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Geometries of Control:
Dynamics of Power, Oppression and Resistance

Issue 2

edited by
Riccardo Caldarera and Simone Tuzza

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Sociorama

Norme, potere, controllo sociale

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QUADERNI DEL LABORATORIO
INTERDISCIPLINARE DI RICERCA SU
CORPI, DIRITTI, CONFLITTI (V)

Geometries of Control:
Dynamics of Power, Oppression and Resistance

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Sociorama. Norme, potere, controllo sociale

Sociorama esplora le interconnessioni tra cambiamenti sociali, politici e giuridici, soffermandosi sui processi di istituzionalizzazione delle norme e delle loro specificità rispetto ad altre modalità di regolazione. La collana si rivolge a chi desidera esplorare, in un'ottica teorica ed empirica, i modi attraverso cui le società e le loro istituzioni affrontano il controllo sociale, la devianza, la criminalità e le disuguaglianze di potere, esaminando i diversi fenomeni anche in chiave di genere e intersezionale. I temi riguardano in particolare le trasformazioni delle democrazie e i conflitti che interessano le istituzioni politiche e giuridiche dalla prospettiva della sociologia del diritto e della devianza, analizzando la selettività delle norme, i processi decisionali e l'impatto del giuridico sulle comunità. L'obiettivo è offrire una lettura critica delle dinamiche socio-politico-giuridiche, supportando la ricerca accademica. All'interno della collana si situano le sezioni: a) «Ricerche», b) «Classici» e c) «Quaderni del Laboratorio Interdisciplinare di ricerca su Corpi, Diritti, Conflitti» / «Quaderni del Laboratorio su Rappresentazioni sociali della violenza sulle donne». Questa sezione si prefigge di valorizzare le attività seminariali, di ricerca sociologica applicata attivati all'interno del Dipartimento «Culture e Società» dell'Università degli Studi di Palermo.

La collana è sottoposta a un processo di *double-blind peer review*.

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What does that have to do with anything?

Abortion and competitive framing processes

*Giulia Agolino*¹

Introduction

This contribution approaches abortion as an issue of power and oppression from a communicative perspective. In particular, it addresses the competitive framing processes in the context of the debate on the topic, by focusing on abortion frames and framing strategies employed in movement-counter movement dynamics (McCaffrey and Keys, 2000). Emphasis is placed on frames and framing because they are powerful strategic tools for imposing certain points of view and reproducing abortion stigma, as well as weapons of resistance.

After outlining the theoretical framework by drawing on the literature on framing, that on the representation of abortion and that on social movement framing processes, the paper analyzes three posters by the Italian anti-choice association Pro Vita & Famiglia. They have been chosen because they all address abortion by referring to other issues, such as environment, migration, disability and gender violence.

We intend to explore the strategic meaning of this choice and its implications, trying to answer the following interwoven questions: how is the abortion issue framed? What framing strategies are employed by Pro Vita & Famiglia? Who are the posters targeted to?

In order to give an answer, a qualitative content analysis is carried out, both verbal and visual, by using some interpretative models drawn from the literature mentioned above. In addition, some semiotic models are

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employed to better understand the communication strategy behind the three posters.

As reflected in the choice to label Pro Vita & Famiglia as an *anti-choice* organisation rather than a *pro-life* organisation, this study does not conceal the pro-choice perspective from which it was carried out, in the belief that researchers cannot be truly neutral and that the *language of choice* (Statham and Ringrow, 2022) is necessary to critically address abortion as an issue of power and inequalities.

Abortion, stigma and power

Abortion is one of the most divisive and debated moral issues and it has been defined as the «clash of absolutes» (Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022). Its contentious nature can be explained by considering that abortion relates to deeply intimate dimensions and experiences of human beings involving at the same time questions of birth, death and sex (Atikcan and Hand, 2024). This makes abortion a site where the operation of social forces, including power, can be observed very clearly (Kimport and Weitz, 2024). Indeed, abortion is a topic relevant to many issues such as gender, sexuality, race, migration, class, inequality, health, religion and so on, and it tells a great deal about the nature and state of health of democracy as a whole (Ferree *et al.*, 2002, p. 4).

Power disparities and inequalities underlie abortion stigma, which is «perpetuated by systems of unequal access to power and resources, narrow and rigid gender roles and systematic attempts to control female sexuality» (Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell, 2009, p. 4)², which have both global and local dimensions (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019). Abortion stigma can be considered a «compound stigma» because «it builds on other forms of discrimination and structural injustices» (ivi, p. 10). In this regard, Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) argue:

2. As pointed out by Link and Phelan (2001), «stigmatisation is entirely contingent on access to social, economic and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labelled persons into distinct categories and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion and discrimination» (p. 367).

Marginalised and disadvantaged women are in the main subjected to societal stigmatisation, which is exacerbated when they seek abortion care. Stigmatisation of abortion builds on these forms of inequality, while at the same time using them to maintain abortion stigma. This strategy has important implications for the (lack of) access to reproductive health care that disproportionally affects the most marginalised, including the poor, ethnic, racial minorities and migrants (p. 8).

According to Kumar, Hessini and Mitchell (2009), abortion is stigmatized because it contravenes female ideals of sexuality and motherhood: female sexuality solely for procreation, inevitability of motherhood and instinctual nurturance of the vulnerable. In addition to these, Norris, Bessett, Steinberg, Kavanaugh, De Zordo and Becker (2011) identified other four reasons behind abortion stigma: attributing personhood to the fetus, legal restrictions, the idea that abortion is dirty or unhealthy, and the use of stigma as a tool for anti-abortion efforts³.

Abortion stigma is created and manifests across all levels of human interactions: between individuals, in community, in institutions, in law and government structure and in framing discourses (Norris *et al.*, 2011; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell, 2009). In this paper we focus on frames and framing strategies employed by social movements dealing with abortion, in particular in movement-counter movement dynamics.

Frames

As pointed out by Entnam (1993), «to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation» (p. 52). An issue frame, more or less implicitly or explicitly, suggests what is essential, the causes, consequences and values in play (Ryan and Gamson, 2015). Subsequently, frame analysis is aimed at examining the selection

3. As pointed out by Kumar, Hessini and Mitchell (2009), abortion stigma is not a universal social fact, but «a social phenomenon that is constructed and reproduced locally through various pathways» (p. 4). Its expression and meaning are context specific and «it is entirely possible that there are situations in which abortion stigma does not exist, is minimal or is less stigmatised than another condition» (Ivi, p. 3).

and salience of certain aspects of an issue by exploring images, texts, the language used, the metaphors employed etc. in an attempt to convey a message (Maguire and Murphy, 2023, p. 5). The techniques used for this purpose include qualitative content analysis, semiotics and narrative analysis (Maguire and Murphy, 2023).

Frames are powerful strategic tools used by political actors to make people think about an issue in a particular way (Moyer, 2021). However, not all frames are equally effective in influencing public opinion. As pointed out by Atikcan and Hand (2024), when a frame comes from credible sources and appeals to cultural values, it is more effective. Besides, we need to take into account that we have multiple frames about an issue in our heads and «a specific frame may be much more easily triggered and habitually used, but others are also part of our cultural heritage and can be triggered and used as well, given the appropriate cues» (Ryan and Gamson, 2015, p. 138).

Focusing on frames and framing strategies is crucial to understand the power dynamics underlying abortion debate and regulation (Calkin, Freeman, and Moore, 2022). By examining abortion frames, we can explore the roots of stigmatisation and discrimination. However, frames are not just tools for imposing certain points of view on reality and society, but also weapons for resisting.

Abortion frames

The extant literature on the representation of abortion shows that abortion is and can be framed in many ways as «the inner logics of abortion narratives and discourses are temporally, culturally, and politically situated» (Maguire and Murphy, 2023, p. 2). Subsequently, abortion frames are an expression of the specific cases under study. However, it is possible to observe the presence of some recurring frames or at least the presence of frames that are semantically close to each other. Therefore we can identify some fundamental nodes in the abortion debate.

In general, it is possible to distinguish between anti-choice and pro-choice frames or between stigmatising and non-stigmatising frames. However, it should be noted that in some cases, the same frame can be employed to advocate both for and against abortion. The communicative

outcome is contingent upon the manner and the context in which the frame is implemented. This is the case, for example, with the women's rights frame, with a focus on health and safety in the anti-choice perspective while bodily autonomy and self-determination in the pro-choice perspective (Mucciaroni, Ferraiolo, and Rubado, 2019; Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022).

As already pointed out, one of the recurring frames is the fetal personhood, according to which the fetus is an autonomous agent with inherent rights (Baird and Millar, 2018; Norris *et al.*, 2011; Rao *et al.*, 2025; Luker, 1984; Maguire and Murphy, 2023). Attributing personhood to the fetus leads to depicting abortion as a murder and women who get an abortion and providers as murderers.

Fetal images are used to erase pregnant women from view «decontextualizing the fetus and overstating its independence from the woman who carries it and the social circumstances of her life» (Norris *et al.*, 2011, p. 51). Thus the humanization of the fetus implies a simultaneous dehumanization of the gestating person (Silva *et al.*, 2025, p. 3), who is perceived merely as an incubator for new life (Maguire and Murphy, 2023). In this perspective, the right to life of a fetus is regarded as being of equal, if not greater, importance than the well-being of the pregnant person (Evans *et al.*, 2023, p. 11). Besides, the frame of fetal personhood is connected with the centrality of the topic of caring in the abortion debate. The question is who to care for between the woman and the fetus (Atikcan and Hand, 2024).

Sometimes, abortion is framed as a potential means of discrimination against sections of the population, e.g. people with Down Syndrome (Maguire and Murphy, 2023; Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Celis and Coene, 2016). Furthermore, it is possible to encounter populist narratives in which abortion is framed as a threat to the nation (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019).

Another recurring frame is the one that portrays abortion as something that hurts women (Baird and Millar, 2018; Norris *et al.*, 2011). The harmful nature of abortion is associated with both physical and psychological dimensions (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Moyer, 2021; Bruce, Hutchens and Cowan, 2024). Some anti-abortionists frame abortion as unsafe and dangerous to women's health, even referring to unsubstantiated links between abortion, breast cancer and reduced fertility (Norris

et al., 2011; Moyer, 2021). There is also talk of the psychological effects of abortion, the so-called post-abortion syndrome (Norris *et al.*, 2011).

This frame is functional to a women-centered anti-abortion strategy, by positioning women as victims and objects of pity who need to be protected and abortion providers as cruel and callous manipulators harming both fetus and women, who are like «damaged goods» (Norris *et al.*, 2011, p. 52). This frame is imbued with gendered stereotypes of vulnerable women and, as a consequence, it leads to a paternalistic approach (Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022).

If within this frame it's the experience of having an abortion to flaw women, in other contexts abortion reveals flaws in women's character (Norris *et al.*, 2011). Women who get an abortion are depicted as deviant, selfish, immoral, irresponsible, promiscuous, unfeminine, depressed (Baird and Millar, 2018; Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Bruce, Hutchens, and Cowan, 2024). In this perspective, if women are not passive and vulnerable victims to protect, but autonomous and agentic beings, they are stigmatized (Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022).

As the women's rights frame, the women's health/safety frame is employed to support positions both for and against abortion. The supporters of pro-choice positions stress the risks associated with illegal abortion practices (Maguire and Murphy, 2023) and the negative effects of unintended pregnancy. In this perspective, women requesting an abortion exercise their right to healthcare (Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022).

Furthermore, we need to take into account that the health/safety frame can be used by the supporters of both anti-choice and pro-choice positions to take the focus off morality and to have a broad, intersectional appeal (Maguire and Murphy, 2023; Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022). This can be explained by referring to the linkage between the women's health frame and the science frame. Framing an issue in scientific terms is a way to demonstrate credibility, «to elevate and insulate claims, by asserting that they are based on neutral and objective evidence, are unaffected by political forces (Ahmed 2015), or come from experts» (Moyer, 2021, p. 155).

We can consider other frames including the economic frame, whereby abortion is represented as an economically motivated decision (Bruce *et al.*, 2024), and the religious frame, whereby abortion is regarded as a sin (Rao *et al.*, 2025).

Those mentioned here are just some of the ways in which abortion is and can be framed. To deepen our understanding of how abortion is framed, we now intend to approach the abortion debate by focusing on movement-counter movement dynamics and how these translate into specific framing strategies. Shifting the focus to framing, we can address the dynamic and interactional nature of frames (Van Hulst and Yanow, 2014) and acknowledge that «frames develop through highly situated interactional processes of communication» (ivi, p. 95).

Social movements and framing strategies

Framing processes are of central importance for understanding the character and course of social movements (Benford and Snow, 2000). Movement actors can be regarded as «signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning» (ivi, p. 613) in order «to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists» (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 198). In order to achieve these objectives, social movements can use framing strategies appealing to people through reason, logic, emotion or all three (Maguire and Murphy, 2023).

With respect to strategic processes associated with social movement framing, Benford and Snow (2000) speak of *frame alignment processes* in order to identify the «strategic efforts by social movement organizations to link their interests and interpretive frames with those of prospective constituents and actual or prospective resource providers» (p. 624).

Four basic alignment processes have been identified: the first is *frame bridging*, which «refers to the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem» (*ibidem*); the second is *frame amplification*, which «involves the idealization, embellishment, clarification, or invigoration of existing values or beliefs» (*ibidem*); the third is *frame extension* which «entails depicting [a social movement organization's] interests and frame(s) as extending beyond its primary interests to include issues and concerns that are presumed to be of importance to potential adherents» (ivi, p. 625); the last is *frame transformation* which «refers to changing old understandings and meanings and/or generating new ones» (*ibidem*).

In order to explore these dynamics, we need to address an aspect of central importance: *cultural resonance* (Rohlinger, 2002; Maguire and Murphy, 2023; Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Benford and Snow, 2000). As pointed out by Cullen and Korolczuk (2019), «social movements do not construct frames in a vacuum, but rather in a cultural context that renders some ideas more legitimate, recognisable and sensible than others» (p. 9). So, in order to achieve their objectives, they tend to use frames which resonate with the targets they address to, by drawing on society's values and existing cultural narratives (Maguire and Murphy, 2023; Ferree, 2003).

For instance, Ferree (2003) conducted a comparative-historical analysis of abortion activism in the United States and Germany, showing the prevalence of liberal individualist frames in the former and protectionist frames in the latter. The feminist movements adopted these different frames depending on the political, ideological and cultural context in order to gain resonance and be more effective (thus securing allies, maintaining public support and demobilising countermovements).

According to Benford and Snow (2000), resonance is relevant to the effectiveness or mobilizing potency of proffered framings and variations in degree of frame resonance can be explained by referring to two sets of interacting factors: credibility of the proffered frame and its relative salience to targets of mobilization. The first is determined by three factors: frame consistency, empirical credibility and credibility of the frame articulators. The latter has three dimensions: centrality, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity.

The concept of cultural resonance hides power dynamics. As pointed out by Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) in relation to abortion, «cultural and social resonance may require a moderating and middle ground framing that captures public sentiment, speaks to deeper cultural constructions and ideologies, but may also marginalise the experiences of minority and/or marginalised women» (p. 9). Such framing strategies, which seek resonance, have political costs because they exclude the interests and needs which are marginalized by the hegemonic discourse in a particular context (Ferree, 2003).

For instance, Ferree's study mentioned above (2003) shows that American abortion-rights rhetoric marginalized «the women who are, and feel themselves to be, victimized by oppressive social conditions – including

not only poverty and racism but also parents, husbands, or boyfriends who pressure them into abortions they personally do not want» (p. 340), while the «middle ground» framing strategy (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019) adopted in West Germany led to rejecting the personal desire to say no to becoming a mother.

These findings are consistent with those of the research conducted by Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) on the mobilisation against the abortion ban in Poland in 2016 and *Repeal the 8th!* campaign in Ireland between 2016 and 2018. They argue that the generalising and empathetic frames employed by pro-choice movements in these contexts to seek resonance have exclusionary implications and raise doubts about their effectiveness in countering abortion stigma.

According to Ferree (2003), while alternative framing strategies may be ineffective in the short term, they may be «the only route to cultural transformations that delegitimize existing power relations» (p. 340). However, even more radical pro-choice positions, which don't seek resonance, run the risk of reproducing an exclusionary logic.

Baird and Millar (2018) stress the growing trend within abortion activism to represent abortion as a positive experience which is beneficial to women and is not to be justified. While the more moderate apologetic narrative requires women who have abortions to justify their actions to others and to express grief and sadness for their decisions, «the unapologetic narrative foregrounds the figure of the “unwillingly pregnant woman”, for whom abortion provides a release from an involuntary and unwelcome condition, thus producing an overwhelming positive experience» (ivi, p. 1120). According to Baird and Millar, these positive and unapologetic narratives contribute to counter abortion stigma and to spread the idea that we can't distinguish between good and bad reasons for abortion (Norris *et al.*, 2011), but they may have exclusionary implications. They may marginalize the women for whom abortion represents a problematic experience.

Besides, overcoming sharp dichotomies, we should take into account and acknowledge that abortion may also be experienced as both positive and negative at the same time.

As pointed out by Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) «it is essential to open social and cultural space for many different experiences of abortion to exist as valid» (p. 16).

Movement-countermovement dynamics and competitive framing processes

The construction of meaning by social movements is a process characterized by adaptation and contentiousness (Moyer, 2021), which is influenced by structures of media, social events, bystanders and oppositional groups (Rohlinger, 2002). We focus on movement-countermovement dynamics, which reveal how «the mobilization of consensus does not occur in a vacuum» (McCaffrey and Keys, 2000, p. 46). Social movements often act in response to the narratives and positions adopted by their opponents (Moyer, 2021), that thus influence the framing strategies employed (Rohlinger, 2002). Therefore counterframing strategies are crucial to understand social movement framing activity.

Counterframing can be defined as the attempt «to rebut, undermine, or neutralize a person's or group's myths, versions of reality, or interpretive framework» (Benford, 1987, p. 75). The movement reacts to the counterframes of opponents trying to prevent, contain or reverse potential damages to its previous claims or attributes (Benford and Snow, 2000). These dynamics involving movements and their detractors have been referred to as *framing contests* (Ryan, 1991).

McCaffrey and Keys (2000) argue that frame alignment is a key element in understanding movement-countermovement dynamics because central to these is the competition for symbolic dominance, which is connected to larger mobilization processes. In order to explore how the presence and the activity of a countermovement influence the frame alignment processes adopted by a social movement organization, they conducted a study focused on the counterframing strategies employed by the New York National Organization for Women (NYSNOW) in response to the conservative countermovement around the abortion issue.

They have identified three counterframing strategies a social movement organization can employ to resist or counterattack the opponent: *polarization-vilification*, *frame saving* and *frame debunking*.

Polarization is a competitive framing strategy used to establish «a definitional dichotomy of “us versus them” or, alternatively, an exaggerated, black-and-white vision of events that justifies investment of resources» (McCaffrey and Keys, 2000, p. 44). It is closely related to *vilification*, which is a strategy consisting in framing the adversary «as corrupt, hyp-

ocritical, or a reprobate», while enabling the movement «to present itself as a moral agent fighting against evil» (*ibidem*).

Frame debunking is a competitive framing strategy aimed at undermining the resonance of rival claims and discrediting competing ideologies for the purpose of advancing the ideology of the movement. For instance, it can be undertaken by holding the claims of opponent groups for scrutiny and deconstruction and showing their inconsistency and hypocrisy. A second way of debunking claims is to use a member sharing an identification with an oppositional group in order to denounce its agenda and strategy and reveal their true character (ivi, p. 53).

Frame saving refers to the efforts of a social movement organization to preserve and restore credibility to a frame which has been challenged, for instance, through the careful selection of terminology.

The analysis of the three posters will show how power dynamics can be embedded in frames and framing strategies.

Research design

This paper intends to analyze three posters by the Italian anti-choice association Pro Vita & Famiglia, an organisation founded in 2019 which is committed to «building a society founded on the values of life and family, against the “culture of death”» and acting «for children, the natural family and the educational freedom of parents» (Pro Vita & Famiglia, n.d.).

The three posters have been chosen because they all address the abortion issue by referring to other issues, such as migration, disability, environment and gender violence. We intend to explore the strategic meaning of this choice and its implications, trying to answer the following interwoven questions: how is the abortion issue framed? What framing strategies are employed by Pro Vita & Famiglia? Who are the posters targeted to?

In order to give an answer, a qualitative content analysis is carried out, both verbal and visual, by employing interpretative models drawn from the literature mentioned above and from semiotics.

In particular, we intend to examine how the abortion issue is framed in the posters trying to observe whether one or more of the recurring abortion frames emerging from the literature are employed.

With regard to the framing strategies adopted in the posters, we intend to recognise whether Pro Vita & Famiglia employs one or more of the four frame alignment strategies identified by Benford and Snow (2000) and the three counterframing strategies outlined by McCaffrey and Keys (2000).

In order to enrich the interpretation, in relation to both the first and second questions, we will also use the *canonical narrative schema*, a model elaborated by the semiologist Algirdas Julien Greimas that allows for the analysis of the basic structure of narratives⁴. It includes different *actants* that correspond to different narrative functions⁵. This semiotic model is argued to be useful to better understand the communication strategy behind the three posters.

In relation to the third question, applying a semiotic perspective in this case as well, we intend to identify the *enunciatee* that emerges from the posters, i.e. the textual simulacrum of the addressee.

Furthermore, in order to contextualize and better analyze the three posters, we take into account the press releases that accompanied their distribution, as well as some posts on the social media pages of the association.

«Not one (woman) less... but for real!»: abortion and gender violence

In 2024, on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March, Pro Vita & Famiglia decided to send five trucks bearing the poster in figure 1 around the streets of Rome (mobile billboards). Against a pink background, the poster depicts a pregnant woman with her eyes turned on her belly, which is adorned with a pink bow. Next to the woman stand

4. It is applicable not only to textual products that tell stories (e.g. novels, films), but also to other discursive genres, such as advertising. More details can be found in Marrone, 2007.

5. Actants are abstract entities identifiable at a deep level of the narrative.

the headline «Not one (woman) less...but for real!»⁶ and the sub-headline «On the side of all women». Bottom right is the logo of the association.

Pro Vita & Famiglia spokesperson Maria Rachele Ruii explained that the aim of this poster is to

give voice to three women's rights ignored by official propaganda: the right to become mothers without giving up work and a decent salary, or to prefer motherhood to a career without feeling singled out; the right not to have an abortion due to socio-economic difficulties; the right to be born and not to be aborted, all the more so if only because they are women, as is still the case in many parts of the world in the deafening silence of the left (Pro Vita & Famiglia, March 7, 2024).



Figure 1. Source: Pro Vita & Famiglia, March 7, 2024

These words seem to suggest a women-centered anti-abortion strategy⁷. However, observing the poster, only the third right indicated seems

6. All translations from Italian are my own unless indicated otherwise.

7. In particular, the second right mentioned implies the economic frame whereby abortion is represented as an economically motivated decision (Bruce *et al.*, 2024).

to have been taken into account: that of the fetus «to be born and not to be aborted».

The combination of visual and verbal components results in the use of the fetal personhood frame, which emerges, on the one hand, from the depiction of the pink bow on the belly and, on the other hand, from the inclusion of the fetus in the women's category («On the side of all women») and the representation of abortion as a form of gender-based violence.

Indeed, «Not one (woman) less» is a clear reference to the feminist movement *Ni una menos* that started in Argentina in 2015 to fight against gender-based violence and then spread internationally, including in Italy (*Non una di meno*). Feminists, in general, represent an opponent for Pro Vita & Famiglia, as demonstrated by the press release which accompanied the launch of the poster: «International Women's Day is not owned by the Democratic Party and feminists» (Pro Vita & Famiglia, March 7, 2024)⁸.

Although the spokeswoman of the organisation openly contested the juxtaposition of the poster to femicides by Marta Bofanoni, a regional councillor in Lazio belonging to the Democratic Party, in 2023 Pro Vita & Famiglia used the same claim in a post published on its social media pages on the occasion of the International Day against Violence towards Women⁹. Besides, in 2021 on the same occasion the association posted an image of a fetus on its social media pages while affirming that abortion is the leading cause of femicide¹⁰.

The words «...but for real!» suggests that Pro Vita & Famiglia is employing the frame debunking strategy in order to shed light on the alleged inconsistency of the positions of feminist movements on gender-based violence and abortion. This competitive framing strategy meets the dual

8. Pro Vita & Famiglia accused Non una di meno of devastating the headquarters of the association during the demonstration against gender violence in Rome on 25 November 2023. Non una di meno described the action as a way to sanction Pro Vita & Famiglia as an expression of the anti-choice patriarchy; Non una di meno (2023, November 26), *La marea al Circo Massimo era straripante e incontenibile*, Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/nonunadimeno.mantova/p/C0J5oqDlfsV/>

9. Pro Vita & Famiglia (2023, November 25), *Nella giornata contro la #violenzasulledonno, di cui ultima vittima è #GiuliaCecchetti, è urgente indagare le cause della violenza dilagante in profondità*, Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C0EO__xRLgk/

10. Pro Vita & Famiglia (2021, November 21), *L'ABORTO È LA PRIMA E PIÙ GRANDE #VIOLENZA CONTRO LE DONNE*, Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWskXr6t-Ka/>

objective of galvanising supporters and undermining the credibility of the opponent.

In semiotics terms, this strategy can be regarded as an attempt at delegitimizing the opponent as a *Sender*¹¹ in order to challenge the values they promote. By presenting its opponents as an *Anti-sender*, Pro Vita & Famiglia tries to affirm its moral superiority.

However, it is not only a question of credibility. The *enunciator* (textual simulacrum of the addresser) who emerges from the poster is not only trying to be credible, but also emotionally engaging, by both the verbal and visual components of the poster.

Who is this poster targeted to? The press release that accompanied the launch of the poster does not specify this aspect, but the choice of mobile billboards suggests the will to reach a broad and diverse audience, also taking into account the media attention that such an edgy poster can attract. However, the reference to Non una di meno implies an *enunciatee* (textual simulacrum of the addressee) who is able to grasp the sense of the provocation, whatever the position on abortion. This is necessary for the frame debunking strategy to be effective.

«Life is always worth»: abortion and vulnerable social categories

In 2023, on the occasion of the 45th National Day of Life (5 February) called by the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI), Pro Vita & Famiglia had the poster in Figure 2 put up in many Italian cities. Against a white/grey background, it depicts various figures, and an interpretation of these is provided in the press release that accompanied the distribution of the poster: «what do a baby in the womb, a disabled young person, a pregnant woman, a migrant, an elderly person, a sick person and any other person in any condition of life have in common?» (Pro Vita & Famiglia, January 31, 2023). Below the seven figures stands the headline «Life is always worth», with the word «always» emphasised through the use of the colour magenta. Bottom right is the logo of the association.

11. The Sender is the actant that determines the values which are at stake in the narrative and the Subject (the “hero”) is charged with achieving in its action programmes (Marrone, 2007).



Figure 2. Source: Pro Vita & Famiglia, January 31, 2023

According to Pro Vita & Famiglia, what the figures have in common is «the absolute value of their life, always worth living» (*Ibidem*). In semiotic terms, we can argue that Pro Vita & Famiglia proposes itself as a *Sender* and all the seven figures in the poster can be interpreted as *Object(s) of value*, in which the same value, that of life, is inscribed¹².

The fetal personhood frame is employed by juxtaposing the fetus with various categories of people. However, through this poster, the organisation is affirming not only that a fetus is a human being with the same value as all other lives, but also that it constitutes a vulnerable social category to be protected from discrimination, alongside children, migrants, pregnant women, people with disabilities and elderly people. In this perspective, as confirmed by the press release, abortion - like euthanasia - is framed not only as a means of death, but also of discrimination. This is emphasised through the choice to portray a boy with Down Syndrome.

Furthermore, the choice to represent vulnerable social categories capable of arousing compassion also reveals the intention to leverage the pathemic dimension in order to be communicatively more effective.

12. The Object of value is the actant in whom the value at stake in the narrative is inscribed.

All the figures represented can be variously traced back to the topic of abortion or euthanasia, which are central issues for Pro Vita & Famiglia. The only exception is the figure of the migrant. The choice to include it suggests the use of a framing strategy interpretable in terms of frame extension, which, as already explained, «entails depicting [a social movement organization's] interests and frame(s) as extending beyond its primary interests to include issues and concerns that are presumed to be of importance to potential adherents» (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 625).

Who is this poster targeted to? Pro Vita & Famiglia doesn't specify this aspect in the press release that accompanied the launch of the poster, somehow thus indirectly suggesting the will to address a broad audience. Confirming this, unlike in the previous poster, there are no particular references implying an enunciatee capable of catching them.

However, the employment of the frame extension strategy could suggest an intent to address in particular those people who are sensitive to the problems migrant people experience. This involves specific strategic implications. Since in Italy it is undoubtedly the left-oriented parties that have a more favourable attitude towards migrants, it could be argued that, by drawing a parallel between migrants and the other social categories represented, Pro Vita & Famiglia might somehow have wanted to suggest the inconsistency of the pro-choice positions expressed by the left (which is an opponent of the organisation). This would imply the combined use of the frame debunking strategy and the frame extension strategy.

Saving human cubs: abortion and the preservation of the planet

In May 2019, Pro Vita & Famiglia had a 250-square-metre poster (Figure 3) put up on a building in Rome. The poster, dominated by shades of red, depicts a fetus presented as «Michelino», specifying that it is 11 weeks from conception. Above the fetus stand the headline «Dear Greta, if you want to save the planet...let's save human cubs», with the footprint of a child's feet, and the logo of the association. Below the fetus, the hashtag «#Ichooselife».



Figure 3. Source: Pro Vita & Famiglia, May 14, 2019

Pro Vita & Famiglia employs the fetal personhood frame by attributing a name to the fetus («Michelino»). Besides, the idea that fetuses are human beings is emphasized by referring to them as «human cubs». These lexical choices reveal the intention to leverage the pathemic dimension.

The hashtag seems to serve as a tool for affirming Pro Vita & Famiglia's moral superiority by highlighting its difference from opponents who choose death rather than life. It can be interpreted as an application of the competitive framing strategy of polarization-vilification, by means of which the adversary is presented as an Anti-sender.

The headline calls into question the ecological issue by addressing Greta Thunberg, the famous young Swedish activist fighting against climate change. This issue is undoubtedly not central to Pro Vita & Famiglia's agenda, yet the organisation addresses it in order to highlight the

alleged contradiction between ecological and pro-choice positions, condemning abortion and dictating an order of priorities. Therefore, Pro Vita & Famiglia seems to employ the frame debunking strategy.

Greta Thunberg and the ecological movements in general are not direct opponents of the association. Why then this strategic choice? One possible explanation is that with this choice Pro Vita & Famiglia tried to ride a very topical issue that could mobilise many people and to exploit the media attention on Greta Thunberg, which was particularly significant at the time of the display of the poster since her presence in Rome a few weeks earlier had brought thousands of people to the streets. Similarly to the second poster, we can also speculate that Pro Vita & Famiglia conceives of ecological movements as opponents due to their proximity to the left-wing political world and therefore it tried to delegitimise them.

In semiotic terms, we could affirm that on the one hand there is the attempt to delegitimise a sender whose proposed values are contested, on the other hand there is the proposal of different values that underpin the narrative programme «saving human cubs».

Who is the poster targeted to? Given its size and location (Via Tiburtina, a very busy street), the poster appears to be intended for a broad and diverse audience, also bearing in mind the media echo that such a provocative poster can receive. However, the reference to «Greta» in the headline, without specifying the surname, implies an enunciatee who can understand that it is the Swedish activist.

Conclusions: how to resist?

The analysis of the three posters shows how frames and framing strategies are crucial to explore the dynamics of power, oppression and resistance that shape the debate on abortion.

With regard to abortion frames, what is striking in the three posters examined is not so much the recurring use of the fetal personhood frame as the representation of the pregnant woman to which it is coupled. In the first and second posters - as also reflected in the press releases that accompanied their distribution - the pregnant woman is depicted as a passive subject who is to be protected. In this regard, it is noteworthy that both posters portray a pregnant woman who is keeping her eyes

turned to her belly, thus denying herself to the gaze of the enunciatee. This suggests a kind of total absorption of the woman in the experience of pregnancy. In the third poster, instead, no female figure is represented, somehow denying the pregnant woman any role. She is invisibilised and excluded from the issue, thus being reduced to a mere incubator of new life (Maguire and Murphy, 2023).

Pro Vita & Famiglia proposes itself as a Sender and seeks to affirm a value system in which the right of women to be acknowledged and protected is that of becoming mothers.

This anti-choice representation of abortion is supported by the adoption of specific frame alignment and counterframing strategies. Indeed, we recognised the use of the frame debunking and frame extension strategies in the choice of addressing the issue of abortion by juxtaposing it with other issues (gender-based violence, migration, disability, preservation of the planet). These parallelisms serve as a tool to challenge pro-choice stances and to delegitimise their supporters by emphasizing their alleged contradictory nature, as well as to seek resonance by leveraging topical issues that attract significant attention and interest.

This strategic approach involves specific implications: it can be interpreted as a form of instrumentalization of the issues and vulnerable social categories brought into play. Pro Vita & Famiglia appropriates their voice in order to assert its moral superiority over its opponents and promote anti-choice positions.

This raises some questions: how to resist and react to such communication strategies? What counterframing strategies to employ? One option could be to adopt a frame debunking strategy by unveiling and denouncing the instrumentalization by Pro Vita & Famiglia in order to delegitimise the association as a Sender. Another possibility could be to reverse the perspective and promote pro-choice positions by dealing with the same issues and vulnerable social categories called into question by the three posters (for instance, by framing the denial of women's right to choose as a form of gender-based violence). However, this could somehow entail the risk of incurring the same instrumentalization that is the subject of contestation. In order to mitigate this risk, the communication strategy should be a product of the subjectivities that have been instrumentalized (women victims of gender-based violence, migrant people,

people with disabilities), thus redressing the power imbalances that permeate framing processes and our societies.

In general, since abortion and abortion stigma are a matter of power, it is on the analysis and unhinging of power inequalities that communication strategies of resistance should be grounded. This implies not to consider framing processes as the mere search for cultural resonance. While alternative framing strategies may be ineffective in the short term, they may be «the only route to cultural transformations that delegitimize existing power relations» (Ferree, 2003, p. 340).

However, as pointed out by Baird and Millar (2018), even more radical pro-choice positions, which don't seek resonance, run the risk of reproducing an exclusionary logic. Therefore, we need to acknowledge the complexity of the abortion issue and «to open social and cultural space for many different experiences of abortion to exist as valid» (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019, p. 16), so that no voice is marginalised.

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