



Arcigay is the leading  
glbtq activist organization  
in Italy today.

## Italy

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With more than 60 million inhabitants, the Republic of Italy is the fifth largest country in Europe and the 23rd most populous country in the world. Located principally on the Italian peninsula in south-central Europe, Italy is a democratic republic.

Although it is a founding member of the European Union, Italy lags beyond other member states in the protections and respect it accords to glbtq citizens, especially gay and lesbian couples.

### History

With its rich classical and artistic heritage, Italy has historically been an important country for queer sensibilities. Gay subcultures have been documented in late medieval and Renaissance Florence, Venice, and Rome; and during the Renaissance, sodomy was even described in Northern Europe as "the Italian vice."

Yet the Renaissance in Italy was also a time of periodic purges and fierce crackdowns against "sodomites," who frequently suffered the death penalty. Records preserve thousands of accusations of sodomy in Florence and Venice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Notwithstanding the great artistic achievement of the Italian Renaissance, and the contributions of gay artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo, Cellini, and Caravaggio, the era was also one fraught with danger for members of sexual minorities.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Italy attracted well-off educated homosexual travelers who were fascinated by the classical ideals of male virility and beauty.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries especially, Italy came to be regarded by many glbtq Englishmen, Germans, Scandinavians, and Americans as a psychic (and, in some cases, also a literal) refuge, a place where the inhabitants were passionate and sexually uninhibited.

Northern Europeans and Americans came to think of Italy as a place where they could fulfill their erotic fantasies free of the sexual inhibitions and conventions (as well as the laws) of their homelands. Hence, in much of the literature of the era, Italy is depicted as a place where repressed Northerners traveled to overcome their sexual and emotional restrictions.

Despite this reputation for sexual freedom, it is unlikely that Italy was actually as liberated as it is portrayed in English and German literature, which probably says more about the emotional repression and self-consciousness of the north than it does about the sexual liberation of the south.

One reason for Italy's reputation for sexual permissiveness is that, except for 28 years following the country's unification in 1861, homosexuality was not criminalized in Italy. Even during the dark days of the Fascist dictatorship, the persecution of homosexuals did not reach levels of cruelty comparable to that of

Nazi Germany.

Yet, this lack of repressive legislation does not mean that Italians were necessarily more progressive in their attitude towards homosexuality than other Europeans. On the contrary, while homosexuality was not itself criminalized, it was in effect rendered invisible.

### **Italian Unification**

Modern Italy may be dated from the founding of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, which was the culmination of the long struggle for Italian unification. The Kingdom of Italy survived until 1946, when the Republic of Italy was established.

Most of the different states into which the Italian peninsula was divided in the early part of the eighteenth century were deeply influenced by the Napoleonic Code, which had been applied to the peninsula during Napoleon's domination. Under the Napoleonic Code, private homosexual behavior was not considered a crime.

The one notable state in which homosexuality was criminalized was the Kingdom of Sardinia, whose ruling monarchy took the military initiative to unify the country in the war against Austria in 1859 and in Garibaldi's expeditions of 1860 and 1861.

When Italy became unified in 1861, the penal code of the Kingdom of Sardinia, which criminalized homosexual acts between men but not women, was adopted nationally.

Article 425 of the code actually did not use the term "homosexual," but spoke of "libidinous acts against nature." Significantly, the law did not apply to the southern regions (from Naples to Sicily), which were once part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. This anomaly was attributed to "the peculiar behavior of those living in the south," an ambiguous phrase that implicitly acknowledged a difference in attitude toward homosexuality in the south and the north.

This discrepancy that made homosexual acts legal in one part of the country and illegal in another part of the country was resolved in the first post-unification penal legislation, the Zanardelli Code of 1889, which decriminalized homosexual acts between consenting adults throughout the entire Kingdom of Italy.

This choice reflected both the continuing influence of the Napoleonic Code and also the belief that the Church, not the state, should take the lead as moral arbiter as far as sexual mores are concerned.

In addition, many legislators thought it better to ignore homosexuality altogether because mentioning the punishment for this "vice" would have been a form of publicity for it. They regarded homosexuality as the sin not to be mentioned among Christians.

For the liberal politicians of the Kingdom of Italy, as well as for the Fascist regime that followed, homosexuality simply did not exist. This policy inaugurated an attitude of repressive tolerance that did not persecute homosexuals as long as they kept silent about their orientation and did not make it apparent, but that also withheld any recognition of homosexuality as a legitimate sexuality.

The shroud of silence that enveloped homosexuality was instrumental in rendering heterosexuality the only possible sexuality for Italians, a long-lasting conviction that the gay liberation movement of the second part of the twentieth century had great difficulty in challenging.

Still, the lack of laws against same-sex acts encouraged queer visitors from Northern Europe, especially Germany and Great Britain, where laws against homosexual acts were harsh. Destinations such as Capri and Taormina became well-known in homosexual circles throughout Europe, and a tradition of sexual tourism

developed, in which wealthy northerners traveled to relatively impoverished areas of Italy in pursuit of sexual dalliances with young men.

### **Fascist Dictatorship**

During the Fascist Dictatorship, 1925-1945, attempts were made to criminalize homosexual acts. In one of the early versions of the Fascist penal legislation, the Rocco Code, promulgated in 1930, "libidinous acts" between people of the same sex were to be punished, "if they cause a scandal," by six months to three years in jail. However, the proposal encountered strong opposition and was not included in the final version of the code since, allegedly, so few Italians practiced homosexuality that their persecution was superfluous.

The typically Italian attitude of remaining silent about same-sex desire for fear of promoting it won once again over the impulse to punish it. Criminalizing homosexuality would have required the regime to admit its existence, thus damaging the cult of masculinity that constituted one of its ideological foundations.

The Fascist regime delegated the repression of visible "deviants" to the administrative discretion of local police forces who were authorized to admonish them and, if that proved insufficient, to condemn them to house arrest or internal exile.

These measures were more strictly and sometimes brutally enforced after the approval of the Race Laws in 1938, and many homosexuals suffered from them in the final years of Mussolini's reign, as illustrated in Ettore Scola's unforgettable film *A Special Day* (1977).

After the collapse of the Fascist dictatorship, during the Italian Social Republic of 1943-1945, there was an attempt to criminalize homosexuality, but this initiative also failed.

### **The Post-War Period**

During the post-World War II period, silence continued to be the preferred response of Italian governments to homosexuality. Laws were introduced not only to criminalize homosexual acts, but also to criminalize public discourse about homosexuality three times in the early 1960s by the Italian Social Movement (MSI), the heir to the Fascist Party, and by the small Italian Social Democratic Party (PSDI). Yet, none of the proposals was even discussed in Parliament.

This code of silence may have effectively prevented the criminalization of homosexuality, but it also made it very difficult to organize on behalf of gay and lesbian liberation. Only a few writers and filmmakers, including especially Pier Paolo Pasolini, Sandro Penna, and Pier Vittorio Tondelli, dared make homosexual desire a prominent subject in their work.

The first glbtq organization that gained any traction was FUORI (Italian Homosexual Revolutionary Unitary Front), an acronym that also means "out" or "Come out!" It was established in 1971, inspired by the writings of Italy's leading gay theorist and activist Massimo Consoli (1945-2007), especially his *Manifesto per la Rivoluzione Morale: l'Omosessualità Rivoluzionaria* (*Manifesto for the moral revolution: Revolutionary homosexuality*).

Mostly composed of male militants, FUORI initially found little support from the mainstream left of the Socialist and Communist Parties. Hence, in 1974, it affiliated with the Radical Party, a minor leftist party that became associated with civil rights after campaigning for the legalization of divorce and abortion.

This new alliance allowed the leader of FUORI, Angelo Pezzana, to become the first openly-gay candidate to be elected to Parliament in 1976, although he resigned before taking his seat. However, not everyone in FUORI approved of the alliance with the Radical Party, and its most militant left-wing members seceded, preferring to make their voices heard in less institutional contexts, such as the students' movement of

1977.

Among the activists who left FUORI was Mario Mieli (1952-1983), who is best known for his Marxist account of homosexuality and homosexual oppression, *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (1977), translated into English in 1980 as *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique* (1980). He regarded the alliance with the Radical Party as "counter-revolutionary," since he thought the gay movement should remain independent of political parties. He left FUORI to help organize the Collettivi Omosessuali Milanesi (Homosexual collectives of Milan).

Since the 1980s, some of the leftist political parties, including the Italian Communist Party (subsequently renamed Democratic Party of the Left and then splintered into other parties), have become more open to the demands of the glbt movement.

Moreover, the left-wing network of cultural and recreational associations (ARCI) supported the formation of a gay branch, Arcigay, which quickly became the major Italian gay organization. Arcigay lobbies for recognition of gay and lesbian couples and for nondiscrimination policies.

In 1982, the Communist-led administration of Bologna, one of Northern Italy's major cities, made history by leasing one of its buildings to the local chapter of Arcigay in spite of the bitter opposition of the Catholic Church.

Throughout the 1980s, the Italian gay movement was mainly concerned with lobbying the government for the prevention and treatment of AIDS, requesting that specific campaigns be targeted to homosexuals and challenging the taboo against mentioning the use of condom as a principal means of prevention.

In the 1990s, openly gay candidates began to be elected to the national parliament. However, the movement splintered into different organizations.

While Arcigay remains the largest queer organization in Italy, other groups on both the right and left emerged in the 1990s. For example, Gaylib was founded in 1997 by activists who wanted to enter a dialogue with the more liberal sectors of the political right. More radical militants who found the institutional and parliamentary left's support for gay causes timid at best have formed more confrontational groups such as Antagonismo Gay and the lesbian organization Fuoricampo.

An important event that contributed to the visibility of the Italian queer movement was the 2000 World Pride parade that took place in Rome, in spite of the Vatican's opposition.

The World Pride parade was particularly controversial because it coincided with the Catholic Jubilee, a millennial celebration that attracted millions of pilgrims to Rome to commemorate two thousand years of Christianity. The Catholic Church together with the Italian political right declared that the parade would be offensive to Christian values and sensibilities and loudly voiced their opposition to the event.

However, the Catholic protest generated an enormous amount of publicity for the parade and attendance at the march swelled beyond all expectations. The failure of the Church and its political allies to halt the march, and the attendant publicity the controversy gave to the issue of gay rights, are widely regarded as landmarks in the quest to secure equal rights in Italy.

The success of World Pride 2000 may mark the beginning of the breaking of silence regarding homosexuality in Italy.

### **The Twenty-first Century**

Since the beginning of the new century, the glbtq movement in Italy has sought legislation to prohibit

discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, to protect glbt people against hate crimes, and to secure recognition of same-sex couples.

In 2002, an openly gay member of Parliament, Franco Grillini, introduced legislation to prohibit discrimination in employment, accommodations, and other areas on the basis of sexual orientation. The legislation failed, as did Grillini's 2006 attempt to prohibit discrimination on the basis of both sexual orientation and gender identity.

However, in 2003 European Union directives against discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation have rendered such discrimination illegal throughout Italy. Still, the refusal of the Italian Parliament to pass legislation to enforce these directives means that it is difficult to redress instances of discrimination.

The courts have recently become more active in responding to blatant instances of discrimination, as when a court in Catania recently awarded a large sum to a gay man who suffered discrimination from the Italian defense and transport ministries, but the fact remains that there is no law that prohibits discrimination against gay people throughout Italy.

In 2004, the region of Tuscany banned discrimination against homosexuals in the areas of employment, education, public services, and accommodations. However, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing national government challenged the new law in court, contending that only the national government has the power to pass such laws.

Italy's Constitutional Court struck down the law's provisions with respect to accommodations offered by private homes and religious institutions, but otherwise upheld the legislation, marking a significant victory for gay rights.

Since then, the Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna regions have also adopted similar legislation.

Several Italian regions governed by leftist parties or center-left coalitions have passed resolutions in favor of civil unions, while other regions governed by right-wing or center-right coalitions have passed resolutions opposing any recognition of same-sex couples. These actions are largely symbolic, since regions currently have no power to confer or deny rights to couples, though that may change soon as federal reforms may grant more power to regions.

Similarly, while several large cities, including Turin, Florence, Bologna, and Padova, as well as some smaller towns, have established registries in which civil unions and partnerships can be registered, these are also largely symbolic. They are instruments to make same-sex relationships visible, but they confer no legal benefits.

Yet attempts to establish such registries are often controversial, as in the case of Rome, where such registries have failed to pass under both center-left and right-wing administrations.

Parliament has repeatedly rejected bills that would confer pension, inheritance, taxation, or property rights to same-sex couples. Hence, same-sex couples in Italy are significantly disadvantaged in comparison with couples in many other European countries.

Italy is now one of the few Western democracies that refuses to recognize unions between same-sex partners. In addition, attempts to pass hate crimes legislation have repeatedly failed.

## **Visibility**

Despite the failure of the glbtq movement to secure rights through the political process, an increased

visibility of gay communities in Italy may presage success in the future.

Italy's most vibrant gay scenes tend to be in cities in the north, in Milan, Bologna, and Padova. In the south, Naples and Palermo offer the most visible gay scenes. The glbtq community has recently become more visible in Rome, with a gay village in the summer and several awareness-raising initiatives.

Popular seaside destinations for gay men and lesbians include the Amalfi coast, Viareggio, and Torre del Lago.

The national gay parade alternates between several cities. The most recent parades have been hosted by Milan (2005), Turin (2006), Bologna (2008), Genova (2009), Naples (2010), and Rome (2011); the latter city also hosted Europride in 2011, where pop singer Lady Gaga not only attracted a very large crowd but also spoke out passionately for equal rights.

In addition to the national parades, there are a number of smaller regional and local marches celebrating gay pride, including in Naples and Palermo.

Turin has hosted the Turin International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (TOGAY) since 1986.

The leading Italian glbtq activists include Franco Grillini, first secretary of Arcigay, who served as a member of Parliament for two terms (2001-2008); Paolo Concia, currently the only out member of Parliament; Titti De Simone, a journalist who served as a member of Parliament for two-terms (2001-2008); Nichi Vendola, who served in Parliament from 1992 until 2005 and since 2005 has served as Governor of the Puglia region and leader of the left-wing party SEL (Sinistra, Ecologia, Libertà--Left, Ecology and Freedom; male-to-female transgender Vladimir Luxuria (born Wladimiro Guadagno), actress, writer, member of Parliament from 2006 to 2008 and winner of the reality show *Celebrities' Island* in 2008; Ivan Scalfarotto, deputy president of the Democratic Party, Italy's largest opposition party; Paolo Patanè, current president of Arcigay; Aurelio Mancuso, former secretary and president of Arcigay and now president of Equality Italia, the first Italian lobby for civil rights.

In addition to these political advocates, a number of celebrities and well-known professionals have come out as openly gay or lesbian and have thereby contributed to glbtq visibility. These include novelist Aldo Busi; fashion designer Valentino (Garavani) and his business partner Giancarlo Giammetti; fashion designer Giorgio Armani; transsexual actress, journalist and painter Giò Stajano (1931-2011); film directors Ferzan Ozpetek and Franco Zeffirelli; film actor, distributor, and producer Andrea Occhipinti; theater actor Paolo Poli; singer and songwriter Tiziano Ferro; singer and songwriter Renato Zero, and Spanish-Italian singer, songwriter, and actor Miguel Bosé.

The two most important Italian gay magazines are *Babilonia*, founded in 1982, and *Pride*, founded in 1999.

## **Conclusion**

The difficulty of securing equal rights for Italian glbtq citizens is principally due to the implacable hostility to homosexuality of the Vatican, the force to which the Italian state historically delegated the control and punishment of homosexuals. Although the power of the Roman Catholic Church has diminished in recent years, it still exerts a strong influence on Italian society and politicians.

Not only are the right-wing parties, led by billionaire media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, firmly opposed to equal rights for glbtq people, but many Catholic politicians in the center-left coalition that opposes Berlusconi are also opposed to equal rights.

Clearly, Italian politicians, and perhaps the majority of Italians, prefer silence to taking seriously the needs and rights of the country's sexual minorities.

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**Luca Prono** holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.