

Article

Divorce Rites as a Way of Dealing with a Life Course Transition: The Case of Contemporary Italy

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Abstract: In Western culture, divorce is becoming a transition event in individual life courses. As a result, it starts to be celebrated in ritual forms. In Italy, divorce is still a highly deritualized event from both civil and religious perspectives, although the transformations that make divorce a transition event have been occurring in recent years. This article depicts the complexities of divorce in a society such as Italy, where instances of social change coexist with strong elements of tradition. Emerging cultural practices related to couple dissolution in both formal and informal contexts are discussed. Structural determinants emerge as a force that can contribute to shaping the divorce rite as a new rite of passage.

Keywords: divorce rite; ritual studies; life course studies; Italy; end of marriage; marital instability; divorce ceremonies; secularization

1. Introduction

A ritual can be described as social behavior, more or less formalized, which includes symbolic actions, gestures, words, music, and sounds performed in a specific sequence. It is not necessary for all these elements to be present simultaneously. Ritual practices tend to be institutionalized and rule-driven, but they can also be adapted to fit specific contexts. They may involve both individuals and groups (Turner 1969). Rituals make meaning, order the complexity of the world, and enable symbolic communication (Bell 1992). Humans have used rituals for thousands of years to promote conformity in societies, transmit norms and values, and shape the behavior of individuals (Collins 2004).

While classical studies focused primarily on the religious dimension of rituals in traditional and non-Western societies (see the foundational contributions of James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Clifford Geertz on the anthropological side, and Emile Durkheim's studies on the sociological side) (Frazer 1922; Malinowski 1948; Geertz 1957; Durkheim 1912), recent scholars have expanded the dimension of the rite from religious practice alone to all other areas of life experience. Rituals are not just observed in traditional cultures but are also part of contemporary societies.

Religion, sport, and politics are a pool of ritual behaviors (Segalen 1998). The practices of everyday life, from dietary habits to leisure activity or performing work tasks, are also spheres in which symbolic practices can be found (Rusu and Kantola 2016). According to Post (2013), ritual can be found in six cultural domains: (a) Seasons and the calendar year, (b) the cycle of life (or life course), (c) religion, (d) commemorative and memory culture, (e) artistic practices, and (f) sport, tourism, and leisure culture. Even in secularized societies, these are spaces where gestures, words, and sounds are performed in ritual forms by individuals and groups to give meaning to the passage of time, the moving of life, making sense of events in personal and collective history, and creating bridges between the past and the present. As such, rituals use symbolic language to respond to unavoidable needs of human life that persist in contemporary societies (among others, see Bell 1992; Douglas 1970; Luhmann 1989).



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Although ritual practices seem to be traditional and persistent, they are variable and subject to social change. Rituals can vary over time and in different social contexts. Some rituals disappear, while others emerge as a result of social transformations. The development of novel rituals favors coping with social change (Grimes 2000; Schechner 1995). In recent decades, the increasingly widespread use of new communication technologies has shaped new ritual patterns that mix online and offline practices, reducing the distinction between these two dimensions (Hoondert and van der Beek 2019). In very recent years, the measures needed by the health emergency that has affected all societies since January 2020 have resulted in some rituals ceasing to exist or being postponed. Other rituals, however, have become established. To give a well-known example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a bow, a head nod, or a gaze of understanding has taken the place of the customary handshake as a sign of greeting (Post and Hoondert 2021).

This article focuses on divorce rites as considered within the framework of rites of passage, starting from the classical studies by Arnold Van Gennep (1909). Divorce rites are explored as emerging life course rituals within Western culture (in discussing the theoretical and methodological aspects of life course studies, see the work of Elder (1985), Bengston and Allen (1993), and Giele and Elder (1998)). The work depicts the complexities of divorce in a society such as Italy, where instances of social change coexist with strong elements of tradition. Emerging cultural practices related to couple dissolution in Italy are first explored, in both formal and informal contexts. The reasoning is supported by secondary and documentary research and previous work regarding marriage and divorce practices. The leading research question is as follows: What kind of divorce rituals and ritual-like practices can be traced in contemporary Italy? Greater attention is given to formal rites, focusing on the religious, legislative, and economic spheres. The absence of formal religious and civil rites for divorce in Italy is discussed in Section 4. New formal initiatives, emerging primarily from business-oriented parties, are described in Section 5. The possibility of informal divorce ceremonial practices existing, especially in the absence of formal ceremonies, is discussed in Section 6.

2. Life Course and Ceremonial Practices

Ritual practices can be found to celebrate life-cycle or life-course events (Post 2013). According to life course theory, individual biographies can be seen as sequences of successive stages from birth to death (Bengston and Allen 1993; Elder 1985; Giele and Elder 1998). In Western culture, the main phases are early childhood, childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age. Non-Western cultures may organize the life course of an individual along specific trajectories. Each stage of life corresponds to a different social status, from which norms of behavior and role expectations come, both formally and informally. Individual lives and social group relationships change as people move through the different stages.

When people move from one stage of their lives to another, their social roles change and this is referred to as a “transition event” (Elder et al. 2003; Hagestad 2003). Birth, growing older, entering old age, and death are examples of these events. A transition event marks the end of one phase and the beginning of a new life span. Some changes are considered normal and socially expected, such as getting a job and starting a family, whereas others are not, such as a sudden and unanticipated loss or a windfall. A transition event requires people to leave their previous position and take on a new one. This change involves both individuals and their social network consisting of the people who have social interactions with them. Status passages over the life course require a process of adaptation to the new role, which is not always easy to deal with, even when changes result in an improvement in life chances.

People employ ceremonies to mark the transition from one stage of the life course to another. Ceremonies consist of a series of gestures, words, actions, sounds, and music performed in a specific and codified order. These ceremonies are known as rites of passage (Van Gennep 1909). Rites of passage consist of celebrations that mark a change in social status. They denote the end of one social status and the beginning of another. Ceremonies

assist individuals in understanding, clarifying, and communicating the change that is taking place. Rituals give meaning to change and help people cope with uncertainty. They can be shared with a restricted or extended network, in a private or public sphere; in any case, they make the change visible while strengthening social bonds (Turner 1969).

In Western societies, marriage has traditionally been regarded as an important life-course transition event (Van Genneep 1909; Segalen 1998). Until the late 1960s, spouses were considered to leave youth and enter adulthood, gaining a new social status that allowed them to leave their family of origin and begin new experiences such as cohabiting, sexuality, and parenting. As a result, marriage has always been marked by various rituals, which have changed over time and in different social contexts. Nowadays, marriage has largely lost its rite of passage characteristics in Western cultures because it is postponed and preceded by a series of experiences that anticipate entry into adult roles. Regardless, marriage is still often celebrated in highly ritualized and spectacular ways (Segalen 1998).

3. Divorce in Life Course Trajectories

Not all experiences of the life course are recognized as transition events and combined with ritual celebrations. An interesting case concerns the exit from marriage. For a long time in contemporary Western societies, the dissolution of marriage was not regarded as a rite of passage and thus was not formally celebrated in ritual forms (Van Genneep 1909; Grimes 1995).

There are two main reasons why divorce has not been formally ritualized as a rite of passage in contemporary Western societies (Arosio 2016). According to life course theory (Bengston and Allen 1993; Elder 1985; Giele and Elder 1998), a transition event needs a starting state and an arrival state. Previously, the status of people who were no longer married due to divorce was not generally accepted and socially regulated, especially concerning social acknowledgment and the informal norms to be observed in different situations of life experience. Divorce, and the same counts for remarriage, has long been regarded as an “incomplete institution” (Cherlin 1978). Second, divorce was perceived as an unexpected and poorly accepted event. The legal dissolution of marriage was considered an avoidable choice and not a “normal” part of the life course. After all, the end of marriage has been identified as one of the primary examples of informal relationship failure, particularly in traditional societies (Goffman 1952).

Nowadays, these motivations are disappearing. The status of divorced people has been extensively analyzed. Starting from the 1980s, research has mapped out the many changes that result from divorce (Kitson and Morgan 1990). The end of a marriage is a long-lasting process that involves many spheres of people’s lives, such as finances, work, physical and mental well-being, daily activities, identity, and lifestyles (Amato 2000). The relationships of former partners also change, especially with their children, the family of origin, and friends. Divorce reshapes the bonds between generations that become more complex and not always easy to manage (Cherlin et al. 1995). Legal separation and divorce bring people to a new status and open a new phase of their lives characterized by new roles (Amato 2000, 2010).

Moreover, an increasing number of people experience divorce, and it is no longer considered an unexpected event. Divorce has grown considerably in the last century due to economic, social, and cultural transformations (Phillips 1988; Weitzman 1985). Growth has occurred both in countries where marital breakup is widespread, such as the United States and the countries of northern, western, and eastern Europe, and in societies where separation and divorce are less frequent, such as the countries of southern Europe. Moreover, the dissolution of marriage tends to be considered a legitimate and justified act when marriage does not correspond to the well-being and aspirations of individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1990; Giddens 1992; Bauman 2003). In Western societies, there is a process of increasing normalization, deproblematization, and public de-stigmatization of separation and divorce (Eckert 2021).

As a result of these developments, in contemporary Western societies, divorce is increasingly accepted as a life-course transition (Arosio 2016). The emergence of divorce rituals may ease the transitions of a divorcing couple and their family, allowing for an adaptive response to these life changes while preserving family integrity (Lewis 1983; Johnson 1988). In some countries such as Japan, Australia, and the United States, divorce ceremonies are starting to be offered. Civil celebrants are being formed to celebrate life's transition events, including divorce (Hoondert 2019). Some religions are exploring the possibility of shaping a religious rite of divorce (Ramshaw 1987; Teig 1990; Bianca 2015; Jenkins 2014; Lauxmann 2023). Some films and music begin to talk about marital dissolution by giving a representation of the rituals of divorce. The therapeutic role of divorce rituals is discussed (for example Jackson and Donovan 1988).

Divorce rites may be civil, religious, formal, or created spontaneously through informal practices. They can be celebrated publicly or in personal practice. Only through intensive social research could the emergence of divorce rites be systematically highlighted in both formal and informal contexts.

4. Divorce in Contemporary Italy: The Absence of Civil and Religious Ceremonies

Italy is an interesting case to be investigated in terms of family models, divorce, and divorce rituals. On the one hand, Italian society is more traditional than other contemporary Western countries. Family is one of the most important values, and it plays a central role in the Italian welfare system through intergenerational solidarity bonds (among others, see Esping-Andersen 1999; Naldini 2003). When compared to other Western countries, Italian family models and living arrangements are more traditional and stable. Italy has a relatively high marriage rate, a low rate of non-marital cohabitation, a low divorce rate, and a low number of births outside of marriage (for the updated data, see Istat 2023 and Eurostat 2023).

At the same time, Italy has demonstrated a strong path of modernization and social change in family behavior since the 1970s. Marriages have declined from approximately 500,000 in 1970 to approximately 180,000 in 2019. Italians also increasingly postpone marriage decisions. The average age of first marriage for men is 34 and for women it is 33 (Istat 2021). The postponement of the first marriage is linked to other behaviors, such as young people staying in their family of origin for an extended period of time and the rise in premarital cohabitation (Istat 2021).

From 1999 to 2019, the amount of cohabitation more than quadrupled, rising from approximately 340 thousand to 1 million 370 thousand (Istat 2021). The proportion of civil weddings (where the Church is not involved) increased from 2.3% in 1970 to 52.6% in 2019. In 2019, there were 34,185 marriages with at least one non-Italian groom. This type of marriage is represented by nearly two out of every ten couples (18.6% of total marriages in Italy) (Istat 2021). The law establishing same-sex civil partnerships in Italy went into effect in June 2016. Because there were a number of couples waiting to formalize their relationship, 2336 civil unions were formed in the second half of 2016. The initial expansion was then followed by a gradual stabilization (Istat 2022).

Since the introduction of divorce into Italian law (in 1970) until the middle of the last decade, the trend of marital dissolution has been increasing. Following the implementation of two important laws that changed the discipline of dissolution and the cessation of civil effects of marriage in 2015 (see below in this section), the number of divorces increased significantly (+57.5%) (Istat 2021). The rise in marital instability contributes to the spread of second marriages and families with at least one person who has previously married. In 2019, at least one groom was present at a second (or subsequent) wedding in 20.6% of marriages (Istat 2021). Divorce has become more acceptable in Italian public opinion since the early years of the twenty-first century: 71.1% of Italian women and 66.2% of Italian men in 2003 declared to agree with divorce, even in families with children, as the dissolution of an unhappy marital union (Istat 2006). The research highlighted the consequences of

divorce, regarding many life domains and leading to a new phase of existence (for a review see [Arosio 2009](#); [Todesco 2009](#)).

Given these changes, conditions exist in Italy for treating divorce as a transition event in people's live courses. Nonetheless, at the moment, neither a religious nor a civil rite is provided in a formalized way in Italy.

From a religious standpoint, Italy continues to experience the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which has historically had a significant impact on Italian society in terms of both personal behavior and social relations. Family law has been significantly influenced by the Catholic Church, particularly the laws governing civil union, divorce, and obligations for family solidarity ([Naldini 2003](#)). Its influence also extends to individuals' values and attitudes, particularly those concerning family and family life ([Albertini and Dronkers 2009](#)). Scholars have frequently linked the strong attachment to Catholic values to the delayed diffusion of new family behaviors such as cohabitation, marital dissolution, or non-marital childbearing in Italy (for a review see [Vignoli and Salvini 2014](#)). According to the Catholic Church, the marriage bond is indissoluble and cannot be broken (in exceptional cases, the Church allows the bond to be declared void, which means it never existed, but this is a different situation from divorce). The Catholic Church does not recognize divorce and does not advocate for a divorce celebration.

Divorce law in Italy was not introduced until 1970 (Law 898/1970), much later than in most Western countries. This delay was influenced by historical and cultural factors, as well as resistance from groups exposed to the Catholic Church's influence (see above in this section). The Divorce Law was enacted with great difficulty, in an uncertain political climate (for a re-construction, see [Seymour 2006](#)). In 1974, a referendum was held to ask Italians whether they supported or opposed the preservation of the Divorce Law. Because roughly 60% of Italians supported the law, it was maintained. The Italian legal framework for divorce can be considered very prudent because of these circumstances.

The law calls for a two-step procedure ([Barbagli and Saraceno 1998](#)). As the first step, Italian spouses must obtain a legal separation that is approved by the court. Legal separation does not terminate the marriage but rather suspends its effects until reconciliation or divorce proceedings are completed. Following that, new divorce proceedings can be initiated. Because divorce is not an automatic procedure after legal separation, the spouses must formulate a request for divorce. Divorce results in the dissolution of the marriage and the termination of its civil consequences. The original 1970 Law required five years between legal separation and divorce, then three years (Law 74/1987), and now one year or six months (but only if ex-partners agree and specific criteria are met (Law 55/2015, so-called Short Divorce Law).

The divorce procedure varies, depending on how the divorce is obtained. A consensual procedure (if the spouses reach an agreement on the terms and conditions of the divorce) or a judicial procedure (if there is no agreement) can be used. In a judicial proceeding, partners appear in court. In a consensual procedure, they can decide whether to go to court or not, though going to court lengthens the proceedings. Partners in a consensual divorce may choose to be represented by lawyers or to proceed without legal representation.

From 1 March 2023, separation and divorce can be obtained in a single proceeding. Reform has been introduced with the intention of reducing delays and complexities. This reform's actual implementation and effects cannot yet be assessed.

The Italian law on divorce is composed of several steps, which might contribute to a ritualized process, although in an ambiguous way. For instance, allowing a period of reflection between legal separation and divorce is a way of marking time in a ritual manner. During the legal separation process, the effects of marriage are put on hold and spouses prepare for leaving the marriage. In the period between legal separation and divorce, the spouses are in an intermediate state between two social statuses. With the request for divorce, the spouses enter a new phase of no longer being married. From a certain perspective, this reflects the three-phase structure that tends to characterize rites of passage ([Van Gennep 1909](#)): A preliminary or separation phase, in which the exit from the previous

status occurs; a liminal period, in which individuals do not belong to either phase; and a post-liminal or reincorporation phase, in which a new condition is reached.

At the same time, divorce in Italy is a difficult, time-consuming, and costly legal process. This prevents ritualization. Many couples do not start the procedure at all. Some couples obtain only a legal separation without filing for divorce. Only a reduced percentage of couples divorce. In any case, divorce is finalized years after the decision to end the marriage. Moreover, the procedure is divided into so many steps that it appears difficult to identify the precise point at which the marriage ends.

5. Divorce Professionals and Business Practices in Italy: A Sign of Change?

As stated in the above section, there are no civil or religious formalized divorce rites in Italy at the moment. In terms of business practices, some initiatives are being proposed, albeit in a sporadic manner¹.

A Divorce Fair was held in 2010 in Italy (Milan 8–9 May 2010), as organized in previous years in the United States and other European countries (Albertini 2010). In these fairs, agencies and professionals offer former partners their services to get through divorce and address the consequences of the marriage breakdown. Legal and administrative assistance, physical and psychological well-being, logistical organization, and leisure and free-time facilities are the main services provided, either separately or as part of a package. In conjunction with the divorce fair, a department store chain proposed a divorce gift list in Italy². Relatives and friends can donate items and services from a catalog to assist former partners in furnishing their new homes and reorganizing their new lives. The concept has already been tested in other European countries, where two different department store chains have launched a gift list for ex-spouses (Fnac and Debenhams).

Some divorce planning agencies have emerged in Italy in recent years³. Divorce planners are counselors who assist partners during separation and divorce by providing legal, psychological, and organizational support to deal with the changing situation. Divorce planning companies usually provide the services of more experts (see Deutsch 2008). The role of the divorce planner in Italy is not formally codified; professionals who provide this type of service are typically psychologists, lawyers, or family mediators.

The figure of the secular celebrant is emerging. A celebrant is a professional who defines and presides over the form and content of a secular ceremony (Wojtkowiak 2022). When people do not want conventional religious or civil authorities to officiate at events such as weddings, births, or funerals, secular celebrants plan ceremonies in their place. Celebrants also provide ceremonies to ritualize moments for which no traditional rites exist, such as adoption, wedding vow renewal, academic and professional achievement, and even divorces as part of farewell rites (Hoondert 2019). In Italy, the figure of the professional celebrant is not legally defined. A free and autonomous association of secular ceremony professionals was tentatively established in 2020⁴.

These proposals are primarily commercial, made on an irregular basis, and not organized as a whole. At first glance, they appear to be extravagant initiatives or futile attempts to avoid the pain that follows the breakdown of a marriage. In a broader sense, these initiatives may be regarded as tentative steps of an emerging rite of divorce (Arosio 2011), in the absence of established religious or civil rituals. According to Arnold Van Gennep's (1909) three-fold scheme, the preliminary, liminal, and post-liminal phases are supposed to be recognized in the rite of divorce (see also Section 4). It is possible to put the professionals we have introduced in this section into the three-fold scheme. Lawyers, notaries, psychologists, family mediators, and religious consultants officiate the preliminary phase, which concerns the decision to separate and the preliminary agreements. They offer their services to accompany the spouses out of marriage. The civil celebrants and event organizers help ex-partners have a ceremony during the liminal phase. Wellness consultants, real estate agents, travel and dating agencies, babysitters, and other professionals help in facing the post-liminal phase, involving the redefinition of social status and daily life activities. Divorce planners can supervise the entire process.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In Western societies, divorce is becoming a life-course transition event. Therefore, the breakup of marriage is starting to be supported by ceremonial practices that mark the status transition and meet the need of creating meaning and symbolic communication, while addressing social change (Grimes 2000). At the same time, cultural, religious, and legal contexts allow divorce rituals to take shape more or less easily. Italian society is an example.

The number of spouses who end their marriage through divorce has increased in contemporary Italy. Divorce seems to be more socially acceptable and results in a new social status. Divorce, in this view, gradually takes on the form of a transition event. The dynamics of social change in these areas of life are intense and rapid.

Nonetheless, neither religious nor civil divorce rites formally exist for Italian spouses. As argued in Section 4, the lack of a religious rite has been linked to the Roman Catholic Church's position, which has had a significant impact on Italian culture over the centuries and does not allow for divorce. In terms of legal procedure, the road to divorce is long and fragmented, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact moment at which the marriage ends. It is unclear whether recent legislative changes will help in this regard. Because of these circumstances, at the moment, formal divorce rites are hardly to be found in Italy. The absence of such rituals can be seen as an interesting aspect, particularly when considering the process of secularization in Italy and its unique configurations compared to other European countries.

What could be the consequences of the absence of a rite of passage in a society in which divorce has become a transition event? One result may be the difficulty of making sense of the changes taking place and adapting to the new status for both former partners and their families. Moreover, uncertainty in sharing and making public the change may arise (Grimes 2000). Finding a new personal and social equilibrium can be more difficult. A ritual ceremony would also serve to manage grief and suffering.

In the case of absent formal rituals, new initiatives emerge in Italy, primarily from business-oriented parties, to offer their services in life course transitions. In Section 5, some initiatives related to separation and divorce have been presented. Services are proposed in the market and look realized by importing practices from abroad. Moreover, new initiatives tend to be copied from well-known practices related to marriage and transformed into practices for the "divorce market". The divorce fair, for example, comes after spouses' fairs, which have long been organized to offer services for marriage organization. The divorce gift list is similar to the wedding gift list in that relatives and friends contribute to the spouses' new life by selecting a gift from an inventory prepared by the couple. Divorce planners offer an organizing and coordinating service that can be compared to that of wedding planners.

The risk of divorce rites being commercialized (or commodified) exists. The message that can come through is that a sensitive and painful life event such as divorce can be turned into a business, undervaluing the significance of a life-changing experience. On the other hand, the existence of emerging practices, even if economically oriented, can be seen as an attempt to develop parts of a ritual ceremony to express personal and group needs.

The article focused on formal practices. Rites may also emerge and consolidate prior to and outside of the normative framework (legal, religious, or commercial) that contains them. This could be true of divorce and divorce rituals. Ceremonial divorce practices are supposed to take shape informally in couples and families, especially in the absence of formalized moments, or even alongside them (Lewis 1983). Social actors might be gradually codifying words, objects, and places (physical or web-mediated) to assign meanings and communicate change in their life trajectories. For example, it could be the return or destruction of objects or gifts to the other partner to indicate the end of the marriage, the organization of a meeting or the sending of a letter to inform relatives of the decision to leave, or the creation of opportunities for members of the divorced family to maintain ties, especially in the presence of children. This could occur both in places where the relationship takes place face-to-face and through the mediation of the Internet (Sas et al. 2016).

For these reasons, emerging cultural practices related to couple dissolution deserve to be studied, as part of the study of rituals in contemporary societies. This article offers a contribution in this direction. Research on divorce rites should be carried out through both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Comparative results would be of great interest to understanding similarities and differences between countries. Monitoring couples over time after the divorce rite would allow to enlighten the possible impact of the rite on the achievement of the new status from a longitudinal perspective. Actors involved in the divorce rite should be studied, from former partners and their families to celebrants and professionals. In any case, it would be essential to explore both formal and informal practices, in both face-to-face and computer-mediated settings.

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Notes

- ¹ The information regarding the commercial practices related to the divorce process in Italy is derived from the analysis of physical and web-mediated documents collected from the Milan Divorce Fair and online sources. The use of documents in social research is part of the so-called documentary analysis (Prior 2003; McCulloch 2004; Scott 2006). Institutional and media documents were inspected for the Divorce Fair, while web-mediated documents were analyzed for divorce planning agencies and civil celebrants.
- ² <https://www.fnac.com/> (accessed on 25 July 2023).
- ³ For some examples see <http://www.legamidivita.com/divorce-planner/>; <http://www.giustiziamite.it/news/giustizia-mite-propone-i-vantaggi-del-divorce-planner.html> (accessed on 25 July 2023).
- ⁴ <https://federcelebranti.com/> (accessed on 25 July 2023).

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