



# The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism and Austerity in an 'Exceptional' Country: Italy

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## Abstract

Homonormativity, meant as the “sexual politics of neoliberalism”, has become a widespread concept within social sciences and geography. Associated with the domestication of homosexual lives and the access of LGBT people to full citizenship rights, this notion creates a monolithic account of neoliberalism and its sexual politics all around the Global North. Focused on the case of Italy, the paper challenges this homogenizing concept through adopting the perspective of the “exception” developed by Aihwa Ong to analyse neoliberalism. Following her conceptualization of the interplay between “neoliberalism as exception” and “exceptions to neoliberalism”, the paper shows how the same interplay characterizes the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity in the Italian case. Indeed Italy represents an exception within the model of the “sexual politics of neoliberalism (and austerity)” concerning LGBT issues, while exception has been invoked in Italian politics to regulate sexuality, notably sex work. Moreover, exceptions have been assembled by public institutions in order to protect LGBT (consumer) subjects from “risk” and “danger” through a strategy defined as “soft entrepreneurialism”.

## Keywords

Italy, sexual politics, exception, neoliberalism, homonormativity, sex work.



## Introduction

In 2000, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Rome to claim public visibility and the recognition of civil rights: the Rome World Pride challenged the resistances of conservative political institutions that tried to prohibit the demonstration. These operated under the influence of the Vatican hierarchies, as the city hosted the holy Jubilee - one of the main celebrations of the Catholic Church usually taking place every 25 years. Fourteen years later, tens of thousands of people have again taken to the streets of the city to claim a recognition of basic citizenship rights. In the meanwhile, most European and Western countries have registered the approval of new legislations for civil unions, marriages and adoptions, aimed at including LGBT people within national citizenship agendas. “Homonormativity” and “homonationalism” have become widespread terms indicating a new trend within national neoliberal citizenship projects now welcoming the good affluent ‘pink’ (and white) consumer (e.g. Bell and Binnie, 2004, Binnie, 2004, Duggan, 2002, Puar, 2007). In this respect, the Italian case appears as ‘backward’ in comparison to ‘modern’ Europe (and the rest of the West), this having become a popular narrative among some mainstream LGBT advocacy groups (Colpani and Habed, 2014). Nevertheless some of the traits that have been associated with “homonormativity” as “the sexual politics of neoliberalism” (Duggan, 2002) can be found also in the Italian context: the creation of Gay Villages and rainbow zones, a public narrative prompted by formal institutions recognizing the importance of pink tourism and business, a new hegemonic discourse centred around love and the ‘good gay’. These trends reflect an overall domestication of lesbian and gay lives and the decline of a queer public realm (Duggan, 2002, Richardson, 2005). So, is Italy merely an example of a ‘backward’ country (slowly) following the path towards a full realization of ‘modernity’ and neoliberalism? Or can the Italian case reveal something more about the variegated and “exceptional” character of neoliberalism and capitalism (and their sexual politics)?

The paper deals with these tensions by adopting the perspective of the exception as a main feature of neoliberalism –this being the core argument of Aihwa Ong’s book *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (2006). Ong offers a brilliant analysis of the complexity, fragmentation and disarticulations of citizenship within the neoliberal spaces of exception, as these mark an open-ended project always under (re)negotiation. By (re)assigning a central role to the State and the narratives of national elites without constructing a homogeneous/uniform vision of State institutions and elites, Ong challenges the dualistic and all-encompassing opposition between “citizenship” and “bare life” characterizing the state of exception according to Agamben<sup>2</sup> (1998). On the

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<sup>2</sup> According to Agamben (1998), the state of exception is the core dispositif of sovereignty, dividing people who are recognized citizenship under a legal system and those who are not, thus bared of any political and legal protection.

contrary, she theorizes (neoliberal) citizenship as striated and graduated, going beyond the boundaries of the Nation-State and situated within the boundaries of ethnicity, gender, class, cultural and human capital, among others. In this way, the exceptions to the Weberian ideal-type of citizenship and sovereignty become manifold, almost innumerable, since the character of neoliberalism itself is exceptional, there is no “original” model to strive towards. When analysing the constitutive role of the exception, Ong remarks how this should not be reduced uniquely to the Agambenian negative ‘other’: indeed exception can consist of accessing rights for specific groups and spaces. In Ong’s own words:

I conceptualize the exception more broadly, as an extraordinary departure in policy that can be deployed to include as well to exclude. As conventionally understood, the sovereign exception marks out excludable subjects who are denied protections. But the exception can also be a positive decision to include selected populations and spaces as targets of “calculative choices and value-orientation” associated with neoliberal reform. In my formulation, we need to explore the hinge between neoliberalism as exception and exception to neoliberalism, the interplay among technologies of governing and of disciplining, of inclusion and exclusion, of giving value or denying value to human conduct. (2006:5)

This way, we see how Ong’s reconceptualization of the exception exceeds the boundaries of the State itself, both at the supra-national and the local level, some spaces, groups or communities gaining an exceptional status (both in negative and positive terms). Indeed rights and benefits that have been traditionally associated with citizenship now follow neoliberal criteria (like in the shift from the Keynesian welfare state to emerging forms of workfare, see Handler, 2004), integrating national spaces of sovereignty within the more complex geographies of European/global capitalism. So citizenship is now linked to a multiplicity of factors, redefined and re-imagined according to place and the meeting of different ethics, the space of the nation-State resulting fragmented and extended across different scales and groups (Ong, 2006:7-8). The entire process is thus built on the interplay and tensions between “neoliberalism as exception” and the “exceptions to neoliberalism”.

Following such a framework, this paper shows how this exceptional character can be found also in the contrasting tendencies of Italian sexual politics under neoliberalism (and austerity), thus going beyond the monolithic and unidirectional temporality deployed when using categories such as “homonormativity” and “homonationalism”. Indeed some commentators have found traces of these tendencies in the Italian case (e.g. De Vivo and Dufour, 2012, Ferrante, 2013), transposing the theorizations of homonormativity by Duggan (2002) and homonationalism by Puar (2006) without any critical adjustment to the Italian context or any reflection on neoliberal models. In contrast, when analysing sexual politics and citizenship in neoliberal Italy, I aim to make my argument inclusive of different subjectivities (LGBT people, sex workers, women) following

the Foucauldian assumption that neoliberal governmentality is primarily biopolitical, aimed at disciplining bodies and behaviours (Foucault, 2008).

In discussing some of the main traits of sexual politics in Italy in the last 20 years, this paper frames them within a more general reflection on neoliberalism and austerity, seeing them as interconnected. Indeed, the austerity policies adopted since the eruption of the current debt and financial crisis are seen as a natural *continuum*, the ultimate step of the neoliberal policies implemented since at least the early 1990s. In this respect their sexual politics may be interconnected too, so what has emerged in the last few years does not mark any rupture with previous models. This reflects the always ongoing, under construction character of neoliberalism, that has led many scholars to talk of “neoliberalization” in order to emphasize its being an (unfinished) project always under negotiation among different actors and scales (e.g. Brenner and Theodore, 2002, Castree, 2006, Peck and Tickell, 2002).

The remainder of the paper comprises five sections: in section 2 I review the literature on homonormativity as “the sexual politics of neoliberalism” highlighting how it creates a reductionist, place-blind and fixed account of neoliberalism itself, thus reinforcing the criticisms previously raised by Brown (2009, 2012). Section 3 presents a brief description of neoliberal and austerity politics in Italy as undertaken in the last 20 years, emphasizing the connections between neoliberalism and austerity and highlighting how exception has become a key-word for understanding how governance has changed in the last 20 years. Exception is the main focus of section 4, as it shows how Italy represents an exception within the model of the “sexual politics of neoliberalism (and austerity)” concerning LGBT issues, while exception has been invoked and assembled in Italian politics to regulate sexuality, notably sex work. Section 5 furthers the discussion on the emerging traits of the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity in Italy focusing on “risk” and “danger” as new main categories for the regulation of (homo)sexualities. These new political mottos cannot be separated from a reflection on the emerging “soft entrepreneurialism” adopted by public institutions to protect LGBT (consuming) people from risk and danger. Finally in the conclusions, I stress the need to recognize the exceptional and uneven character of neoliberalism in order to understand how different the consequences of the austerity measures currently being adopted in most European (and Western) countries will be according to their context.

### **Homonormativity and the missing link on the exceptional character of neoliberalism (and austerity)**

In a book chapter from 2002, Lisa Duggan introduced the concept of “homonormativity” to identify “the sexual politics of neoliberalism” in relation to the US context; just over 10 years later, the concept has become extremely popular and widespread within academia, used in relation to different contexts (see, for example, Cervulle, 2008, about France, Collins, 2009, about Manila). In Duggan’s

formulation, homonormativity indicates a general visibility of certain forms of gay and lesbian culture in the public sphere (media, politics and so forth), reflecting new representations and discourses from LGBT mainstream groups around the issues of “equality”, “freedom” and “right to the privacy”, as these have become key-mottos of neoliberalism. In her own words:

This New Homonormativity comes equipped with a rhetorical recoding of key terms in the history of gay politics: “equality” becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, “freedom” becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the “right to privacy” becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped. All of this adds up to a corporate culture managed by a minimal state, achieved by the neoliberal privatization of affective as well as economic and public life. (*ibid*: 190)

Duggan’s conceptualization highlights the occurring process of “assimilation” of certain kinds of (homo)sexualities by neoliberal, growth-oriented regimes (for a similar argument, Nast, 2002, Puar, 2006). In a similar vein, Richardson (2005) spoke of a “neoliberal politics of normalisation” featured by a hegemonic discourse on the “individuals”, “equal rights” and a “new partnership” between state institutions and LGBT organisations (*ibid*: 516); in fact, “contemporary struggles for ‘equality’ help to reaffirm the regulatory power of the state by reinforcing the authority of the institutions appealed to which confer rights and responsibilities (in this case military, marriage, family), and through which sexualities are regulated” (*ibid*: 532). Main attention in this debate has been paid to the exclusionary nature of homonormativity, notably in terms of race; for instance, Nast defined it as “gay white patriarchy” supporting “pre-existing racialized and politically and economically conservative processes of profit-accumulation” (2002: 878). According to Puar (2006), the inclusion of gay and queer subjects/bodies has become crucial to fully develop the American nationalist and militarist project of the War on terror; indeed, in her view, “certain domesticated homosexual bodies provide ammunition to reinforce nationalist projects” (*ibid*: 68).

As previously said, the concept has rapidly travelled around and beyond the Global North, (pre)assumed to describe the sexual politics of every neoliberal(izing) country, including Italy. Indeed recent contributions by De Vivo and Dufour (2012) and Ferrante (2013) highlighted traces of homonationalism (and the homonormativity it is based on) in Italy through a semiotical analysis of the advertising material produced for the 2011 Europride demonstration in Rome and other media campaigns promoted by mainstream LGBT organizations. Although sharing their concerns towards the use of racist and normative imageries in the advertising campaigns of some mainstream LGBT associations, I doubt the usefulness of their strategy to leave unquestioned the adherence and applicability of these concepts to the Italian context. In this respect, I share the criticisms recently raised by Brown (2009, 2012) about the (ab)use of the concept of homonormativity within (queer) social sciences. Following Gibson-Graham’s theoretical framework

(1996) on the necessity to rethink the economy and go beyond the Marxist orthodox vision of capitalistic relations as all-encompassing, in an article from 2009 Brown explores diverse gay economic spaces and practices in Western metropolitan areas in order to question “the violence committed by critical ‘queer’ scholars when they normalise all contemporary gay life as being homonormative gay life that is dictated by the political and economic imperatives of neoliberalism” (1507). Brown’s concern towards the hegemonic (and fixed) narrative on homonormativity constructed by international queer scholars has geographical foundations. In fact, by stressing the (international) uniformity of the “sexual politics of neoliberalism”, scholars dealing with homonormativity underestimate the place-based (and social, cultural and historical) differences concerning the governance of (homo)sexualities; on the contrary, they create a uniform, reductionist narrative of neoliberalism (and its “sexual politics”). This geographical critique has been reinforced in a more recent paper (2012), in which Brown addresses how “the development of theories of homonormativity has primarily occurred in the same limited range of global cities that it studies”, thus overlooking “the lived experience of many lesbians and gay men outside of the metropolitan milieu in which these theoretical debates circulate” (1067).

In more general terms, these geographical claims contest the use of ‘paradigmatic’ cases to investigate geographies of (homo)sexualities for two main reasons: a) they reinforce the analytical focus on the ‘modern’ metropolitan areas of the Global North that are assumed as the ‘standard’, thus producing a hegemonic knowledge through the lens of Anglo-Americanism that excludes the Global South and post-socialist, Central and Eastern European countries (Brown et al., 2010, Kulpa, 2011, Moss, 2014, Visser, 2013); b) they produce a monolithic account of the Global North, completely erasing the experiences of both ‘ordinary cities’ and cities/countries not following the Northern Atlantic trajectory (e.g. Brown, 2008, Lewis, 2013).

However these criticisms raised by Brown could be expanded by considering how these perspectives depicting homonormativity as all-encompassing and featuring neoliberalism everywhere create a monolithic and stable account of neoliberalism itself. Indeed what emerges is an image of neoliberalism as always making value of sexual diversity, trying to incorporate specific affluent sexual subjectivities within nationalist citizenship agendas. This ontology of fixity of neoliberalism collides with the main insights recently originated within critical social sciences (geography, anthropology, political economy, urban studies, and so forth) stressing how the character of neoliberalism (and capitalism) is uneven and variegated, including the forms of social reproduction and regulation (e.g. Brenner et al., 2010, Harvey, 2005b, Peck and Theodore, 2007). When analysing the case of sexual politics in Italy in the last 20 years, the paper frames the critique of homonormativity within Ong’s conceptualization of the tensions between “neoliberalism as exception” and the “exceptions to neoliberalism”. Ong’s approach offers the possibility to emphasize

how under neoliberalism different ethics collide. For instance, in Italy, the homophobic national denial of rights to LGBT people collides with forms of “soft entrepreneurialism” developed by local institutions to favour business and attract the ‘pink money’, this permitting at the same time for LGBT people to live and enjoy ‘safe’ spaces for meeting and entertainment (see sections 4 and 5).

Before analysing the exception within sexual politics, it is worth introducing how the exception has rapidly become a main trait of Italian politics overall with the implementation of neoliberal and austerity policies in the last 20 years.

### **Exceptional neoliberalism and austerity Italian style<sup>3</sup>**

When talking about the starting of neoliberal reforms and policies in Italy, scholars usually make reference to the early 1990s when the political parties’ architecture featuring the country after the II World War collapsed, strong economic and monetary reforms were adopted, and new political formations emerged (Woolf, 2007). Neoliberal reforms are usually associated with the adoption of the market ‘technical’ rationality within politics, cuts to public spending, privatization of public-interest enterprises and dispossession of commons (e.g. Harvey, 2005a). These trends emerged in Italy since the early 1990s, notably with the first two ‘technical’, ‘national-interest’ governments of Giuliano Amato (June 1992-April 1993) and Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (April 1993- May 1994), who promoted a rapid privatization of some main national enterprises. In political/government terms, the last 20 years in Italy have been defined by a predominance of the figure of Silvio Berlusconi who ruled the Government of the country for a combined 10 years across his times in office. Beyond Berlusconi, new ‘technical’, ‘national-interest’ governments have ruled the country, such as a second one by Giuliano Amato between April 2000 and June 2001 and, more recently, by Mario Monti (November 2011-April 2013) and Enrico Letta (April 2013-February 2014). This form of exceptional government, not directly elected, has been invoked each time as a necessary instrument to ensure the ‘governability’ of the country, avoiding economic collapse and promoting the economic reforms required by ‘markets’. Exception has been even reinforced by the current debt and financial crisis, as the current government led by Matteo Renzi, like those of Mario Monti and Enrico Letta previously, has been established under the narrative of the best option to follow the markets’ will. Beyond that, the current phase of austerity politics has not marked any real rupture with previously adopted (neoliberal) measures, the major examples being: the cuts to (low-income) pensions, to

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<sup>3</sup> When reflecting on the exceptional forms, instruments and measures towards specific subjectivities assembled by neoliberalism in Italy, my aim is not to “dis-embed” them from the social and political history of the country. Indeed, as specified, some of these measures find their legitimacy in the 1948 republican constitution and some of the same narratives and instruments were already experimented in the 1970s. This is linked to the “assemblage”-character of neoliberalism, resulting from different power relations, interests, specific territorial histories and cultures (e.g. Ong, 2007).

education and universities, to health, to social services; and the block on hiring new staff in the public sector. In the meanwhile, the job market has been made more and more precarious for workers and new measures of taxation have been regressive (for instance the augmentation of VAT or the excise for fuels). Following this, I find a *continuum* between neoliberalism and austerity politics in Italy, as they share the same (presumed) markets' rationality: reduction of public goods and services, private management of strategic services and resources, and a strong redistribution of wealth from low-income groups to high-income ones (Gallino, 2012).

The use of exception as a main feature of neoliberal austerity has not been limited to the political and institutional architectures of the country, but extended to several domains of social and economic life, especially a) to ensure economic growth through the realization of mega-projects and mega-events and b) to govern and discipline specific groups and bodies in case of 'emergency', risk and danger.

In the first case, literature has widely acknowledged how, under neoliberalism, the imperatives of economic growth, competitiveness and efficiency have replaced the ideas of redistribution and reduction of inequalities of the Fordist State (e.g. Fougner, 2008, Harvey, 2005a, 2005b). Italy registered the same trends, with economic growth and competitiveness completely overcoming territorial cohesion and redistribution as the aims of political intervention. In order to pursue (short-term) economic growth mainly based on land and real estate speculation, any attention to territories and socially redistributive urban planning has been erased with the implementation of "derogations" to city Masterplans and environmental/territorial protections (e.g. Berdini, 2010, Bonora, 2009, 2012). In this respect, the most emblematic instrument has been represented by the "building amnesty" (*condono edilizio*) adopted twice by Silvio Berlusconi's governments (in 1995 and 2003), providing an opportunity to heal and regularize building irregularities through payment of a monetary compensation (Berdini, 2010). Once again we see how an exceptional instrument has been deployed to favour the national tax revenues on a very short-term basis and protect the interests of specific social groups, framing the measure as aimed at defending homeownership.

In more general terms, exceptional legislative instruments have spread, the most emblematic case being that of *decreto-legge*. Within the Italian law system, *decreto-legge* is an instrument that should be used by the Government in extraordinary cases of urgency and necessity and is equivalent to a law (after the approval by the Government, the Parliament has 60 days to transform the *decreto-legge* into a law or it expires). For instance, if we consider the recent 'technical' government led by Enrico Letta during the austerity phase, among the 35 laws approved by the Parliament, 19 (more than 54%) were the conversion of a *decreto-legge*, whilst none of them was a law under the initiative of the Parliament itself (the others were international agreements and so forth)<sup>4</sup>. So an exceptional

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<sup>4</sup> Data available online: [www.osservatoriosullefonti.it](http://www.osservatoriosullefonti.it)



instrument that the Government should use in extraordinary cases has become the most prominent one during recent years, concerning a variety of issues (from pensions reform to funding Expo 2015 in Milan). The same trend can be seen at the local level. Indeed in order to guarantee the citizens' 'safety' in situations not regulated by national law, municipal governments are accorded a special power to approve special administrative orders (*ordinanze amministrative*) to regulate serious problems requiring 'necessity and urgency' of intervention (Cavallo Perin, 1990). What has happened in Italy since 2008 is that municipal governments have started to use these administrative orders as an ordinary instrument of territorial governance (Simone, 2010: 58), abusing this special power. In fact, to give an idea of this phenomenon, it's enough to consider that in the first three months of 2009 (when the Berlusconi's government was still denying the existence of economic crisis in Italy), more than 600 administrative orders were approved<sup>5</sup>.

This use of exception has not been limited just to the imperatives of economic growth, mega-projects and so forth; on the contrary, it has become a main instrument also to regulate bodies, behaviors and groups perceived as risky, dangerous or creating an emergency. In this respect, migration has represented a major domain of intervention, with the idea of the emergency repeatedly used in the last 20 years to establish a "tautology of fear" (Dal Lago, 1999). Among the others we can consider the two *decreti-legge* approved by the (left-wing) government at the end of 2007 after the rape and murder of an Italian woman by a Romanian-Roma man. They introduced the possibility to eject from the country EU citizens unable to provide for their own subsistence or for "reasons of public safety". The main narrative accompanying the episode was that migrant men are the main perpetrators of violence against women. This leads us to consider how exception, risk and danger have become the key-words of sexual politics in Italy in (neoliberal) times of austerity, as we will see in the following sections.

### **The exceptional character of the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity**

I have discussed how exception represents a main feature of neoliberal States, as they tend to create a diversified and fragmented series of exceptions. In the case of Italy this occurs on multiple levels (legislative, institutional, etc.), including sexual politics, which I discuss in this section. Indeed sexual politics has represented a crucial political issue in contemporary Italy, with "the unfolding of passionate public and politicised debates, struggles and contested renegotiations over normative and minoritised sexual identities and practices" (Crowhurst and Bertone, 2012: 413). Following Aiwaha Ong's elaboration of the dialectical interplay between "neoliberalism as an exception" and the "exceptions to neoliberalism", I address a double deployment of the concept of neoliberal exception in relation to sexual politics in Italy. First, I consider how (neoliberal,

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Minister of Interiors.

austere) Italy itself represents an exception within the neoliberal model of sexual politics as developed by Duggan (and discussed in section 2). Afterwards I focus on how exceptions have been recently undertaken in Italy in order to regulate bodies, behaviours and (urban) spaces.

### ***Italy as an exception to the sexual politics of neoliberalism (and austerity)***

As discussed in section 2, the concept of “homonormativity” developed by Duggan (as well as that of “homonationalism” by Puar) depicts the “sexual politics of neoliberalism” as featured by the progressive access of lesbian and gay people to formal, conservative institutions of national(ist) citizenship and a correlated depoliticization of LGBT politics. This transnational trend towards full citizenship rights has continued also in the current phase of austerity, with even right-wing conservative governments promoting gay marriage (see, for instance the UK case discussed by Brown, in this special issue).

In this respect, Italy clearly appears as an exceptional case, usually labelled as “backward” (Colpani and Habed, 2014). While most of European and Western countries have approved different forms of same-sex civil unions, marriages and adoption, in Italy there has been no recognition in terms of rights, to the extent that a law introducing homophobia as an aggravating circumstance in the Penal Code was rejected by the Parliament in 2009 (Hofer and Ragazzi, 2008, Ross, 2008). That episode is highly meaningful because the deputies voting for considering that *disegno di legge* as unconstitutional equated homosexuality with paedophilia, necrophilia and zoophilia. On the other hand, the homo/lesbo/transphobia of public (political) discourse is not a novelty. For instance, the electoral campaign of 2006 was marked by a hyper-violent discourse on homosexuality and transsexuality, as one of the most famous transgender activists of the country was running for the Parliament for *Rifondazione Comunista*. When in 2009 there was a major media scandal involving the Governor of Lazio Region, Piero Marrazzo, who had been accused of embezzlement by the court, the media and political narrative against him was not centred on his crime but on him having had a sexual relationship with a transgender (migrant) sex worker (who was murdered some weeks after the scandal became public).

The lack of recognition of civil unions and marriages followed a similar path: during the 2006 electoral campaign, the center-left coalition presented civil unions as one of its key-points, while after the election the *proposta di legge* has been progressively erased and abandoned, not even being discussed by the Parliament (Hofer and Ragazzi, 2008). This seems to be what is currently happening with the government led by Matteo Renzi who promised to approve a law on civil partnerships before becoming Prime Minister, but this promise has disappeared from the political agenda of the Parliament and the Government.

In her recent analysis of LGBT politics during the years of Berlusconi’s governments, Charlotte Ross has highlighted how his governments did not

represent an anomaly concerning LGBT issues, as “the experiences of the LGBT population under Berlusconi fall into a ‘legislative continuum’ since their rights remained unprotected before, during and after this period” (2009: 204). Indeed she recognizes how the Catholic Church is for sure the most long-standing opponent of LGBT rights and communities, this explaining also the dismissal of the *disegno di legge* on civil unions during the years of the centre-left government (2006-2008). Ross’ position is not isolated; on the contrary, most commentators have recognized the fierce opposition of the Vatican institutions to any form of visibility and rights for LGBT people. The most documented case is that of Pride parades, as local Catholic institutions have tried on several occasions to block them from happening on the grounds that they are ‘inappropriate’ when they coincide with religious festivities (e.g. Trappolin, 2004, 2009, on the Pride parade in Padua). For instance, in the case of the World Pride of 2000, the Vatican strongly opposed the realization of the demonstration as it was a ‘holy’ year for the city, extending its influence to national and local institutions that tried repeatedly to cancel the demonstration, without success (e.g. McNeill, 2003, Mudu, 2002). The Prime Minister Giuliano Amato declared that he would have loved to forbid the demonstration, but it was not possible since the Constitution was still guaranteeing the right to demonstrate (L’Unità, 25 May 2000). According to Mudu (2002), the 2000 World Pride reveals the “repressive tolerance” of Italian institutions (led by the Catholic Church) towards LGBT communities, rights and visibility.

Despite these institutional constraints, the everyday conditions of LGBT people in Italy have improved as revealed by recent research stressing how LGBT people feel more accepted and legitimated, reporting an increased visibility, especially in metropolitan areas (e.g. Bertone *et al*, 2003, Ross, 2008, 2013). This has been made possible thanks to the work of several associations and NGOs that have undertaken anti-discrimination projects all around the country, often funded by public institutions. Nevertheless, we cannot underestimate the conflictual and ongoing nature of this process, so there is not a predetermined path towards full citizenship to follow. Indeed if we look at what has recently happened with the anti-discrimination pamphlets withdrawn by the Ministry of Education, we see how ‘backwards’ steps are easy to make. At the beginning of 2014, the Ministry withdrew a pamphlet to be distributed in Italian schools, produced by the national office against discrimination (UNAR) and aimed at “educating for diversity” and preventing homophobic bullying. One of the most prominent figures from the Vatican institutions, Arnaldo Bagnasco, President of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), condemned the pamphlet stating: “A persecutory strategy against family is taking place, an attack to deconstruct individuals and thus society, putting it at the mercy of who is stronger and makes profit of people who are lost. Evil works better within the turbid”<sup>6</sup> (author’s translation). Following this strong

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<sup>6</sup>Source:<http://comunicazionedigenere.wordpress.com/2014/02/23/il-triste-caso-dei-libretti-unar-per-il-contrasto-al-bullismo-omofobico-nelle-scuole/>

condemnation, the Ministry withdrew the pamphlet, stating that for this kind of topic there should be a sort of 'contradictory': Catholic associations should be given the chance to intervene within schools. Despite encouraging changes, Italy then remains the exception within the homonormative "sexual politics of neoliberalism" (and austerity), with LGBT people denied any form of access to full citizenship and homophobic discourses remaining hegemonic under the "repressive tolerance" of Catholic institutions.

### ***The sexual politics of neoliberalism in Italy as the creation of the exception***

In section 3 I described how exception has been invoked in neoliberal, austere Italy to discipline migration, with the rape and murder of a woman being used to establish new, severe limitations to (Central and Eastern) European migration, as the two *decreti-legge* approved after the murder were also known as "anti-Roma". Thus, a widespread social concern in the Italian context, such as violence against women (for which data are dramatic, see Karadole and Pramstrahler, 2012) has been used to limit migration, creating new exceptions for EU citizens who cannot provide for their own subsistence or represent a danger for "public safety". The narrative of the dangerous and violent migrant rapist was promoted, instead of denouncing how most of violence (including murder) against women is domestic (Peroni, 2012)<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, exception has been invoked and practiced also to regulate sexuality, bodies and practices, one of the most emblematic cases being that of sex work.

Abolishing brothels, the 1958 Merlin Law (n.75/58) has made prostitution legal in the Italian context, although in an abolitionist vein, so any form of favouring, organizing, exploiting or profiting of sex work by a third subject is illegal (Garofalo Geymonat, 2014). Despite several attempts, the law has not been changed during recent years, the most recent being promoted by the Minister of Equal Opportunities, Mara Carfagna, in 2008, trying to import the so-called Swedish abolitionist system. Following Berlusconi's sexual scandals with sex workers, the government could not finalise Carfagna's efforts and the law has remained unchanged (Peano, 2012). However this lack of normative intervention has not remained isolated, with several municipalities intervening to limit and discipline sex work, and, in the process, female and trans people's bodies and behaviours. We have seen in section 3 how municipalities in Italy have the possibility to introduce special *ordinanze amministrative* in case of 'necessity' and 'urgency' and how they have started in the last years to use this exceptional power on a frequent basis. Among the various issues of concern in different cities, street prostitution appears to occupy a very prominent position (Simone, 2010). How can

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<sup>7</sup> However the recent campaign of the (former) Ministry for Equal Opportunities launched in November 2013 addresses the issue of domestic violence through four messages inviting women to denounce violent husbands/partners and leave them.

street prostitution represent a matter of 'necessity' and 'urgency' requiring municipalities to intervene immediately beyond national laws? In order to understand how this intervention has been framed (and its consequences for the regulation of bodies and public spaces) we can consider the case of Rome.

A few months after his election, the former right-wing Mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, promoted an *ordinanza amministrativa* (n. 242/2008) aimed at “contrasting street prostitution and defending urban safety”<sup>8</sup>. The *ordinanza* forbade street prostitution in any public space of the municipality, but “especially on the main streets where there is a higher risk of serious streets accidents” (author’s translation). The reasons enounced within the *ordinanza* to prohibit street prostitution are variegated:

- street prostitution is very widespread within the municipality;
- street prostitutes are often victims of trafficking and smuggling, exploited by criminal organizations;
- street prostitutes often assume indecorous and indecent behaviours, generating episodes of tension among citizens;
- places usually attended by street prostitutes present hygienic situations that are dangerous for public health;
- prostitution creates a disruption for street safety, since drivers assume imprudent behaviours as they are looking for sexual services;
- the indecorous and indecent outfit of prostitutes distracts street users, frequently causing street accidents.

Beyond these controversial reasons used to prohibit legal sexual activities and behaviours, the *ordinanza* makes a step forward in the discipline of bodies and behaviours, prohibiting also “to assume attitudes and to wear dresses that show unequivocally the intention to practice prostitution” (author’s translation). How to interpret such a controversial statement? Recognizing that an 'indecorous' outfit can be difficult to establish, the Union of Municipality Police Workers (SULPM) and the municipality have publicly invited girls to avoid “succinct outfits” especially at bus stops at night (since street prostitutes are presumed to stand at bus stops)<sup>9</sup>. This way, 'decorous' girls would avoid receiving the fine expected for street sex workers.

So we see how through these kinds of norms multiple ethics collide: an activity that is legal across the national territory is forbidden in specific sites through exceptional measures because it is deemed to be risky and dangerous. At

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<sup>8</sup>The text of the *ordinanza* is available online:

[http://www.comune.roma.it/PCR/resources/cms/documents/Ordinanza\\_antiprostituzione.pdf](http://www.comune.roma.it/PCR/resources/cms/documents/Ordinanza_antiprostituzione.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://www.inviatospeciale.com/2008/09/prostituzione-multe-e-minigonne/>

the same time, the exception is deployed not just to reshape and limit a sexual conduct, but to define appropriate bodies, outfits and behaviours, especially for girls/women and trans people, thus disciplining gender roles and norms. Indeed men have been almost excluded by the *ordinanza amministrativa* and dress regulation. An extensive literature has documented how sex work has progressively become a main issue of concern for the regulation of public (urban) space in neoliberal times (of gentrification), as it is perceived as risky and dangerous or associated with gender violence, 'immorality' or other social issues (e.g. Bernstein, 2007, Hubbard, 1998, 2004). With street prostitution being associated more and more with (illegal) migration, the victim/criminal paradigm has become hegemonic within the public representations of female sex workers, this being the case also in Italy (e.g. Crowhurst, 2012, Peano, 2012). Following Agamben's framework of the "state of exception", Peano (2012) has highlighted how the criminalization of sex workers and migrants in Italy responds to the logics of sovereign power in neoliberal times. In her own words: "The criminalisation of certain subjects, namely prostitutes and/as undocumented migrants, relates to a sovereign structure in which power is characterised by its capacity to suspend the law, affording certain subjects a seemingly unrestrained freedom whilst denying any political subjectivity to others, who are thereby reduced to 'bare life'" (*ibid*: 429).

However the case of *ordinanze amministrative* appears to register a step further: the exception linked to (im)morality and décor is invoked not only in the case of migrant(s and) sex workers, but is practiced to regulate bodies and behaviours, creating a divide along the line of 'appropriateness' for women's behaviours and dressings. Indeed the *ordinanza* n. 242/2008 does not represent an isolated case, as in most cities new *ordinanze* have been realized to forbid sex work as a matter of public safety, or further, to prohibit specific outfits for young women in public space because of the danger for streets' safety. In this respect, the most discussed case is that of the former Mayor of Pescara (a small city on the Adriatic sea) who in 2011 prohibited young women from wearing skimpy outfits in the most popular areas of the city (like the promenade and the other main streets of the city centre) from 10pm to 7am (Il Corriere della sera, 28 May 2011). In all these cases the exception for the prohibition of street prostitution is invoked making reference to a narrative based on the ideas of danger, risk and safety, all these biopolitical dispositifs being used also for the regulation of (homo)sexualities in urban spaces, as we will see in the next section.

### **Risk and danger as new mottos of the (softly entrepreneurial) urban governance of (homo)sexualities**

In her book *I Corpi del reato* (2010), Italian sociologist Anna Simone has brilliantly analysed how neoliberalism governance within "risk society" (e.g. Beck, 1992, Luhmann, 1996) develops multiple dispositifs aimed at preventing 'deviance' or restoring 'legality'. In this frame, danger, risk and safety have surged to a new role, as there is a political and media concern around new social emergencies. In

the Italian case, these have become key-words for the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity not only for sex work, but also for the urban governance of (homo)sexualities. This section deals with this process, showing how these dispositifs have favoured the emergence of a new urban governance of (homo)sexualities based on a sort of “soft entrepreneurialism”.

Looking for safe and ‘friendly’ environments represents a main concern for LGBT people, as public space maintains a deeply heteronormative character, often leading to discrimination and violence for non-conforming subjects (e.g. Hubbard, 2008, Kirby and Hay, 1997). For this reason, (urban) LGBT commercial venues and ‘gay ghettos’ have often been described as spaces of liberation in the “queer quest for identity” (Knopp, 2004) as they disrupt heteronormativity (e.g. Blidon, 2007, Leroy, 2009). Nevertheless, LGBT venues can still be perceived by LGBT people as risky and dangerous, especially when they become attractors of many straights attendees, as registered for instance in the well-documented case of the Manchester Gay Village (e.g. Casey, 2004, Skeggs, 1999). Indeed the innovative research of Moran et al. (2003) demonstrated how “the Gay Village, far from being experienced by its most frequent gay users as a safe space, was experienced as a space of danger and a location that was unsafe” (p.191), especially among the people who attend it the most (p. 192). For the Italian case, previous research (Di Feliciano, 2012) has shown how a general trend has emerged in Rome for the Gay Village, as in 2009 the city witnessed a so-called “homophobic emergency”. Indeed a series of episodes of violence and attacks occurred in some of the main LGBT venues of the city, including the Village, making the media proclaim a homophobic emergency, with LGBT people targeted more and more in the public discourse as risky and in danger. The response provided by the municipality, led by the aforementioned Mayor Gianni Alemanno, was based on the idea to “guarantee safety” for LGBT people, as LGBT businesses represent an important source of income for the city. For this reason, control measures at two main LGBT venues of the city (the Gay Village and the ‘Gay Street’) have been implemented (*ibid*).

So the main ideas that accompanied the creation of the exception within the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity in Italy, such as risk, danger and safety, have become key-words to represent the LGBT consuming community. Indeed such dispositifs have not been deployed to recognize new rights and fight discrimination, but to favour and defend commercial activities, thus confirming Bell and Binnie’s idea that neoliberalism opens access to lesbian and gay people firstly as “consumer citizens” (2004). This protection of (pink) commercial and business activities can become particularly relevant in a phase of deep economic crisis, declining economy or “wannabe global” cities (Rushbrook, 2002). In the remainder of this section, I discuss two examples that highlight clearly this process for the Italian case. The first one is that of Milan, a “wannabe global” city hosting an international Mega-Event (Expo2015) but inserted in a national context of austerity politics. The second example is Palermo, a city experiencing strong economic decline and hardly affected by the current crisis.

Milan can certainly be considered the economic capital of the country, a world-city in the domains of fashion and finance, at the forefront of the national urban economy, “with new developments, restructuring of older areas, and increasing and decreasing popularity of different city areas” (Aalbers, 2007: 178). In 2015, the city hosts Expo 2015, a Mega-Event considered of crucial importance to revitalise the image of the country internationally in a phase of hard-hitting economic crisis. Literature has widely acknowledged how Mega-Events occupy a special role within the neoliberal mantra of urban competitiveness, as they generate intense changes in terms of gentrification, displacement, privatization of space, city-use and new forms of control and discipline (e.g. Hiller, 2000, Olds, 1998, Shin, 2009). Given the phase of financial crisis and austerity politics preceding Expo 2015, the event has been highly contested within the country for its costs, but many commentators highlight potential benefits for reshaping the territorial development of the city (and the Lombardia Region), although denouncing potential socio-environmental risks (e.g. Di Vita, 2008, Erba, 2009). In this effort to frame the city as “global” (Gonzales, 2007), a specific trait of sexual politics has recently emerged. Indeed, as brilliantly discussed by Rushbrook (2002), in the transnational competition to attract investments, tourism and (affluent) residents, “wannabe global” cities need to promote an image of diversity and tolerance (as theorized by the neoliberal guru Richard Florida, 2002). So ethnic and queer spaces find their legitimacy as a marketing strategy, a label to promote the open and welcoming attitude of a ‘multicultural’ city. The case of Milan fits perfectly with Rushbrook’s theorization. With the Mega-Event approaching (and lesbian and gay tourists expected to arrive for it) and the city lacking a ‘proper gay area’, the municipality and a group of entrepreneurs have launched the idea to create a “gay street” in a central (but still under-valued) area mostly inhabited by migrant communities (via Sammartini, see Milano Today, 9 April 2014). Nevertheless, given the lack of funding and resources the municipality is facing in the current phase of austerity, the project for the requalification of the area currently has included only very basic interventions, like new lighting and the remaking of sidewalks<sup>10</sup>. Although limited, these interventions aim to stimulate private entrepreneurship along the street in order make it properly ‘gay’ (currently there are a bar, a sauna, a club, a cruising venue, a disco/bar and a sex-shop); the “gay street” has been officially inaugurated the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2015 (one month before the starting of Expo) by some representatives of the municipality.

On the contrary, Palermo is a city with long-standing socio-economic problems that have been worsened by the current debt and financial crisis, especially concerning poverty levels and (un)employment. Moreover, the city registers an extremely high rate of household indebtedness (139% of the national

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<sup>10</sup> Online source:

[https://www.comune.milano.it/portale/wps/portal/CDM?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/ContentLibrary/giornale/giornale/tutte+le+notizie+new/lavori+pubblici/via\\_sammartini\\_luce\\_marciapiedi](https://www.comune.milano.it/portale/wps/portal/CDM?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/ContentLibrary/giornale/giornale/tutte+le+notizie+new/lavori+pubblici/via_sammartini_luce_marciapiedi)



average), the only positive expectations for the city economy coming from tourism (Osservatorio Economico della provincia di Palermo, 2013). It is maybe for these positive expectations from tourism that the municipality was very active in the occasion of the “nationally relevant” Pride march of 2013. Indeed until 2013, a different city in Italy was chosen each year to host a “nationally relevant” Pride parade, while the other cities (Rome included) hosted formally “local” parades. In the case of the 2013 Palermo Pride, the municipality strongly promoted the event, adopting a narrative centred not just around rights but on the economic revenues linked to tourism. Indeed at the conference press to promote the event, the Mayor Leoluca Orlando proclaimed: “This initiative will bring to the city some millions of euros in consumption, activities and economic development. I feel ashamed to do an economic calculation on such a pure and laudable initiative” (source: La Sicilia, 17 March 2013, author’s translation). So the case of Palermo shows how in times of crisis and austerity sexual politics can be assembled to attract new money (and visitors), thus revealing the contradictory nature of Pride parades under neoliberalism: on one hand they express hegemonic economic power (subjection), on the other they favour new spaces of political subjectification through mass-demonstrations, such as the 2013 Palermo Pride attended by around 100,000 people.

The examples of Milan and Palermo show how in the current phase of austerity municipal governments use LGBT communities, spaces and events for economic growth purposes through different channels (tourism, urban requalification). Nevertheless financial constraints make this a “soft entrepreneurialism”, as municipalities lack the (financial) resources required to establish large-scale projects of urban renewal (in the case of Milan) or to brand the city as an international gay destination (in the case of Palermo). Once again we see how one of the main traits of neoliberalism, such as making value of sexual diversity (e.g. Rushbrook, 2002), is strengthened in times of austerity.

### **Conclusions: thinking the neoliberal exception to understand the uneven consequences of austerity**

This paper has tried to give an overall analysis of the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity in Italy through the theoretical perspective of the “exception” as developed by A. Ong (2006), while showing at the same time that exception has been invoked several times under neoliberalism in different domains of Italian politics. Indeed considering the interplay between “neoliberalism as exception” and “exceptions to neoliberalism” gives the possibility to think beyond the idea of ‘backwardness’ usually associated with sexual politics in Italy. The Italian case remains a very peculiar one, an exception to the “sexual politics of neoliberalism” as framed by Duggan in her conceptualization of homonormativity, since there is no recognition of full citizenship rights for LGBT people and homophobia remains hegemonic in public discourse. On the other hand, new exceptions have been invoked and deployed in relation to sexual politics, especially

concerning sex work and women's and trans peoples' bodies and behaviours more in general. In the neoliberal risky society, exception has been deployed through multiple dispositifs, both narrative (through the ideas of risk, danger and safety) and legislative/institutional (through the use of *ordinanze amministrative*, a special power that Mayors should use only in case of urgency and necessity). In the case of Rome, the same rhetorical devices have accompanied the shift towards a urban governance of (homo)sexualities based on more security controls, this protection aimed firstly at protecting business and a consuming community. So in times of crisis and austerity the need to promote the city image for economic purposes can lead municipalities to engage in specific projects targeted toward LGBT people, as registered in the cases of Milan and Palermo. Nevertheless financial constraints make this process a "soft entrepreneurialism", with municipalities realizing only small-scale interventions.

Theorizing the exception as a central feature of neoliberalism and austerity gives the possibility to think about the variegated, place-based character of the different (social, political, economic, cultural, and so forth) processes which comprise neoliberalism, as there are no pre-organized social relations featuring neoliberalism everywhere. On the contrary, neoliberal technologies of governance are dynamic assemblages (Ong, 2007) situated along different axes, socio-historical paths and power relations. Such a reconceptualization of the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity offers important possibilities (yet to be explored) to understand the uneven consequences of the current debt and financial crisis and the related austerity measures. Indeed not only places are affected unevenly by crisis and austerity measures, but these uneven consequences are also registered within communities and by groups within communities. So future research could depart from such a re-conceptualization of neoliberalism and sexual politics to investigate the uneven impact of austerity on LGBT and sexual dissidents' lives across different spaces, territories and legal systems. For instance, we can consider how job losses due to the crisis and austerity measures impact unevenly on LGBT lives depending, among other factors, on whether they own a house (or a mortgage). We could also try to retrace this divide transnationally, thinking for instance of the differential impact that the mortgage crisis has had for lesbian and gay households according to their legislative context. What happens in contexts where these kinships do not find legal recognition? Otherwise we could reflect on the impact of austerity measures in terms of health services: for instance, what is involved for LGBT people with disabilities by the cuts of local medical facilities in many Italian provinces? Or again: what does the progressive privatization of the health system involve for LGBT people (or women), since most of the Italian private hospitals are Catholic?

These questions should make us aware that the (similar) changes occurring within the sexual politics of many Western/Global North countries cannot be expected to occur in any other (Western/Global North or Global South) country that has adopted neoliberal reforms and measures. A more cosmopolitan approach

within geographies of sexualities (and political economy) should then recognize that there is not any specific logics of necessity or causality along the (continuously re-negotiating and under-construction) processes of neoliberalization: indeed new, unexpected exceptions can arise in different contexts and then may be exported elsewhere.

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