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Concept Paper

Coming Out as Undocumented: Identity Celebrations and Political Change

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Abstract: By focusing on the notion of 'coming out as undocumented', this concept paper critically explores whether identity politics has the potential to transform dominant 'illegalisation' processes. It argues that although the coming out strategy has helped make marginalised communities more visible and audible, it does not necessarily help disrupt dominant stigmas. Drawing upon insights from Disability Studies and Fat and Queer Politics, it suggests that the celebration of stigmatised identities through coming out events does not necessarily disrupt and transform unequal systems. What is needed is a radical shift in focus: from identity celebration to political projects, from an 'unliveable' present to an inclusive tomorrow.

Keywords: resistance; change; democratic politics; disability; fat and queer politics

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, great academic attention has been paid to undocumented activism and the ways in which the undocumented have resisted 'illegalisation' processes in countries as diverse as the United States, Canada, France, Spain, Sweden, and Australia, see [1–5]. In the US, the Latino and Citizenship literature has extensively examined how undocumented youth have 'come out of the shadows' [6–9] and made themselves visible and audible in society. By openly disclosing their status through a variety of public messages and slogans—such as "undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic", "I'm undocumented", "No one is illegal", and "I'm an immigrant"—they have signalled a radical shift in how they see and understand their undocumented status. By adopting and adapting LGBTQ+ coming out strategies, undocumented youths[1] have refused to remain invisible, silent, and ashamed due to their irregular status [8–13].

Instead of reiterating the positive effects of the coming out strategy, as a great part of the literature does, this article suggests distinguishing between adopting identity politics as a tool for (political) recognition and adopting it as a tool for breaking and challenging dominant illegalisation processes. This distinction is especially important as undocumented activism aims not only to draw public attention to the issue but also to break dominant stigmas and marginalisation. Although coming out has proven to be a "powerful strategy" [7] (p. 87) and a key tool for achieving emancipation and empowerment [14], the dominant perception and approach towards irregular entry and residence continue to hold sway. This suggests that the coming out strategy—articulated upon identity—even if an important tool of resistance, does not necessarily succeed in breaking and eliminating dominant and pervasive negative perceptions. In other words, even if exclusion and invisibility might be resisted through coming out (public) events, changes—in perspective and approach towards certain marginalised and excluded groups—might not necessarily follow, at least not in the near future, see [15].

Using US undocumented youth activism as an illustrative case, this paper embarks on a theoretical journey, which engages with the concept of coming out and questions whether the appropriation of an imposed and stigmatised identity—that is, their being 'illegal'—might limit, rather than transform, dominant 'illegalisation' processes. The limits of identity politics, and more specifically of the coming out strategy, are investigated by drawing upon insights from three sets of the literature, namely Fat Politics, Disability Studies, and Queer Politics, which have all recognised, albeit in different ways, the limits of identity politics in breaking *and* transforming dominant prejudices. Although they all agree that coming out events are crucial in creating and shaping a sense of community, establishing shared experiences and a sense of belonging, and generating public awareness—the very same positive outcomes that undocumented activism has also achieved—they do not help in challenging the stigmas attached to their (fat, disabled, and non-heterosexual) bodies.

This strand of the literature highlights that although coming out events enable acceptance and recognition, they lack the ability to contest dominant stigmatised perceptions. In light of this, they have highlighted the limits of coming out events in breaking dominant views, which continue to perceive their bodies as a deviation from the (normal) able, thin, and heterosexual body. For instance, using the case example of the homosexual community and their efforts to change the *status quo*, Jonathan Alexander demonstrated that identity politics has been "effective with a smattering of sympathetic politicians" but not in challenging dominant prejudices [16] (p. 296). More specifically, for him, demanding acceptance or tolerance is not enough as it does not "encourage all people [. . .] to think critically about how sexuality is politicized in our culture" (p. 296).

This paper critically engages with existing Citizenship and Latino Studies, a part of which has focused on the benefits of adopting the coming out strategy. While the literature provides insights on how this approach has helped draw public attention to the political activism of the undocumented, it has overlooked its inability to break the dominant ('illegality') discourse. This paper aims to scrutinise this limitation. This is performed by combining Citizenship and Latino Studies—which mostly rely on primary and secondary empirical data on undocumented youth activism in the US—with the theoretical analyses that Fat Politics, Disability Studies, and Queer Politics offer in relation to identity politics and coming out events. This latter set of the literature provides a fascinating perspective, which is not exclusively theoretical, as it is based on a close scrutiny of the outcomes of coming out campaigns over two decades or more. By combining these sets of the literature, this (conceptual) paper aims to stimulate a debate that opens up new venues for discussing coming out strategies, and particularly, the limits of identity politics in breaking dominant stigmas.

The argument is organised along five main lines of enquiry. Firstly, it looks at the concept of 'coming out' by investigating the commonalities and differences between coming out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and coming out as undocu(mented/queer). Secondly, it investigates the power of outing strategies in creating a sense of community and alleviating some negative and dominant perceptions and stigmas, as some social movement scholars have highlighted. Thirdly, it focuses on some coming out of the shadows events and examines the rationality underlying that strategy. Fourthly, it draws upon insights from Fat Politics and Disability Studies, which argue that the key challenge for stigmatised communities lies not in transforming negative perceptions into positive ones but in contesting the systems that impose and maintain those very stigmas. Finally, the article examines arguments from the queer literature which suggest moving away from identity politics that replicate, rather than break free from, certain identity categories.

2. Coming Out as an Identity Celebration

The term 'coming out of the closet' is a familiar one within the LGBTQ+ community, which uses the metaphor of the closet to evoke the idea of a hidden life. This metaphor, however, is a recent development. For instance, in his history of gay culture in New York, George Chauncey [17] states that while the concept of coming out was widely used by the gay community, the metaphor of the closet started to circulate only after the 1960s. Borrowing from debutante culture—that is, the practice of holding debutante balls during which young (and elite) ladies were officially welcomed into society—gay men started using the term "coming out of the closet" to signal their entry into the gay community.

Other metaphors—for instance, "wearing a mask and taking it off"—were used to signal a "double life" [17] (p. 6). Over the course of the twentieth century, the term 'coming out' has acquired a different meaning. While in the 1920s, it referred to a person's entry into the gay world, fifty years later, it referred, more generally, to announcing one's homosexuality to family and friends [17] (p. 8).

Broadly speaking, given the dominant homophobic culture, coming out events have traditionally been seen as key tools for emancipation—an emancipation achieved not simply through greater visibility and recognition but because of the "narrative of selflove, acceptance and authenticity" that coming out enables [17] (p. 695). As also discussed in Elizabeth Armstrong's book, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950–1994*, "the public display of identity became possible because gay liberation enabled people to overcome self-loathing in favour of self-love" [18] (p. 25). It was, and still is, the courage to publicly proclaim one's identity that made emancipation possible. The freedom that coming out events enabled was traditionally contrasted with the image of being constrained in the closet. Thus, the closet became the "defining structure for gay oppression", often connected with the pairings of "secrecy/disclosure and private/public" [19] (pp. 71–72). By refusing to remain silent about one's sexuality, the private becomes public. The shift from private to public not only liberates the self but the whole community. The act of speaking out aloud creates not only a sense of collective identity but also unites the LGBTQ+ community in its battle against the closet and the "negative existence" attached to it [20] (p. 61). Consequently, visibility is celebrated because it provides greater recognition and acceptance and because it represents a crucial step towards freedom, truth, and emancipation.

Some of the LGBTQ+ literature goes beyond public visibility and recognises the importance of the act of coming out for the individual as a person beyond identity declarations. According to Shane Phelan, coming out refers to a "revelation, an acknowledgement of a previously hidden truth [. . .], a process of discovery or admission rather than one of construction or choice" [21] (p. 773). Here, revealing a hidden truth does not simply involve its verbal utterance to others; it also involves a discovery and acknowledgement of oneself. Mark Blasius [22] argues that the process of coming out should be interpreted as part of a more complex process of becoming. More specifically, it is not just about the verbal articulation of one's identity; it is about "a process of becoming in which the individual enters into a field of relationships that constitutes the lesbian and gay community" [22] (pp. 642–643). In other words, it is "a process of fashioning a self—a lesbian or gay self—that did not exist before coming out began" [21] (p. 774). Seen through this perspective, coming out revolves around self-acceptance as much as revealing one's identity. Coming out thus entails a (long) process where the two moments—self-acceptance and open disclosure—do not necessarily coincide. Even the moment of disclosure is not as straightforward as it might first appear. It requires other choices, such as to whom to reveal it and when to do it. According to Robert Rhoads, coming out is not only "the process of openly acknowledging one's same-sex attractions" but it also represents the very initial "step in becoming engaged in the politics of sexual identity" [20] (p. 7). Gilbert Herdt [23] similarly describes it as a rite of passage that begins with self-acknowledgement and is followed by open disclosure. However, the moment of self-acknowledgement is not when one recognises one's attraction to the same sex but the moment in which one accepts one's sexual orientation, which is then openly proclaimed (self-disclosure) [20] (p. 69). What emerges from Rhoads' analysis is that coming out is not so much about sharing one's sexual orientation as it is about the moments of "visibility" that are "a necessity if they are to achieve social and economic justice" [20] (p. 24). Given the negativity associated with a life in the closet—that is, a life of lies, darkness, and confinement—coming out, as well as the courage to do so, is by default celebrated. In short, as a counter-action to the dominant homophobic culture, identity celebrations are seen both as the answer to invisibility, discrimination, and stigmatisation as well as a key tool for constructing a collective consciousness, creating identifiable communities, and emancipating oneself from negative feelings and perceptions.

3. Coming Out of the Shadows

Undocumented public campaigns in the past two decades have been extensive and not limited to coming out events. Youths have been campaigning using a variety of verbal and non-verbal communication tools, including making calls and writing hundreds of thousands of emails and petitions to key political figures; organising sit-ins before official buildings; resorting to marches and 'undocubus' throughout the US; organising acts of civil disobedience; and setting up ad hoc associations within universities, and the like. While investigating the main modalities through which public campaigns were conducted—especially following the mass mobilisation in 2006 against the congressional bill known as H.R. 4437[2]—I found that great academic attention has been devoted to legal consciousness and political engagement [11,12]; education and civic participation [13,24–26]; invisibility and liminal life [5,27]; and political engagement and activism [28–30]. This rich literature acknowledges that the protests led by undocumented youth in the US were significant and radical. By 'going public' [31] and declaring their irregular status, undocumented youths challenged the dominant politics of criminalisation and exclusion. As discussed in René Galindo's work, students not only highlighted 'the gap between the invisibility and anonymity of undocumented status and their own political act of public disclosure', but they also put 'a human face to the pejorative term "illegal alien" and to a status that constrained their future' [29] (p. 601). As the vast majority of the literature highlights, by openly disclosing their status through a variety of public messages and slogans—such as "undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic", "I'm undocumented", "No one is illegal", and "I'm an immigrant"—they signalled a radical shift in how they perceived, and still perceive, their undocumented status. They chose not to remain invisible, marginal, and silent. They entered the public stage. The coming out campaigns were one of the many tools used for campaigning for a change of legislation.

As recalled in Seif's work [7], it was Tania Unzueta Carrasco—co-founder of the Immigrant Youth Justice League, established in Chicago in 2009—who suggested the adoption of the "coming out of the shadows" concept and encouraged those who participated in the protests at the Federal Plaza in Chicago in March 2010 "to come out" [7] (p. 87). On that occasion, she addressed the public by citing the very same words used in 1978 by Harvey Milk, the first openly gay member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors:

> *Brothers and sisters, we must come out, [. . .] Come out to your relatives, come out to your friends, [. . .] come out to your neighbors, to your fellow workers, to people who work where you eat and shop, but once and for all let's break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions (italics in original).* [7] (pp. 87–88)

Standing in the square facing Chicago's Federal Building, she had the courage to tell her story—a Mexican migrant who entered the US at the age of ten—and to encourage others to do the same. Drawing on her experience as a member of the LGBTQ+ movement, Tania Unzueta Carrasco adopted the same strategy. The event at the Federal Plaza in Chicago marked the first annual national 'Coming Out of the Shadows Day'. The idea of 'coming out of the shadows' was proposed by the undocumented themselves. Not only have they articulated their public involvement as a coming out process, but they have also identified the space from which they are coming out—the space of marginality and invisibility [7]. The very image of coming out of the shadows strongly evokes the hidden life that their status suggests.

The Immigrant Youth Justice League was one of the many organisations that undocumented youths set up—others include United We Dream, the DreamActivist Network, the University Leadership Initiative, the Immigrant Youth Justice League, the League of United Latin American Citizens, and Dream in Mexico—which have all adopted, among others, the coming out strategy as an important tool for visibility. Seif is not alone in recognising the role of the undocuqueer in shaping public discourse and lending their faces to this struggle, see [26–31]. While the most used slogans tended to highlight their irregular status—for instance, "I'm undocumented", "I'm an immigrant", "undocumented, unafraid, and unapologetic", and "No one is illegal"—they did not replicate the dominant concept of 'illegality', although the concept of being undocumented is commonly perceived in terms of 'illegality' [32,33].

According to Erika Grajeda, who has conducted ethnographic fieldwork at a worker centre in San Francisco, the strategy of 'coming out of the shadows' is "widely celebrated and encouraged as it is assumed to mark an ontological shift from anonymity, nonbeing, and shame to resistance" [34] (p. 1024). In her work, Grajeda sees 'coming out' through the lens of queer (of colour) perspectives, which encourage LGBTQ+ people "to be 'out, loud, and proud'" (p. 1024). She is critical of the worker centre, which replicates "an institutional culture of compulsive (and compulsory) self-disclosure" (p. 1024). More specifically, undocumented women were able to earn job placements through the Women's Collective (only) in exchange for political activism, including marching, protesting, making congressional visits, and engaging in acts of civil disobedience (p. 1025). However, in all these public events, coming out as undocumented was a key strategy. As Grajeda highlighted, not only does their activism—or better their "performative enactments" (p. 1036)—not empower women, but they are made part of a "system of incentivized participation", in which the benefits of the coming out strategy were taken for granted, and "paradoxically", they exposed "undocumented women to greater risk of detection, arrest, and deportation" (p. 1037).

It should be noted that undocumented activism is not articulated only on one's undocumented (and stigmatised) identity, even if identity is a key element in virtually all their public events. For example, campaigns in favour of passing the DREAM Act[3] highlighted the integration, achievements, and economic contributions of the highly educated undocumented. As Angélica Chazaro explained in great detail, "we are not criminal" was the dominant message, generally accompanied by two other (interrelated) messages: "we are hard working" and "we deserve a pathway to legalization" [35] (pp. 358, 377–388). As also analysed in Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram's edited volume, *Deserving and Entitled: Social Constructions and Public Policy* [36], the discourse on deservedness and entitlement distinguishes between those who are contributing, or could potentially contribute, to the welfare of the country and those who are not: that is, between "potential citizens"' and "unassimilable aliens" [37] (pp. 139–140). By uncritically incorporating the dominant language—which reinforces dominant stigmatised images—undocumented youth reproduced what Fanny Lauby refers to as the '"perfect DREAMer" narrative' [38]. In other words, they have based their campaigns on ideas of achievement, meritocracy, innocent youths, and justice [35]. Although this was done to mobilise support in favour of the DREAM Act, the public messages did not aim at challenging the concept of the "illegal" migrant but celebrated those who were considered worthy of deserving a change in their legal status. The biggest problem, for Lauby, was not so much that professional organisations and immigrant rights activists developed "the perfect DREAMer" narrative, but that a great majority of undocumented youths "internalized" that narrative [38] (p. 375).

4. Coming Out as Undocu (Mented/Queer)

The stories of the many undocumented who have openly declared their status and participated in coming out of the shadows campaigns suggest that there are many commonalities between coming out as an LGBTQ+ member and coming out as undocumented. Similar to LGBTQ+ members, the undocumented have expressed pride, courage, a feeling of liberation, and a sense of community in coming out events. As Pedro de la Torre III and Roy Germano point out, not only has "'Illegality' as the Basis of Identity" created "a sense of shared struggle" [39] (p. 452) but it has also made "[m]embers of the immigrant youth movement [take] their stigmatized undocumented status and made it into a powerful identity" [39] (p. 450). Different professional organisations have also worked behind the scenes in training DREAMers2 [40], including the National Immigrant Youth Alliance, which has "developed a toolkit for the 'undocumented, unafraid and unapologetic'", as for instance "How to Tell Your Story", "Taking Action Online", and "Why Come Out?" [41] (p. 74). According to Hinda Seif, external involvement was marginal as the coming out of the shadows trope rose from within the undocumented movement [7] (p. 87). She highlights that not only has the involvement of queer undocumented youths been important but it also reflected "the intersectionality of queer youth of color, rather than an appropriation of gay and lesbian speech by outsiders" [7] (p. 94).

In his ethnographic work, Jesus Cisneros refers to the outness of his research participants as "identity negotiation" [42] (p. 121). More specifically, undocumented and/or LGBTQ+ identities are revealed or concealed according to one's perceptions of "safety, protection and/or visibility" (p. 121), which change according to spaces of (inter)action. The processes of becoming and outing are mostly distinct. All of Cisneros' respondents have not only come out as LGBTQ+, undocumented, and undocuqueer at different points, but they all have also highlighted the dilemma of "simultaneously living in the *closet* and in the *shadows*" (p. 133). Moreover, the very idea of determining whether one is "in" or "out" of the closet based on whether one has openly declared one's identity is, according to Carlos Decena [43], misleading. By problematising contemporary queer communities and the way they celebrate "the individual, the visible, and the proud" (p. 399), Decena highlights that a refusal "to discuss an openly lived homosexuality" does not amount to "silence" (p. 340). His findings from research on Dominican immigrant gay and bisexual individuals in New York City suggest that "some of [his] informants inhabit a space that is 'in' and 'out' of the closet in terms of the tacit subject" (p. 340). They are tacit subjects since they do not necessarily share their identity or feel the need to, as it is "already understood or assumed" (p. 340).

What emerges from this brief overview of the outing literature is that it is a complex *personal* experience for both LGBTQ+ and undocumented individuals, especially the undocuqueer, who are likely to go through different outing experiences. These differences are, however, important. The home is a safe space where one can share one's undocumented status, as there is no need to declare it to other family members or feel ashamed of it; yet, even at home, declaring one's gender identity is often problematic. Some feel comfortable sharing their irregular status, but they do not necessarily feel as comfortable sharing their gender identity. While the prior experience of coming out as LGBTQ+ has helped some publicly declare their undocumented status, for others, revealing their LGBTQ+ identity to their family members has proven more difficult.

5. The Power of Outing Strategies

It was Michel Foucault [44] who first suggested the use of the dominant discourse as a tool for resistance. In particular, he highlighted that the emergence of various discourses in the nineteenth century—within psychiatry, jurisprudence, and the literature—on the '"perversity"' of homosexuality did not prevent "a 'reverse' discourse" [44] (p. 101). He explains, "homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" [44] (p. 101). This is precisely the strategy that gay communities originally adopted in their public struggle for recognition. They started using and declaring, with pride, the very same stigmatised and dominant language that labelled their sexuality as deviant, abnormal, and unnatural. This strategy has been subsequently appropriated by other (excluded and stigmatised) communities, including fat and disabled groups.

The potential of coming out events to effect societal change has traditionally been taken for granted under the premise that pride, in response to stigma and shame, was itself transformative and emancipatory. As Nikki Sullivan put it,

> Associated with 'pride' and with the rhetoric of choice was the belief in the transformative power of "coming out", of publicly declaring one's personal and political identity. [. . .] 'Coming out' has its benefits and its disadvantages, but either way, the call to come out presupposes that such an action is in itself transformative. [45] (p. 31)

Coming out campaigns were portrayed as transformative because "Gay Liberation promised freedom not just for those [. . .] of the so-called same sex, but for everyone" [45] (p. 31). Yet, what was eventually achieved was very different from what was envisioned. Gay pride "did not bring about politically significant changes", nor did it revolutionise society by eradicating traditional notions of gender and sexuality (p. 31). In other words, gay pride events did not break the normal/abnormal divide. But where gay pride actually succeeded was in encouraging excluded, marginalised, and stigmatised groups to celebrate their *chosen* identities with pride, create a sense of community, overcome negative perceptions, and mobilise for a shared cause.

Identity claims and displays have been crucial in almost all social movements that have traditionally played a key role in shaping members' sense of identity and converting their "shame and loneliness into pride and solidarity" [46] (p. 252), see also [47–49]. Mobilising and transforming participants into visible and audible subjects are very complex tasks. As Lory Britt and David Heise elucidate, members of marginalised groups are often made to feel "ashamed, isolated, and perhaps depressed. The first task is to turn shame and depression into other emotions with higher activation in order to incite and motivate" [46] (p. 255). Identity (re)production is part and parcel of collective actions. As Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani have highlighted, identity does not refer simply to an autonomous subject but to "the process by which social actors recognize themselves—and are recognized by other actors—as part of broader collectivities, and develop emotional attachments to them" [50] (p. 133 epub). Identity formation is no longer simply constructed around class, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, but it is also based upon shared experiences, orientations, values, and worldviews [50] (p. 133). Needless to say, social identification is not a static process. Identity and action are (re)shaped in response to social and political contexts as well as members' motives and aims, see [51–53]. Identity construction creates and defines boundaries between members and non-members, between a 'we' and a 'them'. In other words, it is through identity that individual and collective identification is (re)shaped, networks are created, and action is organised [54,55]. Identity formation does not simply allow for the emergence of a (strong) sense of belonging among its members but it also works as an emancipatory tool. As Alexander put it,

> One might wonder why identity politics have had such a strong hold on our political, social, and cultural imaginations. The reasons are simple. Considering our culture's widespread homophobia and the lack of queer visibility, identity politics has given us an imagination, perhaps even a collective consciousness, of what we could be. Further, [. . .] we should consider the powerful psychological desire to be accepted within identifiable communities, to be a little less alone in our existentially angst-ridden world, to know that there are others out there like us. The collective consciousness offered by believing in a shared and common identity—and our buying into that identity—has certainly helped to alleviate those feelings of angst. [16] (p. 299)

The coming out of the shadows strategy should be read precisely along these lines. They have, among others, offered undocumented youth a key tool for achieving a sense of shared experience, pride, solidarity, and the motivation and courage to speak up. However, as some have pointed out, disclosing their irregular legal status does not necessarily suggest that the undocumented see themselves as 'illegal'. However, according to René Galindo, undocumented youth are publicly disclosing their identity not "so much because they accept the dominant label as undocumented, but to declare that they should not be ashamed of their legal status to the point of keeping it to themselves" [29] (p. 602).

In brief, public campaigns articulated upon identity—and especially coming out events—have historically been used as important tools for resistance—a resistance that tends to focus more on reacting to power rather than opposing and breaking the very structures that subjugate and exclude them. This is precisely the paradox of adopting identity as the key language of a struggle. For instance, Joshua Gamson argues that recent social movement theory has devoted more attention to "the creation and negotiation of collective identity" rather than paying "sufficient attention to the simultaneous impulse to destabilize identities from within" [56] (p. 390). The question is not to decide who is right between "the boundary-strippers and the boundary-defenders"—those who advocate dismantling identity boundaries and those who advocate protecting them—as they are both right (p. 400). The important task at hand is to acknowledge the limits of identity politics. By constructing certain identities, the "system of meanings that underlies the political oppression" is not at all challenged; on the contrary, identity categories are ratified and reinforced (p. 400).

6. Rethinking Identity Politics

While the benefits of the coming out strategy are rather evident, less evident are the dangers of reproducing the very same dominant messages that marginalised, excluded, and stigmatised communities aim to resist and challenge. The question is not simply whether outing events enable change—as they clearly do and not exclusively at the personal level—but rather, what kinds of transformations can they effect in the case of dominant exclusivist systems. In other words, does reaffirming a stigmatised identity help in contesting dominant stigmas? According to some of the critical literature—within Fat Politics and Disability Studies, whose (academic) members have also personally experienced outing processes—it does not.

Both the fat and disability movements have used identity politics as a key tool for resisting dominant perceptions. While public campaigns have succeeded in creating a strong sense of commonality, they have not succeeded in breaking the normal/abnormal duality. Contrary to other social movements, the fat and disability movements do not aim to secure recognition and acceptance of their stigmatised identities; rather, they seek their inclusion as full members of the group. In this context, Fat Politics and Disability Studies offer important insights on the limits of identity politics—limits that have been discussed in the discourse only recently, after two decades of coming out campaigns. This is the first reason for incorporating this set of the literature, as their experiences offer important insights for reflection. The second, and most important, reason for juxtaposing Fat and Disability Studies with (undocumented) activism is their commonalities. The undocumented, the fat, and the disabled are not simply marginalised and excluded because they are part of (linguistic, religious, or cultural) minority groups. They are discriminated and made invisible because their (imposed) identities are highly stigmatised. They tend to be identified not simply as different but as 'abnormal' or 'irregular'. Lennard Davis articulates this well. According to him, to better understand the disabled body, one should consider not the construction of disability but the construction of normalcy. As he put it: "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" [57] (p. 3). The normal/abnormal duality also applies to other stigmatised groups. The concept of the undocumented is articulated in relation to the concept of the (normal and documented) citizen as much as the concept of the fat body is articulated in light of the thin one. It is to this literature that the focus will shift.

To begin with, Samantha Murray, in her article, "(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics" [29], suggests moving away from any celebration articulated upon a stigmatised identity. According to Murray, the political potential of coming out events is very limited as they only seek to transform negative perceptions into positive ones. For her, the biggest challenge is not simply implementing this transformation but contesting the system that created those perceptions and knowledge in the first place. Murray highlights the dominant understanding of the fat body, which is not only to be generally perceived as a deviant, but as a deviant which needs to become "normal". If this transformation proves to be impossible, then the fat body is expected to disguise itself using special clothes and pass as a thin body [58] (p. 155). Murray is especially critical of Eve Sedgwick's argument [59], elaborated together with Michael Moon, that fat women should come out as fat not because they would reveal a (non-hidden) truth but because they would thereby signal a change in perspective. By doing so, fat women would display a profound sense of pride in their (stigmatised) bodies. For Sedgwick and Moon, coming out as fat is not about drawing attention to something that is already apparent, but "in speaking the truth of one's body, [one opens] the possibility (despite one's fat hypervisibility) to being *seen in new ways*" [58] (p. 157). The public celebration of one's body is thus read as a crucial step in accepting it. For Murray, the goal of the movement should not be about using coming out campaigns to transform one's personal perceptions regarding one's body but contesting the stigma associated with fat bodies. She asks: "Can we remove ourselves from the knowledges that have become so embedded in our sense of self, simply by changing our mind about our fat bodies?" [58] (p. 161). For Murray, the answer is no. As long as the "normal" body remains thin, no amount of public celebrations will change dominant perceptions (p. 161). Although public (coming out) events are important for creating friendly communities, finding commonalities, advancing positive attitudes, and accepting one's body, they mostly focus on the private sphere. Not private in the sense that these identities are articulated in the home, but private because it prioritises (positive) acceptance of one's own body rather than a public contestation of the stigmatised identity. According to Murray, coming out public events do not aim at challenging or undermining dominant political hierarchies, but on the contrary, they accept uncritically some identities as normal and some others as deviant. To quote Murray,

> Size acceptance does not attempt to alter, nor can it attempt to alter dominant aesthetic ideals simply by changing one's mind about one's fat body. Fat politics and size acceptance are crucial in establishing communities and providing support to fat people. [. . .] but in creating communities and offering support, one does not dismantle dominant cultural ideals about the body and ideal bodily aesthetics. [T]he politics of 'coming out' as fat does not formulate new modes of embodiment or being-in-the-world. [58] (p. 162)

The limits of coming out events in challenging dominant hierarchies have also been highlighted by a few Disability Studies scholars, who have reached similar conclusions. For instance, Shelley Tremain advocates for the disabled people's movement to develop strategies that "make no appeal to the very identity upon which that subjection relies" [60] (p. 194). Despite militant self-pride campaigns where the word "cripple", the "identity that scares the outside world the most" [61] (p. 556), was appropriated as a tool of self-identity during public campaigns, dominant stigmas remain. Making oneself visible with pride is not enough. Borrowing from the Foucauldian power–knowledge nexus, Tremain suggests that the aim of "insurgent movements" should be "to refuse subjecting individuality, not embrace it" [60] (p. 194). By refusing and challenging the imposed identity, it will then be possible "to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal" [57] (p. 8). One way of breaking from the normal/abnormal divide is through language. For instance, some scholars have highlighted how dominant language—as in the case of disability and disabled people—"reinforces the dominant culture's views of disability" [62] (p. 161). Linton Simi is especially critical of dominant medical definitions, which not only "block" any "reinterpretation of *disability* as a political category" but which "also prevent social changes" [62] (162). As he highlights, the very definitions of disability, as in dictionaries, "include incapacity, a disadvantage, deficiency, especially a physical or mental impairment that restricts normal achievement" (162). To this, we can also add that the prefix 'dis' is not dissimilar from the prefix used for the *un*documented, which similarly suggests a lack. This recalls, for instance, Jacques Rancière's conceptualisation of the "un" in the "uncounted", that is, those of no account and those who are not counted as part of society's members [63].

To conclude, this literature suggests that the coming out strategy, particularly the *uncritical* reproduction of dominant stigmatised identities, will neither change dominant knowledge nor dominant power relations. It might challenge, break, or disrupt that knowledge but not necessarily transform it. The question is not whether only a chosen identity, rather than an imposed legal status, should be celebrated but whether identity is a tool for (radical) change when what needs to be dismantled is precisely that very identity that is being celebrated. Although it is recognised that identity politics helps when seeking recognition and acceptance, does it also help when seeking inclusion and respect? For instance, Seif makes a clear distinction between LGBTQ+ communities and the undocumented: "Unlike same-sex sexuality, which has generated a movement for acceptance and inclusion, persons called 'illegal immigrants' work to eliminate this category and status forever" [7] (p. 95). Hence, if the ultimate aim is to eliminate the dominant exclusivist culture and the stigmas and prejudices attached to it, would a "reversed" discourse help achieve that very aim?

7. Identity and (the Limit to) Political Change

Adopting identity celebration as a tool for resistance, therefore, signals an important message to power, but it does not necessarily alter the dominant culture and hierarchies. Consequently, the question is not whether undocumented immigrant activism disrupts the order or reproduces the *status quo*, as articulated, for instance, in the symposium on "Undocumented Immigrant Activism and the Political" [64]. The question is, on the contrary, whether the "moments of break, crack and disruption" might also "signal the beginning of alternative visions" that will help dismantle dominant (sexist, racist, heteronormative, xenophobic, oppressive, and unequal) systems [see 15] (p. 39). This question is especially pertinent in light of the public campaigns that the undocumented movement has successfully implemented in terms of increasing visibility, fostering debate, and opening up new (selective) pathways for inclusion and equality, such as the DACA program and in-state tuition laws[4]. Without disputing these important achievements, we should also ask whether undocumented (disruptive) "acts of citizenship" [65] have also been successful in dismantling the stigma of being undocumented. Hinda Seif specifically asks this question to Julio Salgado, a well-known undocumented artist and queer activist in the US: "How do you think things are changing now that there is the DACA program?" Seif received the following answer:

> there's the idea that if we get papers we're going to be fine. The reality is that it's not. [. . .] It's not going to change the anti-migrant culture. It could make it worse—the idea that you're rewarding criminal activities. So we need to change culture. [66] (p. 308)

The argument that Salgado makes is extremely important. It highlights that while legalisation might solve the problem of their irregular status, it will still leave the (citizenship) system unaltered. Processes of (selected) legalisation have not helped contest the overall culture but have encouraged, on the contrary, the emergence of a myriad of subgroupings articulated upon a long series of binary oppositions—legal vs. illegal, deserving vs. undeserving, honest vs. dishonest, high-achieving students vs. poorly performing students, productive and contributing vs. unproductive and unworthy migrants, and guilty adults vs. innocent children [67]. In other words, identity claims have led to new identity boundaries and left unaltered the dominant 'illegal' stigma.

The concept of 'illegality' is not, however, a stigma used exclusively against the undocumented. A similar stigma has often been attached, albeit differently, to LGBTQ+ members. For instance, Ruthan Robson's question, "Are we sexual outlaws [. . .] Or are we legitimate citizens who have been wrongly excluded from legal recognitions and protections?" [44] (p. 19), quoted in [21] (p. 334), is for Shane Phelan misleading, because it is wrongly formulated. For Phelan, it is not whether lesbians are legitimate or illegitimate, but that it is the "current regime of power/knowledge" that makes the distinction between "being law-abiding and being a criminal"—a distinction that is premised upon "the assumption that 'everyone else' is in fact law-abiding and 'normal'" (p. 334). Acknowledging the limits of identity politics, many queer theorists suggest shifting from claiming rights, recognition, and identity to creating instead the conditions for working together with other marginalised groups against existing forms of oppression. This can be achieved by constructing "coalitions of the future" (p. 345), communities of "values" [16] (p. 304), as well as communities of shared ideas, ideals, and ideologies [68] (p. 371).

This shift will require an approach based on democratic politics, even radical democracy, see [69], where politics is able to "restructure" and not simply "reform" the dominant culture [68]. Queer theorists are not suggesting that identity politics is irrelevant. On the contrary, they recognise its importance in the initial phase of mobilisation as a key tool for constructing communities. The key problem is that, by invoking identity, marginalised communities risk reinforcing marginalisation and domination rather than transforming them. Wendy Brown articulates this very clearly, beyond a queer lens:

> Initial figurations of freedom are inevitably reactionary in the sense of emerging in reaction to perceived injuries or constraints of a regime from within its own terms. Ideals of freedom ordinarily emerge to vanquish their imagined immediate enemies, but in this move they frequently recycle and reinstate rather than transform the terms of domination that generated them. Consider exploited workers who dream of a world in which work has been abolished, blacks who imagine a world without whites, feminists who conjure a world either without men or without sex [. . .]. Such images of freedom perform mirror reversals of suffering without transforming the *organization of the activity through which the suffering is produced* and without addressing the *subject constitution that domination effects*, that is, the constitution of the social categories, 'workers', 'blacks', 'women'. [70] (p. 7)

By referring to "initial figurations", Brown clearly suggests that there are different times and different modalities of action and reaction for countering domination. By (rhetorically) asking: "what kind of political recognition can identity-based claims seek [. . .] that will not resubordinate a subject itself historically subjugated through identity"? Brown makes her position clear (p. 55). For her, politicised groups need to move away from identity claims and start adopting the language of want. More specifically, Brown proposes to replace "the language of 'being' with 'wanting'", that is, switching stances that focus on "the language of 'I am' [. . .] with the language of 'I want this for us"' (p. 75). To use Wendy Brown's own words:

> What if we sought to supplant the language of 'I am'—with its defensive closure on identity [. . .]—with the language of 'I want this for us'? [...] What if we were to rehabilitate the memory of desire within identificatory processes [. . .]? What if 'wanting to be' or 'wanting to have' were taken up as modes of political speech that could destabilize the formulation of identity as fixed position? [70] (p. 75)

The shift that Brown proposes is not simply a linguistic one. It entails a radical shift in perspective—from a focus on today's "unlivable present" towards a tomorrow that aims at "forging an alternative future" (p. 76). To articulate the struggle in terms of "want", there is a need to envisage a project, an alternative, or a new vision that does not simply *re*act to stigmas, exclusion, and dominant immigration politics but starts building a different reality. The need to "envision a [alternative] future" is also highlighted in Shane Phelan's work. In her chapter, "The Space of Justice: Lesbians and Democratic Politics", she suggests moving away from the "vision of 'politics', as the terrain of power" and engaging with a "common vision or justice or citizenship" [21] (pp. 332–333). More specifically, she suggests a change in perspective and approach, no longer or not exclusively focused on "calls for 'subversion' [but towards] to a more concrete and specific agenda" upon which to build a new future (p. 333). However, a new future requires a shared project that is not just shared by marginalised groups but also one that is able to attract dominant groups. In other words, there is a need to move from identity politics and its claims of uniqueness and diversity to democratic politics and its claims of a shared space for debate and agreement towards realising a common vision.

The need to make the general American public part of the debate has been, for instance, publicly recognised by the undocumented themselves, some of whom offer a different reading of coming out events. One such person is Jose Antonio Vargas, a Pulitzer Prize shared-winner, often known as 'the most famous illegal in America'. He made this point very clearly in a 20-minute TEDxMidAtlantic talk in 2012 titled "Be Fearless" [71]. After sharing his personal story, Vargas asked his audience: "Why do people like me come out? [. . .] And here is an interesting thing, we are not really coming out. We are just letting you in". Vargas' suggestion that the undocumented are not really coming out—and he also experienced his outing as a gay teenager during his school years—but are "letting people in" provoked and stimulated alternative ways of reading coming out events. The idea of letting people in suggests that the struggles of the undocumented are not simply *their* (identity) struggle but a shared American struggle. It is a political and democratic struggle open to anyone willing to be part of a more inclusive project. By presenting it as a common (democratic) struggle, Vargas switched the terrain of the debate from the undocumented to the American citizens. What mattered to Vargas was not what the undocumented were doing but what American citizens were going to do "to them". As he puts it: "what [are] you gonna do? All the American citizens, people sitting here, how are you to solve this issue? How are [you] going to help us?" [71].

Vargas' perspective that the undocumented are not really coming out but "letting people in" challenges traditional notions of identity politics and highlights the importance of rethinking our approach to youth activism. It suggests that the undocumented are not "coming out" to reveal their identity and liberate themselves from a hidden truth. Rather, they are becoming visible and audible in order to make American citizens aware of what they see as the "wrong" in the picture [63]. Vargas calls for the struggles of the undocumented to be considered a political problem for American society and not simply a personal problem of the undocumented. His call is not for a politics of identity but for shared political engagement.

By political engagement, I am specifically referring to the ability to come up with a new (inclusive) project, a new dream, or a new configuration of society. In this light, my understanding of "the political" is closer to that in Jacques Rancière's work [63], that is, a politics that aims at breaking from the *status quo*. For him, to engage with the political is to break from the ordinary, the accepted, and the taken-for-granted. Politics signals the ability to break the dominant configuration that defines "the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying" [63] (p. 29). By introducing the concept of "disagreement", of "dissensus", Rancière suggests that

> every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those what are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world. [72] (p. 9)

In other words, for Rancière, politics is the ability to move beyond the current configuration of the sensible by allowing the unfamiliar, the impossible, and the unthinkable to emerge. However, while Rancière suggests how the ordinary might be "cracked open from the inside" (p. 9), he does not envisage the modalities through which *dissensus* might lead to political change. As suggested somewhere else [15], there is a need to transform that *dissensus* into a *consensus*, that is, into a shared vision, which is what I am also suggesting in this paper.

8. Concluding Remarks

This article offers a critical analysis of the concept of 'coming out', which has served as an important tool for a great part of undocumented activism. While it is indisputable that coming out events help excluded groups become visible and audible in society, they do not *necessarily* possess the transformative potential to break dominant stigmas.

The critical approaches offered by Disability, Fat Politics, and Queer scholars offer an interesting prism through which to scrutinise the limits of identity politics in breaking *and* transforming dominant exclusivist and hierarchical systems. For them, the challenge is not to transform negative perceptions into positive ones but to contest those systems that create, impose, and maintain those very perceptions. The question of which (linguistic and identitarian) tools to adopt in public events is a crucial one for the undocumented, as they not only seek acceptance and recognition but also aim to break dominant stigmas and eliminate the very concept of 'illegality' that drives their marginalisation. Although the perspective used here is mostly theoretical, this conceptual paper will hopefully encourage a (lively) debate on the benefits, as much as the limits, of identity politics in encouraging a change in perspective. If 'the master's tools will not dismantle the masters' house'—as Audre Lorde highlighted already in 1984 [73] (p. 112) —more attention should be given to the benefits, and the limits, of adopting the dominant stigmatising language during public campaigns. Perhaps the Foucauldian concept of "a 'reverse' discourse" [44] (p. 101), recalled earlier, requires greater scrutiny. While it certainly encourages emancipation, empowerment, and pride on the part of the marginalised and silenced, it does not necessarily help break dominant stigmas.

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Notes

[1] The concept 'undocumented youth' refers to a very heterogeneous group, including students and non-students, roughly between the ages of 18 up to 40.

[2] The bill was presented in 2005 to the Congress, under the name Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (known as H.R. 4437) and aimed at criminalising whole communities of undocumented immigrants and those who supported them. The bill included provisions related to tightening border controls, higher penalties for those abetting irregular crossings, increased controls in the workplaces in order to deter employers from hiring migrants.

[3] DREAM Act is the acronym of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, introduced in 2001, which opened up the possibility for undocumented youths to regularise their status and eventually gain citizenship, if certain conditions were met. Those who mobilise in favour of the Act, as well as those who could benefit from DACA, tend to be identified as DREAMers.

[4] DACA stands for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. It is a 2012 US immigration policy that allowed undocumented youths who entered the US as children (up to age five) to apply for a process of regularisation, allowing authorities to defer deportation and make them eligible for employment. In-state tuition laws refer to the possibility, recognised by some US states under certain conditions, that these students could pay the same tuition fees at universities as nationals.

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