have singular and plural forms and hence their gender is not specified (“intelligente,” “triste,” “abile,” etc.). Or, consider the “sostantivi epiceni” already discussed, and the formal “Lei.” I am aware that current grammar books, which are descriptive and not law-dictating, do not define these forms as “genderneutral.” What I am saying is: *they should*. With this mission in mind, since the summer of 2021, my students at Colorado College and I have been collaborating on making animation videos on Italian

¹¹ See Blackless, Charuvastra, Amanda Derryck, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Karl Lauzanne, and Ellen Lee, “How sexually dimorphic are we? Review and synthesis”; and “Frequency” on the website of the *Intersex Society of North America* <https://isna.org/faq/frequency/>.

¹² By “actively” I mean that any deliberation should mention openly and specifically nonbinary/genderfluid people instead of assuming inclusion.

¹³ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (1948) <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> accessed on 04/03/2023.

grammar: these videos are available to anyone for free and more are in the making.¹⁴ Ben Papadopoulos, currently a graduate student in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UC Berkeley, has been coordinating the Gender in Language Project, which includes a section on gender neutrality in Italian.¹⁵ The OpenEd books of the series *Tutt* a tavola!* by Stacy Giufre and Melina Masterson of UMass Amherst, which we have adopted at Colorado College, has an example of gender neutrality in its title. Even if an open discussion of gender neutrality is not included in the current version, the title itself opens up the space for a conversation on some of the possibilities Italian has to offer to be inclusive of nonbinary people.

Juridically, Italian law scholar Francesco Bilotta, has pointed out the current legal gap regarding genderfluid language, and its urgent necessity. As Bilotta explained, making efforts towards language inclusivity is not just a benevolent inclination, but something enshrined in Italian law, specifically in paragraph 4 of the Codice delle Pari Opportunità (Equal Opportunity Law), integrated by article III of the Italian Constitution, which prescribes full inclusion under all social, political, and economic relations to enable each citizen to achieve full personhood and social dignity.¹⁶ Additionally, the question of genderneutral language should not overlook the plea of trans people. Hagen, Deiana and Roberts warn against the dangers of genderneutral policies that may end up depoliticizing and marginalizing trans issues. In fact:

Too often, claims of gender neutrality lead to a doubling down on the enforcement of the gender binary, with a detrimental impact of members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community, especially trans women. As a way forward, we prioritise insights from the trans community regarding the value of intersectional, coalitional approaches to gender-aware policymaking.¹⁷

Although belatedly, Italy has recently seen a discussion of genderneutral forms, notably sparked by writer Michela Murgia, who had the merit of bringing this issue to the attention of larger audiences, even though her position still faces many opponents after her passing. Vera Gheno herself, in the previously cited interview, completes her sentence on the negative masculinization of women in power by adding: “femministi possono essere tutti, anzi tutt*”: “everyone can be a feminist, or better”—and she modifies the *maschile sovraesteso* (overextended masculine) “tutti” (everyone) into the genderneutral “tutt*.” I chose to refer to this interview, rather than Gheno’s book, precisely because I wanted to comment on this moment and on the oral pronunciation of a genderneutral form. It should be noticed how Gheno effortlessly pronounces “tutt*” by truncating the word at “tutt.” The “impossible” pronunciation of a genderneutral ending marked with “*” or “schwa” or other option, has been used as a lazy excuse to complicate what is actually extremely simple and other gendered languages have figured out years ago. In the animation video “Beyond Gender Binaries,” we also propose another possible way to pronounce gender neutral words. Also, Gheno very aptly does not change all the endings and agreements of that sentence saying “femminist* possono essere tutt*”

¹⁴ See Minervini et al., “Free Educational Materials on Italian Language and Culture.”

¹⁵ See Papadopoulos, Cintrón, Hartman, & Rusicnuolo, *Italian. Gender in Language Project*.

¹⁶ See Bilotta’s intervention at the conference *La lingua italiana in una prospettiva di genere*. I paraphrased and translated Bilotta’s words. Bilotta is a scholar of diritto privato (private law) and anti-discrimination law at the Università di Udine. Bilotta has also been an activist for the recognition of same-sex marriage in Italy, which, as of today (October 2024), despite the abrogation of laws forbidding it, still does not have a clear legislation for same-sex marriages, aside from recognizing some forms of civil union.

¹⁷ Hagen, Deiana, and Roberts. “Revisiting gender-neutral policy from a trans perspective: a look at Northern Ireland.”

(I think this will happen, over time). Given the current state of this debate, it makes sense to change just one key word in a sentence like “femministi possono essere tutt*,” instead of saying “femminist* possono essere tutt*.”¹⁸ (min 9:35) In my opinion, Gheno’s elegant and simple choice is sufficient, for now, to be gender inclusive. It expresses the idea neatly, and it is not necessary to change all the agreements to achieve that result.



Fig. 4. Graffiti in Genova, courtesy by Marco Bagli.



Fig 5: Geppi Cucciari on the TV show “Che Succ3de?”. Still from Rai 3. November 17, 2021.

On Italian television as well as on graffiti on city walls (see figs. 4-5), the asterisk and schwa symbols have been starting to surface, and “genderless” items have also been entering the space of fashion discussions. The “Moda and Beauty” insert of *La Repubblica* of May 25, 2022: “Ora Genderless” describes how Gen Z and Millennials are pushing for genderless fashion. In particular, this insert discusses the market requests for “genderless watches”: a capitalistic but good enough starting point to introduce the very idea of gender neutrality. As fashion introduces items of consumption, the Italian language has no choice but to come up with solutions: in this case *La Repubblica* uses the English term “genderless” (figs. 6-7). Other terms in use are “neutralità di genere,” “genere non binario,” “terzo genere” (which I would not recommend because the ordinal number carries a degree of hierarchy), along with “genderqueer,” and this list is not exhaustive.

In the animation video “Beyond Gender Binaries,” we suggest the use of the gender-undefined pronoun “loi,” and to base a reflection on gender neutrality on the class of adjectives ending in “-e.” These adjectives, in fact, do not have a gender, only a singular and a plural form, such as the singular form “intelligente” and “intelligenti” (plural). Mario, and Maria, as well as Mari* and Mariø,” each of them can be described as “intelligente,” without straining one bit the current rules of Italian language. As I am trying to type this text, I realized that my version of Word does not include a schwa in its special characters, whereas iPhones included it in its updated iOS 15 version in late 2021. The origin of the schwa is often and mistakenly thought to be traceable to Medieval Hebrew, lent to German and English to signify a “strange, unusual” vowel, so it may seem fitting that a letter would be adopted by a historically otherized group.¹⁹ In reality, there is a clear distinction between the International Phonetic Alphabet schwa [ə] (“a

¹⁸ See min 9:35 of the already cited video interview to Gheno.

¹⁹ This incorrect version is given, among other sources, in: Belletti, “The Schwa: Opponents Vs Supporters” and Curwin, “Schwa.”

mid-central vowel” - or a “variable reduced non-defined centralized vowel”), and the Hebrew schwa, in use since the 10th century.²⁰ Linguistically, it is important to be aware of the distinction, but in cultural terms it is also worth keeping in mind that there is an overlap between the schwa of the phonetic alphabet and the Hebrew one, so by extension one can posit an overlap between schwa and Jews. Hence a diffidence towards the schwa could also be not-so-consciously nurtured by a distrust for Jews that is not unknown in Italy and among Catholic cultures.²¹ The authors of the website www.italianoinclusivo.it propose to distinguish between regular and long schwa for inclusive forms in the singular and plural: they recommend “la schwa per il singolare (ə) e la schwa lunga per il plurale (ɜ),” while also explaining pronunciations.²² We can see how there are already quite a few available proposals both for feminine forms and for genderneutral solutions.



Fig. 6 – Photo of “Moda and Beauty” insert of *La Repubblica*, May 25, 2022

²⁰ Asher Laufer, “The Origin of the IPA Schwa.”

²¹ Let me just mention one of the many important studies about the long history of Italian antisemitism: Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican’s Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism*.

²² See *Italiano Inclusivo. Una lingua che non discrimina per genere*. www.italianoinclusivo.it. Accessed October 17, 2024.

Fig. 7 – Photo of “Moda and Beauty” insert of *La Repubblica*, May 25, 2022

However, one may still be asking why we need inclusive language, even in Italian? In order to conceptualize gender fluidity, gender nonconformity, and for genderfluid people to fully exist within the logocentric components of our Western culture, the Italian language must allow for fluid, nonbinary, and neutral pronouns and other grammatical forms. As, I have already suggested in the previous section of this article, as well as in various talks and conference presentations, gender neutrality in language must be considered a human rights issue.²³

Il (Signor) Presidente Meloni. The Masculinization of Political Power, or: Queering Giorgia Meloni

All Clownfish (think Nemo) are always born male. Each male Clownfish has the ability to turn into a female but will only do so to become the leader of a group; at that point the sex change cannot be reversed.²⁴ There seems to be a parallelism, although reversed, between the Clownfish and Italian right-wing women in politics. Why would Meloni, who identifies as female, call herself “Il Presidente?” And has Meloni finally shattered the glass-ceiling of women in Italian politics, or made it bullet-proof? Why would Meloni, as Gheno observed, repeat the usual dynamics of a negative masculinization of power? In “Girls Will Be Boys: Gender Envy and the Freudian Social Contract,” tying together Freud’s analyses of sexual difference and the formation of liberal societies, Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg discusses “envy” as the common root of Freudian theories of sexual difference and of modern liberal politics. In modern political theory, Stewart-Steinberg explains, the political subject has to be deprived of affect in order to become a democratic subject.²⁵ Women then were excluded from liberal politics as the bearers of the excluded affect and hence became “the excluded Other.”²⁶

The symptom of this exclusion is in the triad “equality, liberty, *fraternity*”: and in fact, Meloni is in the party called, fittingly, “Fratelli d’Italia” (“Brothers of Italy”), the neofascist, populist party she co-founded with Ignazio LaRussa in 2012. In the Freudian fantasy of the social contract, the male democratic subject, is a *woman who acts like a man*: “It is impossible for Freud to stop women from acting like men and, conversely, to convince men to act like women, and I will claim that Freud requires this bedrock to remain a bedrock for his model of politics to function properly” (27). Giorgia Meloni incarnates *precisely* this fantasy of the social contract from which women are excluded, and women who wish to be a part of it need to imitate men. Further, Meloni stands squarely, in further theoretical terms, within the recent scholarship on right-wing “feminism” (Arfini, Nickerson, Delegard, Blee, McGee Deutsch). Within this debate, I align with those who argue that right-wing feminism is an oxymoron, just like feminism and

²³ I am grateful to Ben Papadopolous and Gabriella Licata for their discussion of nonbinary language and inclusivity in “Refuting Language Academics’ Rejections of Nonbinary Grammatical Gender,” a talk given virtually at the 95th LSA 95th Annual Meeting, January 7–10, 2021. However, while they discuss nonbinary language as a “humanitarian issue,” I suggest framing the issue in terms of a “human rights issue,” because whereas humanitarian law applies in times of conflict, human rights apply at all times. See Barnett, “Introduction: Worlds of Difference,” in Barnett (ed.), *Humanitarianism and Human Rights*. I am also indebted to Omri Grinberg, post-doctoral fellow at the Minerva Center for the Rule of Law Under Extreme Conditions, and post-doctoral fellow at the Martin Buber Society of Fellows, for many inspiring conversations on human rights.

²⁴ “Clownfish” in *National Geographic*.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/fish/facts/clownfish#:~:text=Surprisingly%2C%20all%20clownfish%20are%20born,dominant%20female%20of%20a%20group>. Accessed on October 17, 2024.

²⁵ Stewart-Steinberg 2007, “Girls Will Be Boys: Gender Envy and the Freudian Social Contract,” 26.

²⁶ Pateman, cited in Stewart-Steinberg, 26.

difference cannot be based on this negative imitation of men (which I wish to distinguish, without hesitations, from being butch, tomboy, masc, etc). In terms of race, conservative feminists (and even left-wing feminists although less intentionally) have solidified racial divisions and white primacy. Meloni—a fatherless child raised in Rome’s working-class neighborhood of Garbatella and an unwed mother—is a defender of the traditional family, openly opposed to gay, queer, and nontraditional families. In line with the parties that launched her political career (Alleanza Nazionale; Popolo della Libertà, the party born in 2009 of the fusion between Alleanza Nazionale and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia), Meloni unsurprisingly holds stern anti-immigrant views. As for her “feminism,” her political record cannot be defined as having women at the center. Meloni is known for signing the “save the babies” law (“Legge salva bebè,” 2019), which is not an anti-abortion law, as a reader in the US might think, but a law that mandates parents of children up to 4 years old to install car devices to alert the driver if a child is forgotten in the car. Even if this law might be helpful to women, even if it is targeted to all parents, it would be a stretch to consider it a feminist advancement. If anything, Meloni seems slightly more progressive in her own private family life than in her political speeches and political acts. I would then conclude that Meloni is not a feminist, and she did not shatter at all the glass ceiling looming over Italian politics. So who is Giorgia Meloni? – “That *guy* Italy just elected,” as an American colleague asked me a few weeks after the September 2022 elections: my colleague’s comment anticipated by one whole year Sechi’s remarks on the newspaper *Libero*.

A gifted speaker, effective in her delivery as in the choice of the most demagogical points, in her famous October 19, 2019 speech in piazza San Giovanni, engorged with self-confidence, Meloni declared “Io sono Giorgia. Sono una donna, sono una madre.” A woman, hence, and a mother, of course, because what would be the point of womanhood without the duty of childbearing? “Sono italiana, sono cristiana,” that sentenced continued, “and you will not take that away from me! You will not take that away from me!” To add some context, here is a longer quote from Meloni’s notorious speech:

Ora parlano di togliere la dicitura “padre” e “madre” sui documenti. Perché la famiglia è un nemico, l’identità nazionale è un nemico, l’identità di genere è un nemico. Per loro tutto ciò che definisce è un nemico. È il gioco del pensiero unico: ci devono togliere tutto quello che siamo, perché quando non avremo più un’identità e non avremo più radici, noi saremo privi di consapevolezza e incapaci di difendere i nostri diritti. È il loro gioco. Vogliono che siamo Genitore 1, Genitore 2, genere LGBT, Cittadini X, dei codici. Ma noi non siamo dei codici, noi siamo delle persone e difenderemo la nostra identità. Io sono Giorgia, sono una donna, sono una madre, sono italiana, sono cristiana. Non me lo toglierete! Non me lo toglierete!

Now they are discussing eliminating the words “father” and “mother” from official documents. Because the family is seen as an enemy, national identity is an enemy, gender identity is an enemy. For them, everything that defines is an enemy. Such is the game of the ‘pensiero unico’ (*pensée unique*): they are trying to take everything we are away from us, because when we will have lost our identity and our roots, we will become unaware and incapable of fighting for our rights. This is their game. They want us to be Parent 1, Parent 2, gender LGBT, Citizen X, some codes. But we are not codes, we are people and we will defend our identity. I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I

am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian. You will not take it away from me! You will not take it away from me!²⁷

This famous “identity declaration” came midway through her speech, a remarkable list of perceived threats against the good, white, Christian, clearly binary in gender, Italian identity, solidifying the perception of the people reunited in the square that there is a very clear attack against them coming from “them” (it is typical of fascism to build a dynamic of ‘us’ versus ‘them’). By “them” Meloni means, vaguely, the PD (Democratic Party), the Cinque Stelle (the party founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo), and more specifically, this speech was meant to be against Laura Boldrini’s proposed bill to grant citizenship to immigrants, and against Virginia Raggi’s chaotic administration of Rome, as Raggi became the Cinque Stelle-elected mayor of the capital. In the midst of all these “threats” to the sacred, Christian, white, Italian purity (such as taking away the crucifix from Italian classrooms, giving rights to queer families, and even, although not said very explicitly, gender neutrality in language), Meloni sought to reassure her audience that such changes would not happen as long as she would be in power. She keeps reassuring her audiences that she is a woman, not a genderqueer, even if she is a woman in a position of power who is acting like a man.

Meloni wears the suit of political power like a perfect cross-dresser. Despite being busy with her political work, she is also a mother, as every woman (but no one else) is expected to be; she is also a Christian, because that’s what Italy is supposed to be—not a cushy place for immigrants of other religions, nor for Italian citizens of different faiths. Despite her appearance as a nonqueer, seemingly nonthreatening woman, it is crucial to remember that her politics belongs to the most ferocious extreme right-wing, with fascist origins. Meloni has consistently voted against any facilitation of immigration, any recognition to nontraditional families, any religious tolerance, and against euthanasia (fascists have a history with euthanasia, but not the type that many Italians have been advocate for today). Meloni has also voted for a complete naval blockade in the Mediterranean, written a proposal to criminalize “extreme Islamism” in Italy, supported expanding cases for gun-aided self-defense, and has advocated for chemical castration for repeat sexual offenders.

This is the political context to keep in mind when we talk about Meloni, her identity as “the first Italian female Prime Minister” and her supposed “feminism.” Based on her recent speeches and political agenda, Meloni is without doubt a neofascist and a populist of the right, and if anything, she appears politically closer to a strongman than to a feminist.²⁸ I would caution anyone from thinking that, politically, Meloni is “not too bad,” just because she has not been able to get the necessary votes on the law she says she supports, even if she acts offended when she is referred to as a Fascist.²⁹

Having briefly explained Meloni’s political beliefs, the contrast between her political agenda and her lived life starts to surface quite clearly: she is not married but defends the traditional family; she identifies as a traditional woman and a mother, staunchly against queer rights, yet she favors *queer speech acts* when she opts for masculine titles which reveal her imitation of male political power— and, even if inadvertently, in doing so, *Meloni also created a space for nonbinary language*. I propose, in fact, to read Meloni’s suggestion of being referred to as “Il Presidente” as an obviously queer and nonbinary speech act. Although I have framed this contradiction as her lack

²⁷ Meloni, “Il discorso integrale di Giorgia Meloni in piazza San Giovanni a Roma.”

²⁸ See Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present*.

²⁹ Martelli, “Se Giorgia Meloni non è fascista.”

of understanding of queerness, I should also note that the same queer linguistic choice may have entirely different motivations. Whereas Meloni's motivation—as I explained earlier—seems a classic example of male imitation of power, a genderqueer, genderfluid, or nonbinary person may opt for the same linguistic choice based only on gender identity, hence not limited to titles, and not at all as a mimicry of male political power.³⁰ I would caution against such a conflation, while trying to highlight differences of motivations and intrinsic contradictions of such a judgement: the same linguistic choice, if motivated by different reasons, cannot be read in the same way. While, again, I am not defending Meloni's politics, I would like to open up a space for genderqueer persons to favor the same speech acts, if so inclined, without being conflated inconsiderately with Meloni's agenda. To give an example, Athena Nguyen has persuasively argued that “butch” has promising political potential, as it is stripped of traits that may be oppressive to women, it can combine a critique of both patriarchy and feminism. “Butch” can operate as a positive threat to male power by disrupting the “naturalized connection between masculinity and male bodies;” “butch” also has the potential to be paired with “feminist awareness.”³¹ A feminist butch in a position of political power may opt for the same masculine title as Meloni's, preferring to be addressed as “Il Presidente.” The similarities would end there, though. Politically, Meloni is a cross-dresser: *il Presidente*, wearing a dress.³²

“Il Presidente” Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein. Tradition vs Modernity, and Queer Modalities

Starting in the Fifties, the main representations of St. Francis of Assisi became a leftist counterpoint to the many fascist appropriations of the Patron Saint of Italy, a saint who had become such in June 1939 when, soon after his election, Pope Pius XII responded to the pressures that had been coming from Fascist circles at least since 1926 (Minervini, 2017). The same saint whose life had been interpreted as the precursor of the Duce, after the fall of fascism became a symbol of pacifism and of communion with nature. Not surprisingly, Meloni cited precisely Saint Francis during her victory speech on September 26, 2022. Meloni said: “Tu comincia a fare quello che è necessario, poi quello che è possibile. Alla fine, ti scoprirai a fare l'impossibile” (“begin by doing what is necessary, then what is possible. In the end you will find yourself achieving impossible things”). While the Franciscan scholar Friar Andrea Valona hurried to clarify that we are in front of a mis-attribution, it is imperative to highlight the historical continuity of a neofascist reappropriation of the figure of St. Francis. Just as the representations of the Patron Saint of Italy are split between right and left-wing interpretations,

³⁰ The political and ideological undertones relative to the choice of women's professional titles is also present in De Santis, “La giudice e altri sostantivi epicèni”: “Negli ultimi anni abbiamo avuto *la ministra* per lo Sport Giovanna Melandri, *il ministro* dell'Istruzione Mariastella Gelmini, e oggi *la ministro* del Lavoro Elsa Fornero. Quest'ultima soluzione sembrerebbe la più ragionevole: da un lato evita l'occultamento linguistico del nome al maschile, dall'altro mette al riparo da facili ironie (anche se al plurale impone un ritorno alla forma femminile del nome: *le ministre* e non *le ministri*). La scelta tra l'una e l'altra formula, tuttavia, dipende spesso dalle preferenze esplicite delle donne che esercitano una certa carica: si tratta infatti di una questione non puramente grammaticale, ma ricca di implicazioni ideologiche.” I also have heard comments by Italians on the fact that if a genderqueer person (whose feature may appear somewhat feminine) should opt for masculine pronouns, this choice would be right-wing because “that's what Meloni did!”

³¹ Nguyen, “Patriarchy, power, and female masculinity,” 15 (abstract).

³² As I have argued, Meloni is a female-identifying person who is imitating male political power. This is why I wanted to point out how there is a measure of cross-dressing in her act. Of course, I do not consider cross-dressing offensive in any way.

after Meloni’s electoral success, her antipodal opposite emerged, and the first clear sign of the opposition also emerged during a speech, a ground on which Meloni is strong. If this were a kung fu fight, this would be the case of an opponent challenging the adversary at their own favorite weapon.

In September 2022, during the primary campaign for the Partito Democratico in piazza del Popolo, Elly Schlein (Elena Ethel Schlein) gave the most-applauded speech, clearly and openly the counterpoint to Meloni’s “io sono una donna, sono una madre, sono cristiana” speech. Schlein unashamedly declared to be “a woman, in love with a woman, not a mother, and yet not less of a woman. We are not a walking uterus, but persons with rights.” In her words: “Sono una donna. Amo un’altra donna e non sono una madre, ma non per questo sono meno donna. Non siamo uteri viventi, ma persone coi loro diritti.”³³

As a reminder, before becoming Prime Minister, Meloni declared: “Io sono Giorgia, sono una donna, sono una madre, sono italiana, sono cristiana.” While Meloni begins with her unmodified, typically Italian first name (whereas Schlein favors the more cosmopolitan diminutive of her own Italian first name, Elena), Schlein starts by declaring her identity as “a woman,” highlighting her feminism and her belonging to a commonality of women. Unlike Meloni, Schlein does not emphasize her own individuality by saying “I am Elly.” Schlein is a woman who loves another woman, immediately challenging the traditional reproductive destiny assigned to women in the right-wing views and embracing a sexual choice not necessarily tied to reproductive duty, adding flexibility between gender identity and the range of life choices. More precisely, Schlein identifies as bisexual, so even her declaration of loving a woman comes with a level of choice and flexibility (unlike Meloni, Schlein is aware of being queer).

By shifting the focus from identity to sexual and reproductive rights, Schlein pulls the carpet out from under Meloni’s feet, moving the debate into a territory that is definitely more her forte. To return to our imaginary kung fu fight, this is the moment when the weapon of choice is broken, allowing the challenger to pick up their best weapon. The continuation of Schlein’s sentence further solidifies this concept, while the parts on nationality and religion are left out, which makes sense for a politician envisioning a diverse country where politics and religion remain separate.

On February 26, 2023, Elly Schlein, against all odds, won the primaries with over 53.75% of the votes of a bit over one million votes³⁴ and became the secretary of the Partito Democratico (PD), a dark horse stealing her victory from the supposed favorite, Stefano Bonaccini. So she became the first woman to lead the PD. In both her private life and political credo, Schlein represents the perfect, radical (almost ironic) antithesis to Meloni: Jewish, born in Lugano, Switzerland, from an Italian mother and American father, both academics, she holds US, Swiss, and Italian citizenship. Her grandparents were the socialist attorney and partisan Agostino Viviani, on the maternal side, and Jewish-Ukrainian and Jewish-Lithuanian emigrees to the US on her paternal side.³⁵ Whereas Meloni identifies as a “borgatara,” one could say, Schlein has chosen Bologna as her home.³⁶ And whereas Meloni from her youth identified with the legacy

³³ Antonio Lamorte, “Sono una donna. Amo un’altra donna e non sono una madre, non per questo sono meno donna.”

³⁴ See official results in “Primarie PD: i risultati definitivi” on the website of the Partito Democratico.

³⁵ “Chi è Elly Schlein.” *Il Gazzettino*.

³⁶ *Borgatara* comes from *borgata*, meaning a working-class suburb, especially in Rome. Describing someone as *borgatara* (feminine) refers to a woman from these areas, often with a tough, straightforward character. The term can be pejorative, implying a lack of sophistication, and has been used to emphasize Meloni’s roots in the Roman neighborhood of Garbatella, reflecting class and regional identity.

of Mussolini,³⁷ Schlein worked in the 2008 Obama campaign. Schlein is also openly queer and pro-queer rights, a feminist, pro-immigrants, pro-environment, pro-subsistence income (“salario minimo”). As Schlein herself observed: “C’è una bella differenza tra leadership femminili e femministe.” Indeed, there is an important difference between being a female leader and being a feminist, and by turning into a man, Meloni negated her last, biological, affiliation to a potential feminist cause.



Fig. 8 - Elly Schlein and Giorgia Meloni. Stills from *Blob*, Rai Television Facebook page. September 25, 2022.

It should be evident by now how Meloni and Schlein represent two entirely antithetical political and personal models; they embody, in fact, a point-by-point opposition. One potential commonality is their interest in languages, as Meloni has a high school degree in tourism with special emphasis on languages (English, French, Spanish). However, she has stated that she does not enjoy German, a language in which Schlein is fluent, along with English, and French. Interestingly, speakers of all the languages spoken by both Meloni and Schlein have been

³⁷ In an interview to RaiNews right before the 2022 elections, having been called a “post-fascist,” Meloni explained that she was part of Alleanza Nazionale when, in 2003, the leader Gianfranco Fini declared that fascism was “an absolute evil.” See D’Alessio, “Chi è Giorgia Meloni,” *Virgilio Notizie*. Fini himself, before that declaration, had placed himself clearly in the legacy of fascism through his “political father,” Pino Rauti, the former fascist and co-founder of the MSI. Meloni, for her part, has *not* offered a clear condemnation of fascism, and her political agenda, along with the charismatic charge of her political leadership, are all too close to fascism to let me think she is not a part of that legacy.

introducing genderneutral forms. The already cited Papadopolous’s “Gender in Language Project” can be consulted again to see the many possibilities these languages offer. Despite this common trait, and despite being quadrilingual, for Meloni any deliberate idea of nonbinary linguistic choices remains very much a foreign and removed world, a world to avoid at all costs. In truth, the St. Francis of Assisi Meloni likes to quote, has a history of being associated with the realm of the feminine and with motherhood. In writing the *Regula non bullata* (1221), Francis exhorted his brothers to be mothers for each other, and he himself was regularly addressed as “sweet mother.” He developed the theme of friars mothering their little brothers also in the “Rule for Life in Hermitages” (“Regula pro Eremitoriis Data”) and in the letter to brother Leo.³⁸ The patron saint of (Fascist) Italy, though, was reworked into a muscular warrior in Fascist aesthetic, and likened to the Duce himself (Minervini 2017), in another “cross-dressing” operation aimed at virilizing political power, similar to Meloni’s own. Where Meloni cites St. Francis of Assisi, “il più italiano dei santi” just like Mussolini used to refer to the Saint adopting the same, existing expression,³⁹ Schlein likes to cite Kimberlé Crenshaw, the theorist of intersectionality, who remains almost unknown in Italy.⁴⁰

While it is clearly Meloni who is imitating male power, right-wing newspapers such as *Il Secolo d’Italia*, have described Schlein’s response to Meloni as mere mockery (“scimmiottare”).⁴¹ In March, their first appearance in Montecitorio was defined by various newspapers as a duel, whose winner is undisputed: Schlein is the winner according to leftist newspapers, but for right-wing newspapers Meloni has triumphed over someone who is trying to gain her spot as the “anti-Meloni.” But according to these sources, Schlein needs to eat a lot of dust before she can call herself the anti-hero of the extreme right-wing Italians. These attempts to distance Schlein from Meloni, while trying to detract from her figure, show some worry in the right that the little Jew may triumph against Goliath.

In the Meloni vs Schlein rivalry there is also the socio-economical chiasmus whereby the more privileged, Schlein, supports the “salario minimo garantito” (“subsistence income”) but the hero of the working-class Meloni is harshly against handouts to the lowest-income families. Rarely have two women, two political agendas, two world views been so radically opposed, their politics in contradiction with their social classes. Will they be able to communicate effectively while leading a divided country? And if so, in which language?

Conclusion

There is a lot at stake in what Meloni and Schlein incarnate. History has taught us that Meloni has a strong advantage against Schlein, and not just because Meloni is the PM and Schlein at the

³⁸ As Frugoni demonstrated in *Francesco E L’invenzione Delle Stimmate: Una Storia Per Parole e Immagini Fino a Bonaventura e Giotto*, the philological question of St. Francis’s opus is tricky, but W. Goetz and others accept that Francis authored the “Regula pro Eremitoriis Data.” See Goetz, W. *Quellen zur Geschichte des hl. Franziskus*, 45, 49, 55.

³⁹ This attribution has a long history. It was repeated by Mussolini as well as by Pope Pius XII at the moment of the proclamation of St Francis as patron saint of Italy. The oldest example found so far is in Vincenzo Gioberti’s *Del primato morale e civile degli italiani*: “...finalmente, che semplicità popolana, ma pur bella e grande, di affetti e di opere, in Francesco di Assisi, che è il più amabile, il più poetico e il più italiano de’ nostri santi!” (120).

⁴⁰ Schlein published a book dedicated to social and environmental justice based on intersectionality, being aware of the complexities relative to inequality and access to resources within environmental activism: Ellie Schlein, *La nostra parte. Per la giustizia sociale e ambientale, insieme*.

⁴¹ Argento, “Elly Schlein scimmiotta la Meloni: ‘Amo un’altra donna e non sono una madre’. L’ossessione.”

opposition, but because Italy is without doubt a country that has not confronted properly its fascist “past,” and hence the remnants of fascism which are still part of Italian culture and politics. There are a lot of specters haunting Italy, the specters of fascism, which need to be confronted seriously, deeply, urgently.

With this analysis, as a scholar of fascism, I have proposed a different interpretation of Meloni’s references to Saint Francis of Assisi. The same could be said for the Prime Minister’s references to other icons of Italian culture, for instance Maria Montessori, whose book *La Santa Messa spiegata ai bambini* was Meloni’s gift to Papa Francesco (see fig. 9). The gift was defined as “unusual” by some, only because not many are aware of work done by Erica Moretti and Christine Quarfood, who have researched the mutual admiration, albeit temporary, between Montessori and Mussolini. It is not correct to always and only emphasize their breakup, without understanding their collaboration first, which went at least from 1924 to 1931.



Fig. 9 - Giorgia Meloni and her daughter in a private hearing with Papa Francesco, January 2023. On this occasion, Meloni brought the pope the gift of a copy of Maria Montessori’s *La Santa Messa Spiegata ai Bambini* (1932) - Vatican Media via Vatican Pool/Getty Images

Many Italians express outrage over Meloni’s references to St. Francis, Montessori, and other so-called, but under-examined, champions of Italian culture, denouncing them as an unduly appropriations. Nevertheless, one must face the evidence that Meloni is historically correct (as much as it pains me to admit it). Meloni carries precisely and unwaveringly the historical memory of the fascist appropriations of the figure of St. Francis, and of Montessori and Mussolini’s reciprocal early sympathies. As I have argued, Meloni incarnates many, deeply hypocritical contractions which are also quite typical of Italian culture, especially its Catholic side. A closer look on Meloni, and not just from academic eyes, hopefully will help see more clearly the amount of fascistic elements still inhabiting Italian culture that Meloni is simply nurturing and emphasizing, but absolutely not creating.

Once again, as scholars, we are facing the consequences of a never-digested history of fascism, as well as the effects of the chronic detachment of academia from larger audiences in Italy. We know that excellent works on Italian fascism and the Shoah have been translated into Italian and do circulate in Italy, but the main representations and discourses (for instance in film and television) remain completely *all'oscuro*. Especially given the worrisome resurgence of extreme right-wing government in the world, it will be our next, important task, to put aside the academic lingo and expensive academic books, and go outside to engage convincingly with much wider and diverse audiences, also moving beyond the format of the strictly academic publication.⁴²

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⁴² Minervini, “It is Time to go Outside. A Dialogue with Dominick LaCapra.”

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