

The darkside of civil society and its relation with the populist radical right: a critical discussion

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Abstract

Civil society is seen as the space of social emancipation and is therefore described in purely positive terms. It is opposed to the state and the market, understood as autonomous and distinct spheres. This contraposition has the effect of creating a binary narrative between what is positive and what is not. Thus, a great misunderstanding is generated: the belief that the answer to the question 'how to defeat the populist and radical right' is civil society itself, as if it were a homogeneous entity invested with some messianic function. Is this really the case? In this contribution, I propose a critical reflection of the concept of civil society in relation to the phenomenon of the populist radical right in Europe, in order to illustrate that the role of civil society is ambivalent. The reference cases are Germany and Italy. The reflections that will be presented are based on a part of my research work on the relationship between right-wing populism and civil society organisations.

Keywords: radical right populism, civil society, political sociology, politics, exclusion, inclusion

1. Introduction

The civil society, as described in contemporary public discourse, is a utopia (Kocka, 2003) because it does not correspond to actually existing societies and with its normative bearing implies that it is always something to be achieved. The reality of things, both from the point of view of the different historical and social experiences made, and with respect to the present, is much more articulated. Civil society has its shadows (Roth, 2003; Schroeder/Trömmner, 2021), it operates on the basis of a binary logic (Alexander, 1998; 2006) – like populism – that gives space to phenomena of inclusion and exclusion.

In this contribution a reflection of the concept of civil society from a theoretical point of view will be proposed, seeking to offer a counter-narrative to the approach that would have civil society as a "panacea" (Roth, 2003:60) for all social problems. An alternative definition of civil society will then be offered to those historically established in philosophical and historical debate, which, while not denying the normative and ethical component of civil society as well as its ability to promote

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emancipatory and democratic processes, does not make it a *simulacrum* and recognizes its exclusionary aspects as inclusionary ones. Such reflection can be traced back to the theoretical work of Alexander (1998; 2006). Through these passages, a concrete reflection is proposed on the functioning of civil society and its consequences in relation to the phenomenon of the populist radical right. The present analysis leverages some qualitative data collected in a larger research project, which has still to be completed, while presenting new premises and framework¹.

2. Civil society: a historical excursus of the concept

From a historical perspective, the term 'civil society' has a long and successful tradition in political philosophy: Thomas Hobbes set civil society '*societas civilis*' against natural society '*societas naturalis*'. Locke and Kant are on this line of thought: civil society is the space in which men meet, give each other rules of coexistence so that man is not a 'wolf to other man', in other words it is 'political society'.

Of a different opinion is the philosopher Jean-Jacque Rousseau, for whom civil society is not overlapping with political society, of which it is, if anything, a precondition, and is not a peaceful place: the foundation of civil society occurs for Rousseau with the invention of private property and thus with an act of separation and conflict between men. These lines of thought will be developed on the one hand by Hegel, who will use the concept of '*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*', and on the other by Marx, who will see it as a secondary phenomenon, as a reflection of capitalism. Antonio Gramsci is the intellectual, on the other hand, who proposes an original and alternative vision of the idea of civil society, specifying how in it not only material economic relations (the structure for Marx), but also ideological and cultural relations (the superstructure) are realised. And it is precisely in this space that, for Gramsci, cultural hegemony is realised (Bobbio, 1976).

After a period in which the concept had fallen into oblivion, the concept of civil society resurfaced in the public debate from the 1960s onwards, with the new social movements in the USA, committed to the recognition of civil rights, the feminist and homosexual movement, the peace movements and the protest in the former Soviet bloc, e.g. the Solidarity movement in Poland (Arato, 1984; Arndt und Gawin, 2008).

The commitment of civil rights movements against state oppression, be it totalitarian (the Soviet Union) or democratic (the USA) gives a new and peculiar representation to civil society "as a moral

¹ The research work referred to is nearing completion. It deals with the analysis of the relationship between civil society youth organizations and the populist radical right in Germany and Italy. The subsystems analyzed are those of religious associations, sport and trade unions. The study aims to analyze organizations and the ways in which they are reacting to the interventions of the radical and populist right. Objective, method, and structure is therefore not overlapping with what is presented in this contribution, which is, in fact, an empirical spin-off of it.

conscience, a social-systemic superego that sometimes heroically, sometimes stoically resisted the invasions of the rapacious, totalitarian and amoral state" (Smith, 1998:115). It is for this reason that the public understanding of the concept of civil society acquires a strong normative connotation (Grande, 2018:51). The overlap between the normative and moral dimensions and the descriptive dimension is well expressed in the words of Havel (2000), for whom civil society would be the *true* basis of democracy and what offers *genuine* pluralism. These views of things originate from the peculiar experience made by the author, who experienced living in a totalitarian system, where the amount of hope placed in the ability to react from below, precisely in civil society, was evidently high. But, if civil society is a space of emancipation, the *true* basis of democracy and *genuine* pluralism as stated by Havel, one has to wonder why certain ideologies now counted among the most devastating in human history found strong support in the past century precisely within civil society. The spread of fascism in Italy first and Nazi-fascism in Germany later are two historical experiences that alone should cast doubt on this hyper-optimistic approach to civil society. Yet, in current public discourse, this specific narrative persists despite the fact that various experiences, including recent ones, have once again highlighted this ambiguity of civil society: for example, PEGIDA movement in Germany, the Yellow Vest Movement in France or the Family Day movements in Italy and France (*La Manif pour tous*) for the defence of the traditional family and against LGBTQI rights.

2.1.Lessons from the past

In an article from 1997, later republished in a revised version in 2021, Sehri Berman analyses from a historical perspective how a strong civil society played a key role in the collapse of the Weimar Republic and supported the entrenchment and spread of Nazi ideology in early 20th century Germany:

Germany's vibrant civil society did not strengthen or promote democracy. Indeed, the opposite was the case; rather than reconciling the interests of different groups or bridging the cleavages in Germany society, civil society reinforced and deepened them (...) German civil society contributed to the Nazis' (NSDAP) success not only by helping undermine the social cohesion and unity necessary to make democracy work. Civil society also directly aided the NSDAP by providing the foundation upon which the organizational infrastructure and electoral coalition necessary for enabling the party to come to power could be built².

² The text is taken from the Online article, see [Revisiting "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic" | HistPhil](#), seen on 06.11.2023.

Similarly, this reflection can also apply to the Italian context. Gramsci, in his reflections on fascism, emphasises the role played by the petty bourgeoisie on the one hand and the devastating effects of the First World War and the resulting dissatisfaction with politics and its structures on the other. Sectors of Italian society were initially, as would have been the case in Germany, in favour of fascism and the latter then managed to infiltrate every level of society, from the professional orders to the world of sport (Molinari, 2021). At least two tendencies can be observed that converge: 1) the exceptional ability of the parties and movements of the time to infiltrate civil society, in all its dimensions, 2) the predisposition of civil society to welcome this kind of influence.

Stating this does not mean that the entire population was predisposed, it means that the organised structures of civil society played a facilitating role in the spread of such ideas. This discourse can also apply today, as it relates to the ability of movements and parties to infiltrate and spread their ideas. However, both the historical and political-economic contexts are extremely different and require different categories of analysis. The historical experience of nazi-fascism is over, but certain worldviews that those parties and movements were able to embody still persist and reappear in different forms.

2.2. The present, and still so much to learn

In the post-World War II aftermath, in fact, the successive political experiences pertaining to the world of the right took on very varied forms, and the multiplication of these experiences forced an intellectual effort to offer more adequate definitions. There are movements and parties that are direct emanations of that historical experience, which is now over, that are defined as neo-fascist or neo-Nazi and that, in a variety of ways and with different intensities, want to promote declaredly racist, xenophobic, ultranationalist and obviously anti-democratic political objectives, without disdaining recourse to violence: in this case we speak of right-wing extremism (Schroeder/Tan Elsen/Greef/Heller, 2021).

Then there is a whole world, more complex and difficult to classify, ranging from right-wing radicalism, more or less xenophobic, to more or less intransigent conservatism, which, however, plays by the rules of the game. Anti-democratic or rather anti-pluralist as they may be, these movements and parties neither resort to violence nor propose the overthrow of the democratic system. But they support a vision of an exclusionary society that can be based on ethno-regionalist and xenophobic forms on the one hand (Lega Nord until 2018), or nationalist, xenophobic and illiberal forms such as AfD in Germany or FdI and the Lega (since 2018) in Italy.

The list of definitions proposed to describe the political families to which the various parties or movements can be traced is long and often chaotic. The one that best holds together the various experiences of radicalism and right-wing populism is the one promoted by Cas Mudde (2007), namely

the concept of 'populist radical right'. The choice of the order of the words that make up the concept is neither accidental nor merely stylistic: it describes a particular type of radical right, the populist type. The ideology that characterises these parties and movements is a "combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism" (Mudde, 2007:26).

In Italy, the last parliamentary elections (2022) saw the victory of FdI, a party offspring of the post-fascist experience of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), which obtained 26% of the vote, while the coalition together with the Lega and the conservative party Forza Italia (FI) obtained 44%. In Germany, nationwide polls show AfD as the second political force after the CDU and before the SPD, with 20%. In the last elections held in Bavaria (2023) AfD obtained 14.6 per cent of the votes, increased compared to 2018 by 4.4 percentage points, while in Hessen it obtained 18.3 per cent, increased votes compared to 2018 by 5.3 percentage points. Interesting thing to note: while in the Italian case the votes mostly migrated from one political force to another within the coalition (from Lega to FdI), in the case of the elections in Bavaria and Hessen, AfD mainly mobilised the non-vote. In Bavaria it gathered more support from voters who had voted CSU and FDP the previous time, while in Hessen it got a greater flow of votes from the SPD and FDP³.

3. The theoretical and the methodological framework

So far, a theoretical and historical discussion of the evolution of the concept of civil society has been proposed, and the idea that it essentially brings progress and emancipation has been questioned. Historical and more actual experiences served as a basis for a critical reflection. It is necessary now to frame more clearly, which definition of civil society and which theoretical approach this paper refers to.

A definition of civil society that takes into account the ethical and normative component, but does not fetishize it as a kind of panacea for all evils is the one proposed by the American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (1998, 2006), who has developed a proper theory of civil society, from a sociological perspective, called "Civil Sphere Theory"(CST). Afterwards, the methodological framework referred to the empirical analysis offered here will be presented to reflect on the relationship between civil society organizations and the populist radical right.

3.1.Civil Sphere Theory

³ See [Landtagswahl Hessen 2023 \(tagesschau.de\)](https://www.tagesschau.de) and [Landtagswahl Bayern 2023 \(tagesschau.de\)](https://www.tagesschau.de). Seen on 06.11.2023. For classification of acronyms: FdI is Fratelli d'Italia. FDP is the right-wing liberal party. SPD is the social democratic party. CSU is the Christian Democratic party of Bavaria. AfD is the german populist radical right party. CDU is the Christian Democratic Party of Germany.

Civil society is described by Alexander (1998; 2006) as a "civil sphere", which is a particular social sphere or social field built around a specific conception of solidarity from which a bond of collective obligations between the individuals that make it up derives:

“a sphere or subsystem of society that is analytically and, to various degrees, empirically separated from the spheres of political, economic, family and religious life. Civil Sphere is a sphere of solidarity in which individuals rights and collective obligations are tensely intertwined” (Alexander, 2006:53)

More explicitly, civil society thus conceived combines two seemingly opposite tendencies: “an abstract universalism and a particularistic versions of community” (Alexander, 1998:97). Moreover, this sphere is separated theoretically and empirically, from others, such as the family, religious life, the state and the economy. This division does not indicate isolation of the spheres: in reality, there are interferences between them, so what he calls "noncivil" can penetrate the civil one causing changes (Alexander, 2006:194), which can be positive, thus pushing for an expansion of solidarity, or negative, undermining civic solidarity and its universalist aspiration.

Alexander does not explain why this universalistic tension exists in civil society or how it originates. In theory it is a given, something that is associated with the very existence of civil society⁴. He also remains vague in describing how and why particularisms arise in communities. What seems to be clear, however, is that there is a conflict originated by this dualism: the utopian tension to universal solidarity and the reality of things, that is, in real civil societies.

One explanation, however, can be derived from his description of the mechanism of functioning of civil society, which is binary: we/they, inside/outside, pure/impure, sacred/profane. While at the ideal level solidarity can be understood as universal, however, it is generated in the concrete of social relations, between individuals and groups, which must define who is part of them and who is not and thus to whom solidarity is given and to whom it is not:

„[j]ust as there is no developed religion that does not divide the world into the saved and the damned, there is no civil discourse that does not conceptualize the world into those who deserve inclusion and those who do not“ (Alexander, 1998:98)

The rhetorical construction of this binarity involves the construction of symbolic codes (ibid.) that are the cultural codes of civil society. In other words, through these mechanisms of defining community

⁴ This approach is somewhat reminiscent of the „principle of solidarity“ (*Solidaritätsprinzip*) proposed by the German philosopher Scheler, who uses this concept to describe the moral totality of the world as given in itself. See Scheler, Max (1921): *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Halle. The english version is: *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A new attempt toward the foundation of an ethical personalism*, Northwestern University Press. Translated by Manfred S. Frings and Robert L. Funk (1973).

membership on a binary basis, the very foundation of civil society is constructed and the logic that describes how solidarity can be generated and reproduced in social interactions, from the microsocial to the macrosocial level, that is, from community cohesion to the construction of society itself, which for Alexander is the democratic one.

Unlike utopian definitions, this one emphasizes its democratic potential, as well as the repressive one: civil society may be the place where the values associated with the idea of democracy are developed, namely activism, rationality, self-control, openness, inclusiveness, fairness, law and rule regulated, and so on (Alexander, 1998:100-101), but it can also be a space in which different values develop, such as passivity, irrationality, the view of the other as an enemy, the preeminence of authority, hierarchy, and arbitrariness (ibid.). In this sense, civil society structures are caught up in this tension between opposite poles, and their role can be relevant for the needle of the balance to swing to one, or the other side.

This theoretical approach makes it possible to analyze civil society in an omnicomprehensive way, to interpret the various historical experiences, positive and negative, without falling into a logical impasse in wanting only to consider the positive potential that it certainly has, but which is not exclusive. Finally, civil society is an autonomous sphere, like the others and possesses its own institutions (communicative and regulatory), its elites, which exercise power and identity through associations and social movements, which are acknowledged to play an active role in generating fractures and repairing them.

3.2. The methodological framework

From the discussion related to the historical evolution of the idea of civil society, to the presentation of some historical and contemporary experiences as a basis for questioning a specific philosophical approach to the conception of civil society, and finally after the theoretical and definitional framework on which this contribution rests, it is necessary to present the methodological approach that guided the empirical analysis.

The research project from which these theoretical reflections and empirical data were extrapolated for the analysis that is offered here has as its focus the study of the relationship between civil society organizations and right-wing populism. This is a qualitative study involving organizations active in three specific subsystems of civil society, namely, the world of sports, the world of labor unions, and religious associations, which are not ascribable to the idea of "religious life" as described by Alexander, which is a noncivil dimension. The techniques used are documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews with members of the various organizations, and focus-groups.

The interview material was transcribed and analyzed according to qualitative content analysis. The empirical material that will be analyzed here is essentially extrapolated from the documentary analysis.

The material analyzed consists of official documents produced by the associations' executive boards, the political programs of the populist radical right parties, press releases and newspaper articles. The reference contexts are Germany and Italy.

4. Case analysis: description and analysis

Italy and Germany have much in common. An assonance between these two countries may be a stretch, especially because of the stereotypes that circulate about allegedly opposing lifestyles, mentalities, and cultures. Yet, Italy and Germany share much more than one might think. In this context, it is the historical dimension on the one hand and the political dimension on the other that are of great relevance.

For centuries, Italy and Germany were territories divided into many feudal realities with a consequent weakening of the emergence of a nation state, something that had already happened in France, Spain, and Britain. Then, the dramatic experience of the early twentieth century, with the consolidation, first in Italy and then in Germany, of a violent and militaristic nationalism, namely fascism and nazism. Finally, the long and difficult path by which these countries had to work out the post-war phase, the reconstruction of cities, economic and social structures but, above all, the effort to build an accomplished democracy (Cotta, 1990; Bernhard, 2001; Fabbrini, 2006, Görtemaker, 2002).

Pappas (2023) has argued that Italy has always been a laboratory of political experimentation, and it could be said that Germany then comes in close behind. Right-wing populism, for example, is nothing new in Italy labeled „the promised land of populism“ (Tarchi, 2015). Compared to Berlusconi's experience, with Salvini's Lega and Giorgia Meloni's FdI there is a strong shift of power toward the populist radical right. The success of right-wing populist movements and radical right-wing parties in Italy occurred earlier than in Germany, where AfD's experience is relatively new. The absence of such a party force in the German Parliament probably resulted in a greater spillover of these nationalist, xenophobic and radical impulses into civil society itself, while in Italy, the presence of the heir party of fascism (MSI) in Parliament since the birth of the Republic mitigated the rise of extra-parliamentary movements and phenomena, since representation, albeit marginalized and always excluded from any governing option, was guaranteed. Nevertheless, movementist experiences traceable to the ideology of the populist radical right, as described by Mudde (2007), were known in both countries.

Some specific experiences will be analyzed below to argue how even in the nowadays civil society has been a favorable space for the rise and development of clearly antipluralist movements and how they represent a concrete democratic challenge. For the German case the experience of “PEGIDA” will be discussed, for Italy the “Pro Vita e Famiglia” case. Both structures originate in civil society and are politically close to parties of the populist radical right, such as AfD, FdI and Lega.

4.1.PEGIDA

PEGIDA is a movement born in 2014 as a reaction to Germany's economic, social and migration policies in the Merkel era. The very name of the movement expresses the political goal. In fact, it is the acronym of „*Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung Des Abendlandes*“, which means „patriotic europeans against the Islamization of the occident“. The movement was then established as a publicly recognised association with a public interest purpose. According to German norms, the designation allows access to public financial support on a local, regional and/or national level.

The Pegida movement brought together thousands of people in several German cities, united by a desire to oppose the Islamization of Europe. A social movement characterized by a desire to defend specific values, considered constitutive of the West, against an ethnic-religious minority, the Muslims (Schenke/Schmitz/Marg/Trittel, 2018). In terms of territory, PEGIDA was established in Dresden, the capital city of the Saxony, where AfD is very strong.

At the foundation of the movement is a general criticism of Germany's liberal policies in economic matters, especially against the middle and working classes, as well as a strong criticism of the European Union and migration policies.

Merkel's openness to accepting hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers from the Middle East is experienced by the movement's adherents as a threat to the Western 'way of life', Christian values and German identity. The demonstrations that are organised in Dresden and Leipzig, for example, become a safe space for thousands of 'concerned citizens' (in German: *besorgter Bürger*) who give rise to Islamophobic and racist agitation.

Angela Merkel becomes the scapegoat, portrayed in the demonstrations either as a Muslim woman with a headscarf⁵, or as a Nazi officer with an evidently 'genocidal' intent against 'Germans'⁶. The movement also attacks the press, which is called a 'lying press' (German: *Lügenpresse*). Nationalism, xenophobia and conspiracy theories become fundamental and characteristic ingredients of PEGIDA. Moreover, to the highly provocative and offensive statements against the Chancellor and xenophobic choirs during demonstrations, attacks against asylum seekers' facilities have also been reported. Since 2014, when the movement was formed, reports of verbal and physical assaults on migrants have multiplied⁷.

From an analytical point of view, it is interesting to analyze the preamble to the program and the program itself of the movement, which is structured into 10 theses that represent the ideological basis.

⁵ See Stuttgarter Zeitung: [Pegida-Demo in Dresden: Kontrastprogramm zur Trauer in Paris - Politik \(stuttgarter-zeitung.de\)](https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de), seen on 31.12.2023.

⁶ See Faz.net: [Ein Jahr Pegida - „Harte Rechtsextremisten“ \(faz.net\)](https://www.faz.net), seen on 31.12.2023.

⁷ See Süddeutsche Zeitung: [Flüchtlinge - Bericht: Zunahme der Gewalt gegen Migranten seit Beginn von Pegida - Politik - SZ.de \(sueddeutsche.de\)](https://www.sueddeutsche.de), seen on 31.12.2023.

In the preamble lies the narrative explaining the reasons for the "concerns" of the citizens, as well as the desire to represent no specific ideology. Nevertheless, the movement defines itself as political, by giving itself goals expressed in the form of 10 theses⁸:

PEGIDA sees itself as a **political movement** that addresses the current political and social problems of our time **without ideology** and wants to find and implement solutions together with the population. Our economic policy is increasingly impoverishing the middle and working classes. Wages and pensions are increasingly out of proportion to the cost of living. Instead of providing funds for urgently needed projects, horrendous sums are being wasted. **People are concerned** about rising crime, social hotspots and **the steady growth of parallel societies**. The security risk is constantly increasing and **global conflicts** are intensifying due to **irresponsible** domestic and foreign **policies** (PEGIDA Programm, 2014⁹).

The 10 theses introduce the concrete points on which the movement intends to engage. Among the various theses, some are revealing.

The first thesis concerns the obligation (*Verpflichtung*) on the part of the government to "defend and maintain our German identity" (*Der Schutz und der Erhalt unserer deutschen Identität*). The fundamental categories to which the movement refers emerge here, which go far beyond what is identified in the preamble: PEGIDA stands against religious fanaticism, radicalism, Islamization, but also against „genderism“ and the „premature sexualization of children“¹⁰. It is interesting that the issue of "gender" is perceived as a threat to German identity, as is the "premature sexualization" of children, which is nothing more than the issue of sexual education in school, seen by the populist radical right movements, as an attack on the "family" and especially an attack on "freedom of teaching" and the prerogative of parenting. This point is then described in thesis 5, with specific criticism of the absence of policies to support families to have children.

⁸ The use of the term "thesis" explicitly recalls the experience of the protest triggered by Martin Luther against the Catholic Church. Luther posted theses at the cathedral door of the castle in Wittenberg, a city in neighboring Saxony-Anhalt. This call brings out an explicit desire to harken back to the founder of the Protestant Reformation and prominent personality of German culture and identity.

⁹ The bold type is inserted to give emphasis to the key words in the transcript. The translation is of my own. The original text is as follows: „PEGIDA versteht sich als politische Bewegung, welche ideologiefrei die aktuellen politischen und gesellschaftlichen Probleme unserer Zeit aufgreift und gemeinsam mit der Bevölkerung Lösungen finden und umsetzen will. Durch unsere Wirtschaftspolitik verarmen der Mittelstand und die Arbeiterklasse zunehmend. Löhne und Renten stehen in einem immer schlechteren Verhältnis zu den Lebenshaltungskosten. Statt Mittel für dringend benötigte Projekte zur Verfügung zu stellen, werden horrend Summen verschwendet. Die steigende Kriminalität, soziale Brennpunkte sowie stetig wachsende Parallelgesellschaften beunruhigen die Menschen. Das Sicherheitsrisiko steigt ständig und die globalen Konflikte verschärfen sich aufgrund unverantwortlicher Innen- und Außenpolitik.“

¹⁰ The original Text is: „Stopp dem politischen oder religiösen Fanatismus, Radikalismus, der Islamisierung, der Genderisierung und der Frühsexualisierung von Kindern“. The text of the theses can be found on the website, as the first published contribution, then scrolling to the end. The translation is my own. See pegida.de: [PEGIDA - Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes](http://pegida.de), seen on 31.12.2023.

Theses number 3 and 4 are those dealing with the topic of migration and asylum. Here the detail of the initiatives is very deep. The third thesis calls for the passage of an immigration law that would insert a "qualitative" selection of people coming into the country, as opposed to "uncontrolled mass immigration"¹¹, which is typical of the rhetoric of populist radical right parties across Europe (Boeynaems/Burgers/Konijn, 2021; Pieroni/Roig/Salmasi, 2023; Quadrelli, 2018).

In thesis 4 emerges perhaps more than in the others, the "dark" drive that this experience carries as an expression of civil society. In the logic of operation described above, reference was made to the pure/impure dichotomy (Alexander, 2006), those who are worthy and those who are not worthy of being part of the community, of civil society. Hence, for PEGIDA it is clear that, among the many concerns, the one that stands out as a negative element, to be controlled, curbed, and possibly isolated, is that of asylum seekers.

Those who are granted entry into Germany must be isolated in closed lagers until the verification of personal data and reasons for seeking asylum has taken place (first point of the thesis). To this must be reintroduced border control – a point that ties in with thesis number 10, which deals with national sovereignty and the need not to subject oneself to Brussels' decisions¹².

Finally, the elimination of the practice of "*Duldung*," that is, of granting a suspension of sanction for an illegal migrant who for technical reasons cannot be returned immediately, is called for. What is thus called for is the application of a clear logic between staying or being repatriated, regardless of the individual case¹³.

PEGIDA's attack on immigration is not generalized. The concern is with migration from Arab countries of the Muslim faith. The cultural and religious set represents for PEGIDA, as well as for AfD, the great danger (Decker, 2021). The political rhetoric of the populist radical right draws its strength from negative feelings such as anxiety, frustration, and fear (Demertzis, 2020; Quadrelli, 2019). The

¹¹ The original Text is: „Deutschland muss ein Zuwanderungsgesetz schaffen und umsetzen: nach demographischen, wirtschaftlichen und kulturellen Gesichtspunkten. Qualitative Zuwanderung statt unregelmäßiger Masseneinwanderung muss garantiert werden!“. For the link see note 12.

¹² The original text is: „Die Auswirkungen der Asylkrise müssen geregelt werden!“.

- zentrale Unterbringung der Asylbewerber in entsprechenden, geschlossenen Auffanglagern bis zur Klärung ihrer Personalien und ihres Hintergrundes.

- die Entscheidung im eigentlichen Asylverfahren muss innerhalb von 3 Monaten erfolgen. Diese Entscheidung ist bindend, Rechtsmittel haben keine aufschiebende Wirkung.

- entsprechende infrastrukturelle und personelle Kapazitäten sind zu schaffen

- Grenzkontrollen sind bis auf Weiteres wieder einzuführen.

- als Fluchtgründe sollen nur Verfolgung wegen politischer Überzeugung, Religion oder persönlichen Merkmalen sowie Krieg, plötzliche Katastrophen gelten.

- Treffen von Vereinbarungen mit Nachbarländern über die Kosten der Rückführung müssen getroffen werden, sollte dies nicht gelingen, sind alle Asylbewerber an den betreffenden Grenzen zurückzuweisen bzw. umgehend über selbige zurück zu verbringen.

- einen Aufenthaltsstatus "*Duldung*" darf es nicht mehr geben“. For the link see note n.12.

¹³ For more information about the legal instrument of „*Duldung*“ see [Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration - Duldung](#), seen on 31.12.2023.

immigrant and the asylum seeker are thus portrayed as concrete threats to German values and identity because 1) they are associated with Islamist terrorism¹⁴, 2) they are part of a strategy by which so-called „ethnic replacement“ is to be achieved (Bracke/Aguilar, 2020).

The image below is an example of how certain information disseminated by the media is commented on PEGIDA's official website. In this particular case, an article from Die Welt and an action by the Office for the Defense of the Constitution (*Der Verfassungsschutz*) against an ethnic business, which is considered a sensitive target to be kept under national security watch, is cited. The statement takes a true fact, referring to a single case, and rhetorically creates a generalization that actually criminalizes an entire ethnic and religious minority. In two passages can be found this rhetorical construction of the enemy as a foreign body, "impure" to return to Alexander. For example, the sentence in which it is stated that "every place where devout, practising Muslims come together is a breeding ground for radicalization¹⁵" and "every Muslim who believes in the Koran is obliged to fight against the "kuffar", i.e. against us!¹⁶"

Image 1: Communication example from the PEGIDA website

03.05.2017

VS ÜBERWACHT ENDLICH AUCH HALAL-GESCHÄFTE DER MOSLEMS

Verfassungsschutz überwacht Geschäfte für Halal-Produkte

Erst Moscheen, dann Gebetsräume, dann "Flüchtlings"-Unterkünfte und nun auch Halal-Geschäfte...

... wann wohl endlich der Groschen fällt bei den "Experten" und diese endlich begreifen, dass jeder Ort, an dem gläubige, praktizierende Moslems zusammenkommen eine Brutstätte der "Radikalisierung" ist? Was soll überhaupt "Radikalisierung" bedeuten? Jeder Moslem, der an den Koran glaubt, ist zum Kampf gegen die "Kuffar", also gegen uns, verpflichtet!

Schaut Euch das Video an:

<https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article164164332/Verfassungsschutz-nimmt-Halal-Laeden-ins-Visier.html>

Bildquelle: Screenshot von www.welt.de



Source: pediga.de

¹⁴ In 2017, a memo from the Office for the Defense of the Constitution (Der Verfassungsschutz) comes out stating that with the arrival of asylum seekers, the number of terrorists has increased. PEGIDA uses this information to attack the government and the defense minister Maas of lying and endangering the security of the country. An interesting note concerns the president of the Verfassungsschutz, Hans-Georg Maaßen. The chairman was close to AfD, radical right-wing milieus, and following further political scandals was later removed from office by the then German interior minister. In 2023 Hans-Georg Maaßen is listed among those under observation by the office he chaired, precisely because of his contacts with extra-parliamentary radical right-wing groups. The case describes an established network of relations between civil society and noncivil spheres (the Office for the Defense of the Constitution structured in the Federal Ministry of the Interior). See Merkur (2019): [Auf dem rechten Auge blind? Die Skandale des Hans-Georg Maaßen \(merkur.de\)](https://www.merkur.de/2019/08/08/auf-dem-rechten-auge-blind-die-skandale-des-hans-georg-maassen/) and Die Welt (2023): [Hans-Georg Maaßen: Verfassungsschutz nimmt offenbar seinen Ex-Präsidenten ins Visier - WELT](https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article164164332/Verfassungsschutz-nimmt-Halal-Laeden-ins-Visier.html), seen on 31.12.2023.

¹⁵ The original text is: „dass jeder Ort, an dem gläubige, praktizierende Moslems zusammenkommen eine Brutstätte der Radikalisierung ist“.

¹⁶ The original text is: Jeder Moslem, der an den Koran glaubt, ist zum Kampf gegen die "Kuffar", also gegen uns, verpflichtet!“.

A final point to note is that the organization since its founding has sought a closeness with the AfD group¹⁷. This closeness was previously identified by a 2015 study, in which the composition of protesters was studied. Of the sample respondents surveyed, 18 percent said they were politically close to AfD, 8.9 percent to the CDU, Germany's Christian Democratic Party, while 62.1 percent said they had no party ties (Vorländer/Herold/Schäller, 2015:52). The researchers comparing the figure with the elections in Saxony, where the study was conducted, find a link to the abstention (>50%) and the positive outcome of CDU and AfD in the elections. For the German political scientist Werner Patzelt (2018) PEGIDA and AfD are "two sides of the same coin" or "meat of the same meat" (In German: *"PEGIDA und AfD sind zwei Seiten derselben Medaille, oder Fleisch vom selben Fleische"*). This union has over time strengthened Germany's populist radical right opposition party, allowing it to penetrate areas of civil society that were previously precluded to it.

Progressive pro-migrant rights, feminism, and LGBTQI movements now find themselves sharing civil society space with movements that support a diametrically opposed worldview. PEGIDA is just one of these nostalgia movements, which brought together people who felt like „strangers in their own land" (Hochschild, 2016) and who by social, political and cultural changes felt threatened and reacted by federating themselves into a movement. Civil society is therefore a contested space where AfD found an interlocutor and vice versa. At public initiatives, in fact, street demonstrations or debate meetings are carried out by hosting political exponents of AfD or other social groups pertaining to the populist radical right as well as to groups considered close to right-wing extremism, such as the German identity movement and NPD.

In studying the phenomenon of PEGIDA, a group of German political scientists titled a book "the dirty side of civil society?"¹⁸ stating that this experience should not come as a surprise, since civil society "include pathological fears and aggression, social and ethnic exclusion and efforts at repression, cynicism and contempt for the democratic process"¹⁹ (Walter/Geiges/Marg, 2015:194).

¹⁷ In 2016, under the leadership of Frauke Petry, AfD distanced itself from PEGIDA and a ban was enacted on AfD politicians and members from attending events as speakers or guests. In 2016, PEGIDA's founder attacked AfD and its leadership, see ntv.de, "Das sind deine Wähler, Frauke!" Pegida verliert Geduld mit AfD-Chefin Petry, 15.11.2016: <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Pegida-verliert-Geduld-mit-AfD-Chefin-Petry-article19090796.html>, seen on 19.01.2024. In 2018, the ban on participation in demonstrations was dropped and indeed, the entire leadership recognizes Pegida as a key interlocutor for the party, see faz.net, AfD-Politiker dürfen bei Pegida auftreten, 03.03.2018, [Parteikonvent beschließt: AfD-Politiker dürfen bei Pegida auftreten \(faz.net\)](https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/afd-politiker-duerfen-bei-pegida-auf-treten-15886798.html), seen on 19.01.2024 and Stern, "Wohlüberlegt": Weidel verteidigt AfD-Auftritte bei Pegida, 05.03.2018, <https://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/-wohluerberlegt---alice-weidel-verteidigt-afd-auftritte-bei-pegida-7886798.html>, seen on 19.01.2024.

¹⁸ The title of the book in German uses the word "schmutzig" which literally means "dirty," "not clean," "unwashed."

¹⁹ The original text in German is: „auch pathologische Ängste und Aggressionen, soziale und ethnische Ausgrenzung und Verdrängungsbemühungen, Zynismus und Verachtung gegenüber dem demokratischen Prozess“. The translation is my own.

4.2. The „ Pro Vita & Famiglia “ association

The association Pro Vita & Famiglia (Pro Life and Family) was founded in 2012 as a union of two separate associations, one committed to the defense of life from its conception (*Pro Vita*), that is, against abortion, and one committed to the defense of the traditional family and against the extension of rights to same-sex couples (*Generazione Famiglia*).

The association has its ideological basis in the Catholic faith and aims to affirm the primacy of "tradition" by opposing a clear rejection of any alternative family model. It also promotes a strictly binary interpretation of sexuality, gender relations, disallowing the possibilities that homosexuality and transgenderism exist in nature:

[Pro Vita & Famiglia is] a non-profit association that works on behalf of children, mothers and fathers, defends the right to life from conception to natural death, promotes the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman, and supports the freedom and educational priority of parents (...) Pro Vita & Famiglia ONLUS works in the name of those who cannot speak, in defense of the weakest and families in need. In its defense of the dignity of human life and the irreplaceable role of the family, it is inspired by Christian principles, based on reason, the natural moral law accessible to every person and the results of the best scientific research²⁰.

The association's concerns are expressed by its president during a speech on Radio24: 1) the support by the Italian governments of the period (center-left) for homosexuality and transgenderism, 2) the fact that homosexuality is a pathological but recoverable condition, so that "from homosexuality one can recover" and one "can become heterosexual again," and 3) the claim that homosexuality fosters pedophilic tendencies. This view is then matched by the statement that "an excellent homosexual is one who is unpretentious and does his own business²¹".

²⁰ Original text is: „una associazione ONLUS che opera in favore dei bambini, delle madri e dei padri, difende il diritto alla vita dal concepimento alla morte naturale, promuove la famiglia fondata sul matrimonio tra un uomo e una donna, e sostiene la libertà e priorità educativa dei genitori (...) Pro Vita & Famiglia ONLUS opera nel nome di chi non può parlare, in difesa dei più deboli e delle famiglie in difficoltà. Nella sua difesa della dignità della vita umana e dell'insostituibile ruolo della famiglia, si ispira a principi cristiani, si basa sulla ragione, sulla legge morale naturale accessibile ad ogni persona e sui risultati della migliore ricerca scientifica". The translation is my own. The text can be found on the website under "about us": <https://www.provitaefamiglia.it/chi-siamo>. Seen on 08.01.2024.

²¹ The speeches were delivered on 02/21/2017 on the Radio24 program. The link where to retrieve the speech is this: [La Zanzara 21 febbraio 2017 \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zanzara_21_febbraio_2017). The intervention is between minute 1:48:00 and minute 1:57:00. A partial transcript of the intervention was published on Gayburg.com: [Toni Brandi a Radio 24: «I gay hanno tendenze pedofile, rompono i coglioni e possono essere curati» \(gayburg.com\)](https://www.gayburg.com/toni-brandi-a-radio-24-«I-gay-hanno-tendenze-pedofile-rompono-i-coglioni-e-possono-essere-curati»), 28.02.2017. Seen on 08.01.2024.

It is a very organized reality, both territorially and communicatively²². In fact, the organization is located throughout Italy and has 110 circles (data provided on the website). It has several social networks; in addition to the website, it has a facebook profile, an instagram one, and a twitter one. To these communication tools are added a newsletter and a monthly magazine.

The association's activities are almost exclusively aimed at protecting a conservative and traditionalist view of the family, gender roles and sex relations. This takes the form of a series of protest initiatives against legislative drafts, educational initiatives that seek to promote gender issues and sex education in schools, a battle against "blasphemy" interpreted as an offense against Christian (Catholic) tradition and customs.

The tool that is used very frequently is the online petition. The association uses digital platforms effectively, mobilizing thousands of people in collecting signatures on well-circumscribed ideological battles. The issues covered overlap with those of the populist radical right in the areas of family and sexuality. Explicit proximity exists between the association and some political personalities in the Lega. An example of this is the petition launched to support the political work of Simone Pillon, a former senator of the Lega and a well-known exponent of the party's anti-gender fringe²³.

Pro Life and Family represents a reality that bases its action on religious principles and acts as a link between the traditionalist Catholic world and the political world of the populist radical right. Specifically, a privileged link with the League emerges as well as a clear anti-left political propaganda (see Image 2). The first image (a) is taken from Instagram (03.03.2023) and is the cover of a series of slides against the Democratic Party (PD) and its newly elected president, Elly Schlein. The image uses the colors of the LGBTQI flag and stylized but evocative images (the skull) with the following text: "Abortion, drugs, euthanasia, LGBT, here is the new radical drift of the PD with Elly Schlein".

Elly Schlein is the political target and the PD the party against which to direct propaganda, since it is an expression of progressivism and therefore of what Pro Life & Family considers anti-values, what falls into the category of "not human". Also, linguistically, the use of the term "drift" (*deriva*) is interesting, as if to indicate that the PD has changed direction with Schlein's election. The message is aimed at the Catholic component of the Democratic Party, which on the issues of euthanasia, abortion and same-sex marriage has always maintained opposing positions²⁴.

²² despite the association's growing public relevance in Italy, ad hoc studies do not exist. Pro Life & Family's experience is of essentially journalistic interest, which is both a problem and a mistake. The relevance of the experience from a sociological point of view is very important. A small but innovative contribution is offered here.

²³ See Online-Petition: [Io sto con Simone Pillon #RESTIAMOLIBERI \(provitaefamiglia.it\)](https://www.provitaefamiglia.it), seen on 8.1.2024.

²⁴ The Democratic Party is part of the political family of European socialism, but it is not a social democratic party in the strict sense. The PD was born from the fusion of two opposing cultures: the Christian-democratic, social-inspired Catholics, and the heirs of the PCI, the Italian Communist Party, namely the PDS and then the DS.

The second image (b) is an attack on Veneto Region President Zaia (15.01.2024), who is a League politician. Zaia has proposed to discuss a regional law on assisted suicide. The depiction of the image is clear: the proposed law contradicts the principle of the inviolability of life, so Zaia is accused of betraying his constituents (text: “tradisci i tuoi elettori”) and advancing the progressive agenda of the Democratic Party (PD), of which he would be secret agent 007 (text: “uno di sinistra sotto copertura”). The phrase in red is evidently aimed at the League and brings out the danger: "we will remember."

Image 2: Official online communication materials of Pro Life & Family (Instagram 2023, X 2024)



Source: Screenshots of the Pro Life & Family page in X (2023/2024)

The language found in the organization's official documents, as well as in the social media posts are those typical of the populist radical right. Comparing, for example, the Lega's 2022 Italian election political program with some of the association's publications on "gender" and "family," the recurrence of identical "buzzwords" is self-evident:

"No **Gender ideology**: fighting gender ideology and fluidity in multiple sectors of society (school, sports, prisons, public documents). Protection of women, their role and measures in their favor against **the prevarications of gender theories**." (Lega, 2022:75²⁵)

²⁵ The original text is: "No ideologia Gender: contrasto all'ideologia di genere e alla fluidità in più settori della società (scuola, sport, carceri, documenti pubblici). Tutela della donna, del suo ruolo e delle misure a suo favore rispetto alle prevaricazioni delle teorie gender". The translation is my own. Bold is an emphasis added to highlight key words.

"**Gender ideology** (or "gender") remains a hot topic of great relevance (...) In Italy and throughout the West strong political and cultural currents promote "gay marriage," laws against homophobia, adoption to same-sex couples, normalization of transgenderism (...) all of this stems from a common ideological matrix? Yes, precisely **gender ideology**." (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2019²⁶)

“Sex is reality, gender is an **ideological abstruseness**” (Pro Vita & Famiglia, 2023²⁷)

The community that Pro Life & Family describes bases its *raison d'être* in Christian morality. Here we see a rather exemplary case in terms of both the binary logic described by Alexander (2006) with respect to the civil sphere and the interference of the noncivil in the civil sphere.

With regard to the first point, the logic of inclusion/exclusion is based on the acceptance or non-acceptance of a Christian-inspired ethical-moral view of the world and humankind. This basis is "natural" and therefore as something prior to any human speculation. The initiatives of movements, parties or governments to introduce same sex marriage for example, or to spread sexuality education in schools, the condemnation of homophobia and thus the sanctioning of those who discriminate on a sexual basis, are described under the label of "anti-human ideologies": the dichotomy is human/anti-human which is linked to the dichotomy "good/evil." This example is found in an association article about the contraception. In this case, an ethical-religious interpretation is offered that opposes the use of the contraceptive. The good/evil duality is used for this purpose, as a logic of the "natural moral law":

Natural moral law requires that the "**good of the person**" be sought. Now the good of the person corresponds to the ultimate ends of human nature and human faculties. Indeed, the good is coincident with the end (that is, the good toward which a subject should strive) and evil consists, specularly, in the deprivation of the good owed (that is, the frustration of the end).

²⁶ The original text is: L'ideologia di genere (o "gender") rimane di un tema scottante di grande attualità (...) In Italia e in tutto l'occidente forti correnti politiche e culturali promuovono i "matrimoni gay", le leggi contro l'omofobia, le adozioni a coppie dello stesso sesso, la normalizzazione del transgenerismo (...) tutto ciò deriva da una matrice ideologica comune? Sì, appunto la ideologia di genere.” The translation is my own. See, provitaefamiglia.it. The Issue is “Gender”: [Scarica il libretto gratuito sulla Ideologia di Genere! \(provitaefamiglia.it\)](#), seen on 08.01.2024.

²⁷ The original text is: “Il sesso è la realtà, il genere è un'astruseria ideologica”. The translation is my own. See provitaefamiglia.it, Issue “Ideologie anti-umane”: [Traduttori: mettono il gender in Costituzione, e cancellano il diritto alla vita dei bambini all'Unicef \(provitaefamiglia.it\)](#), seen on 08.01.2024.

(...) This means that the purpose of sexuality must be respected both in the act and in the intentions (...) the act that prevents sexual intercourse from causing conception is an act that contradicts the purpose of sexuality, which is opposed to the good owed in this matter. The use of contraceptives **constitutes by itself a bad** (anti-finalistic) **act** from the point of view of natural morality²⁸”

With regard to the second aspect, religious life, which is a noncivil sphere according to Alexander (2006), enters civil society through the activity of the association itself: specific norms and values of the Christian faith are selected and placed on a higher moral level, with which it is intended to interpret reality. This intransigent and conservative stance has within the Church itself its own ideological positioning that conflicts, for example, with explicit openings that the current Pope has made on the subject of blessing homosexual persons²⁹. This ideological conflict is strong in Catholicism, while in the evangelical church in Germany, or in the Italian Waldensian Church it has already been formally overcome³⁰. Thus, it is a particularism that compresses solidarity in civil society, pushing for the exclusion from the body of the community of those who do not align themselves with these specific interpretations of the Christian faith, which are characterized by a deep-rooted anti-gender stance (Prearo, 2020).

Finally, another element that links the rhetoric of the populist radical right with that of the association is the theme of the Christian values of the West (Europe) and the danger they face in this time. The association published an article on its website denouncing a growing anti-Christian hatred and accusing the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights of encouraging "anti-Christian blasphemy under the guise of freedom of expression³¹". If for PEGIDA the danger to Western

²⁸ The original text is: La legge morale naturale impone di cercare il "bene della persona". Ora il bene della persona corrisponde ai fini ultimi della natura umana e delle facoltà umane. Il bene è infatti coincidente con il fine (cioè il bene verso cui dovrebbe tendere un soggetto) e il male consiste, specularmente, nella privazione del bene dovuto (cioè nella frustrazione del fine) - (...) Ciò vuol dire che la finalità della sessualità deve essere rispettata sia nell'atto che nelle intenzioni (...) l'atto che impedisce che il rapporto sessuale causi il concepimento è un atto che contraddice la finalità della sessualità, che si oppone al bene dovuto in questo ambito. L'uso di contraccettivi costituisce per ciò stesso un atto cattivo (anti-finalistico) dal punto di vista della morale naturale. The translation is my own. See provitaefamiglia.it, Issue, Contraccezione: [Contraccezione: significato, metodi e valutazioni \(provitaefamiglia.it\)](https://www.provitaefamiglia.it/contraccezione-significato-metodi-e-valutazioni), seen on 08.01.2024.

²⁹ See for instance: [Pope Francis Allows Priests to Bless Same-Sex Couples - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/18/world/europe/pope-francis-priests-bless-same-sex-couples.html), in New York Times, 18.12.2023. Seen on 10.01.2024.

³⁰ This is not to say that conflicts do not also exist in evangelical and Protestant denominations on the issue of homosexuality. However, recognition of same-sex de facto couples occurred in the German Evangelical church for example as early as the early 2000s and in the Waldensian church in 2010. See for instance: [Evangelische Kirche bekräftigt liberale Haltung zum Umgang mit Homosexualität – EKD](https://www.evangelische-kirche.de/aktuelles/2024/01/10/evangelische-kirche-bekraeftigt-liberale-haltung-zum-umgang-mit-homosexualitaet-ekd), seen on 10.01.2024, [HuK e. V. | Ökumenische Arbeitsgruppe Homosexuelle und Kirche \(archive.org\)](https://www.hu-k.de/aktuelles/2024/01/10/hu-k-e-v-oekumenische-arbeitsgruppe-homosexuelle-und-kirche) and [Omosessuali, la Chiesa valdese sceglie diritti e accoglienza | Chiesa evangelica valdese](https://www.chiesaevangelica.it/omosessuali-la-chiesa-valdese-sceglie-diritti-e-accoglienza), seen on 10.01.2024.

³¹ The original text is: Nonostante ciò, da un lato l'Unione Europea tace sull'odio anticristiano, dall'altro, la Corte europea dei diritti dell'uomo (CEDU) incoraggia la blasfemia anticristiana sotto la maschera della libertà di espressione". The

(Christian) values is represented by Muslim migrants and asylum seekers, for Pro Life & Family, the threat comes from "far-left groups, radical feminists, and LGBT groups". Faced with this drift, the association takes an ethical and moral position of strong opposition, as if it were a battle between good and evil, between "culture of life" and "culture of death" for which it is indispensable:

““continue head-on in the mission of promoting nonnegotiable principles and **defending universal (and therefore Catholic) values** that are the only real bastion against the destructive nihilism of **the culture of death** ³²”.

This specific rhetorical formula was also recently expressed by PM Giorgia Meloni, who at an official meeting in Budapest on the topic of demography said that the political goal of Politics must be to "defend the family, nation, identity and God³³", concepts that, the premier says, define the idea of "civilization".

4.3. Comparison of cases

The two cases presented are two examples of how civil society organizations with different origins and different concerns converge in giving ideological and practical support to the populist radical right. These organizations become bridges between noncivil spheres, such as religious life or the family (Alexander, 2006), and facilitators of potentially disruptive processes of the universalistic solidarity that grounds the civil sphere. They need not be organizations pursuing the same ends. In fact, PEGIDA has based its existence on opposing the Islamization of the West by targeting migrants and asylum seekers from Arab countries. This is the political and ideological core of the movement. To this are then added the issues related to the theme of family, gender relations and thus traditionalist representation, which, however, is not religiously inspired but a reaction against the socio-cultural transformations induced by globalization and liberalism, themes already analyzed within the framework of the loser theory of modernization (Spier, 2010).

In contrast, Pro Life & Family has an almost exclusive focus on the issue of the relationship between religious values and alternative (post-modern) models of life in sexuality, education, and family. Both are characterized by a strong connection with populist radical right movements and political parties.

translation is my own. See provitaefamiglia.it, Issue Ideologie anti-umane: [Crimini d'odio contro prolife e cristianofobia in aumento: l'Europa li ignora \(provitaefamiglia.it\)](#), seen on 10.01.2024.

³² The original text is: “continuare a testa alta nella missione di promuovere i principi non negoziabili e difendere i valori universali (e quindi cattolici) che sono l'unico vero baluardo al nichilismo distruttivo della cultura della morte”. See provitaefamiglia.it, Issue Ideologie anti-umane: [Crimini d'odio contro prolife e cristianofobia in aumento: l'Europa li ignora \(provitaefamiglia.it\)](#), seen on 10.01.2024.

³³ See the Speech, in english, of the PM Giorgia Meloni: [Meloni: "Serve dura lotta per difendere famiglie e Dio" \(youtube.com\)](#), seen on 10.01.2024.

They are their bannermen in civil society, actors that can move with equal legitimacy in civic space, just like progressive movements that instead pursue completely opposite aims: more rights, pluralism, participation and inclusion beyond ethnic, religious and gender differences.

The actions of these organizations legitimize the activities of the populist radical right in institutions, doing so by giving spaces of visibility to political figures, promoting their proposals and ideological approaches, supporting them in their political battles with demonstrations (PEGIDA), online petitions (Pro Life & Family) and so on. Nothing new, after all, as the rights movements do the same, seeking to influence politics to take a different course. This is now happening, more and more explicitly and widely, in relation to antipluralist movements. This relationship that has been established grows on the basis of reciprocity and the reproduction of an internal solidarity within specific groups considered homogeneous by opposing, even violently³⁴, groups that do not identify with it.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, an attempt has been made in this contribution to question an exclusively positive approach to the role of civil society. Through a historical excursus, the dominant positions in philosophical and political debate on the idea of civil society have been introduced. A number of historical examples have long highlighted the dark side of civil society, which is instead, in public and journalistic discourse, often hidden.

Recognizing that civil society is a space that, like others, can generate processes of inclusion and exclusion, is an added value for understanding the social and political phenomena taking place in contemporary society, especially with reference to the phenomenon of populism and the spread of the electoral successes of the populist radical right, in Europe and elsewhere. In this regard, Alexander's theory of the civil sphere was presented, its definition proposed as a theoretical basis for interpreting the internal torsions within civil society and the role of the influence of noncivil spheres, such as those of religious life and the family in civil society.

There is a relationship between a universalism that civil society seeks to pursue and the rise of particularism in various communities. The idea of solidarity fits into this segment: when solidarity expands, civil society promotes inclusion; when solidarity becomes particularistic and the binary logic of inclusion/exclusion is manifested on the basis of ethnic, religious, social or sexual affiliation, then civil society runs into the phenomena of the breakdown of universalistic solidarity and the emergence of conflicts, which can also be violent, repressive and discriminatory.

³⁴ To name a few events see [Von Körperverletzung bis Hitlergruß: Bei Pegida und Co. grassiert die Gewalt \(tagesspiegel.de\)](https://www.tagesspiegel.de), in 2015, [Gewalt gegen Journalisten bei Pegida-Demo - "Pack dein Zeug und verschwinde!" \(deutschlandfunk.de\)](https://www.deutschlandfunk.de) in 2017 and [Rechte Gewalt: 200 Ermittlungsverfahren gegen Pegida-Anhänger in Sachsen | ZEIT ONLINE](https://www.zeitonline.de) in 2019. All seen on 12.01.2024.

The two cases presented and analyzed highlighted precisely what happens when a particularistic idea of solidarity prevails, one that associates being worthy or not worthy of membership in a community with the possession of specific, ethnic, religious and sexual requirements. The parties of the populist radical right thus find allies in civil society and can thus penetrate the civic sphere with the exclusionary, xenophobic and antipluralistic rhetoric that characterizes it.

The 'perversion' of the idea of solidarity, which becomes a 'something' to be reserved for members of a group homogeneous in gender, ethnicity and social status, is the critical element that reinforces the populist radical right in civil society. The bridge between these realities thus becomes a two-way path, based on reciprocity: just as the noncivil spheres influence civil society, conversely these civil society organizations by reinforcing and reproducing the mechanisms of exclusion, strengthen the noncivil spheres and the populist radical right in its propaganda and infiltration activities.

The merit of Alexander's (2006) theory is that civil society is recognized to have ambivalence, that is, positive or negative impulses can be manifested. The frictions and interferences of the noncivil in the civil, which generate fractures and cause particularism and an interpretation of solidarity to prevail in a selective and exclusionary manner, can be repaired by opposing forces. Civil society is thus accorded a very human quality of coexistence of light and shadow. There can be imbalance, but there can also be balance. And so, the moral component is also maintained, while the disenchanting and unilateral one that would have civil society as a panacea for all social problems is rejected.

A specific analysis was offered in this contribution aimed at bringing out the dark component with the purpose of raising an awareness about the ambiguity of civil society and going beyond utopian and hyper-optimistic representations. However, further effort, including with another contribution, can be directed at the emancipatory and progressive component of civil society and its organizations that have arisen and will continue to arise as a counter-narrative and counter-power to the exclusionary dynamics of which the populist radical right is currently the main actor in Western political systems.

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