



Open letter from the Network of Gender Studies, Intersex, Feminism, Transfeminism, and Sexuality - GIFTS, to the Minister of University and Research, Anna Maria Bernini

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Dear Minister,

With this letter, as GIFTS network we would like to draw your attention to **the danger currently facing research and teaching freedom in Italy.**

Just a few weeks ago, we witnessed with concern the attack by Pro Vita and RadFem organizations against a research group at the University of Roma Tre engaged in studying gender creative childhood. This aggression was immediately picked up and amplified at the parliamentary level by the Vice President of the Chamber of Deputies, Fabio Rampelli, who defined a workshop organized at University of Roma Tre on gender creative childhood an “ideological madness”, demanding your immediate intervention.

Today, we have to report another serious **case of interference by a governing party in the freedom of research and teaching.** The case that compels us to further raise our guard has targeted not only the freedom but also the legitimacy of a political philosophy professor at the University of Sassari: Federico Zappino.

Despite being a fixed-term researcher, Zappino has significantly contributed to the dissemination of queer thought in Italy. He has numerous scientific publications, including articles in international scientific journals, as well as widely read books that have been translated into other languages. For over a decade, he has translated prominent works by Judith Butler and other important queer and feminist authors, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Monique Wittig. Recently, he was also awarded the title of Honorary Fellow at Birkbeck College, London. The course under attack, “Gender and Queer Theories”, which he teaches in the Political Science degree program at the University of Sassari, has achieved extraordinary success among students: his course, which allocates significant space to the issue of gender-based violence, has seen over 200 enrollments.

Ad intervenire con un durissimo attacco nei confronti del Ricercatore dell'Università di Sassari e del suo insegnamento di “Teorie di genere e queer” è stato il Parlamentare della Lega Rossano Sasso, primo firmatario della proposta presentata alla Camera che dovrebbe contrastare la diffusione, nelle scuole dell'obbligo e superiori, di idee che possano rappresentare una sfida per il concetto di “famiglia

tradizionale”. Anche il Deputato Sasso chiede a gran voce il Suo intervento, perché – come si legge in un articolo che riporta la vicenda – «per potersi preparare opportunamente all’esame del professor Zappino, come risulta dal sito dell’Università, bisognerebbe acquistare alcuni libri, tra cui alcuni dello stesso “professore” e uno dello storico attivista Mario Mieli. Quel Mario Mieli», sottolinea Sasso, «che sdoganò la pedofilia con frasi aberranti che tutti ricordiamo».

The harshest attack against the researcher from the University of Sassari and his course “Gender and Queer Theories” came from Lega MP Rossano Sasso, the primary sponsor of a bill proposal presented to the Chamber aimed at countering the spread, in compulsory and secondary schools, of ideas that challenge the concept of “traditional family”. Sasso has vocally advocated for your intervention, as – according to a news article covering the episode – “to prepare properly for Professor Zappino’s exam, as indicated on the university’s website, one would need to purchase several books, including some by the same ‘professor’ and one by the historic activist Mario Mieli. That Mario Mieli”, Sasso emphasizes, “who legitimized pedophilia with abhorrent statements that we all remember”.

Oltre a essere falso che i testi di Mieli siano obbligatori per sostenere l’esame del docente sotto accusa da parte dell’on. Sasso, facciamo notare che le opere di Mieli sono da decenni oggetto di studio in numerosi insegnamenti di area filosofica e umanistica e, infatti, sono state di recente ripubblicate dal prestigioso editore Feltrinelli, come riconoscimento dell’importanza avuta da questo pensatore nella storia del movimento omosessuale in Italia. L’attacco, tuttavia, fa leva anche sulla condizione di precarietà di Zappino per chiedere direttamente a Lei, Ministra Bernini, se sia «giuridicamente ammissibile» che un ricercatore a tempo determinato possa legittimamente insegnare e, addirittura, inserire un proprio libro nel programma d’esame. Questa vera e propria aggressione non si fonda solo sull’ignoranza del fatto che, nell’università italiana, i ricercatori e le ricercatrici hanno il dovere della docenza, ma è volta a censurare le idee, ritenute pericolose, di un filosofo e ricercatore precario, che viene così a trovarsi in una posizione di particolare vulnerabilità all’interno del proprio contesto universitario. Contesto nel quale, pur nella precarietà e, quindi, nell’incertezza economica e lavorativa in cui si trova a operare – come purtroppo troppo spesso accade nel nostro Paese in ambito universitario –, svolge attività essenziali sia per la ricerca che per la didattica.

In addition to the false statement that Mieli’s texts are mandatory for sitting the exam with the professor accused by MP Sasso, we would like to note that Mieli’s works have been the subject of study for decades in numerous philosophical and humanistic teachings and have indeed been recently republished by the prestigious Feltrinelli publisher as recognition of this thinker’s importance in the history of the homosexual movement in Italy. However, the attack also leverages on Zappino’s precarious position to directly ask you, Minister Bernini, whether it is “legally admissible” for a fixed-term researcher to legitimately teach and even include their own book in the exam syllabus. This outright aggression is not only based on ignorance of the fact that, in the Italian university system, researchers have the duty to teach, but is aimed at censoring the ideas, deemed dangerous, of a philosopher and precarious researcher, who thus finds himself in a position of particular vulnerability within the academic context. In this context, despite the precarity and thus the economic and job uncertainty in which he operates – as unfortunately often occurs in our country’s academic environment –, he takes up essential activities for both research and teaching.

This new serious episode compels us to fear that a domino effect may develop. The attack on Federico Zappino is an attack on anyone in Italy who conducts research or teaches. **As GIFTS network, we appeal to you to unequivocally guarantee the inalienable prerogatives of freedom of research and**

teaching, without which there can be no progress in knowledge and research. It is unacceptable for anyone's freedom of research, teaching, speech, and expression to be called into question, nor, above all, for the scientific and educational legitimacy of the work of individuals who, despite their clear contributions to research and philosophical and scientific debate, even find themselves in precarious conditions.

In a not-too-distant past, the research center at the University of Verona, PoliTesse – Policies and Theories of Sexuality, founded and directed by Professor Lorenzo Bernini, was attacked by the current President of the Chamber, Lorenzo Fontana. Against PoliTesse the Lega MP Massimiliano Fedriga even presented a parliamentary enquiry. In 2017, the far-right movement Forza Nuova harshly attacked historian Maya De Leo when the University of Turin announced it would hold Italy's first course on the History of Homosexuality, again with a precarious contract lecturer. The difference between the case we have witnessed in these days and the ones just mentioned is that this is happening in a context where, with blatant arrogance, an attempt is being made to impose a new cultural hegemony that seems to be centered around opposing the alleged "gender ideology": a buzzword that, using the Trojan horse of safeguarding the so-called "natural family", effectively threatens **Article 33 of the Constitution, which not only guarantees freedom of research and teaching but also protects the dignity and legitimacy of those who conduct research and teach every day.**

With our warmest regards,

GIFTS Network