

[forthcoming in R. Kaiser and J. Edelmann, eds., *Crisis as a Permanent Condition? The Italian Political System Between Transition and reform Resistance*, Nomos, 2015]

**A Crisis of Italian Identity? The Northern League and Italy's
Renationalization Since the 1990s**

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The term “crisis” to refer to the state of Italian politics has been circulating for quite a long time and one must wonder whether it is really helpful if we want to describe, not to mention explain, what would indeed seem to have become a permanent condition. The word may have lost meaning also in relation to the embattled issue of Italian national identity. Is there an “inherent,” or intrinsic, crisis of national identity in Italy? In the 1990s, after the emergence of the Northern League, a party that attacked national unity and attempted to create an alternative identity for the inhabitants of the northern regions, many academics and commentators insisted on the fragility of national identification in Italy. Rivers of ink were devoted to the topic and anxieties about the capacity of the nation to hold together were strong.¹ Yet in more recent years and in spite of the presence of the Northern League in a right-wing coalition in government for most of the 2000s, the sense of national identity appears, if anything, stronger. In fact the very presence of the Northern League, in spite of its ideology, may have contributed to this strengthening and thus to what I would call the renationalization of the political field.

¹ Among the titles of this large literature one can recall G. E. Rusconi, *Se cessiamo di essere una nazione* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993), A. Lepre, *Italia addio? Unità e disunità dal 1860 a oggi* (Milan, Mondadori, 1994), and E. Galli della Loggia, *La morte della patria. La crisi dell'idea di nazione tra Resistenza, antifascismo e Repubblica* (Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1996).

By this expression I mean that national identity has become again a central component of the political discourse and that nationalism - as an idiom that stresses the crucial importance of the nation in the life of people - is no longer confined to the margins of the Italian political spectrum. In this process the League, far from succeeding in radically questioning national unity, ended up playing the role that populist parties of the right have played elsewhere in Europe in the past thirty years, namely that of pushing further the implementation of an exclusivist and ethno-racial vision of the national community. Even before the recent full-fledged shedding of the separatist discourse under the leadership of Matteo Salvini (who has been moving the party even further to the right),² what the Northern League did while in government qualifies it as a *de facto Italian nationalist* party. It was in power at the national level for almost nine years in a coalition where the post-fascist/nationalist component was prominent, and where the political use of national symbols was the order of the day. One may recall a demonstration during the campaign for regional elections organized by Silvio Berlusconi's party in Rome in the spring of 2010 (when he was still in power), where demonstrators carried a huge Italian flag (several meters wide and between 300 and 1,000 meters long according to the sources). There were also Umberto Bossi, the founder and president of the League at the time, and his followers – their presence requested by the prime minister – and they certainly did not seem to be bothered by the flag which in other occasions they liked to hold in contempt. In other words, the League's recent embracing of the national flag is not just an opportunist move on the part of the new young leader, but reflects a tendency which has been visible for quite some time. In the following pages I will offer some reflections on this tendency

² This paper was completed in June 2014 (when this process had just started) and only partially updated. Since then the tendency has become completely clear: see for example Enrico Deaglio, "La Lega nera," *Il venerdì di Repubblica*, 26 September 2014.

and on the Northern League's deeper linkages to long-term ideas of Italian national and racial identity.

The Multiple Factors of Italy's Renationalization

In 2011 a myriad of local events marked the celebrations of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Italian state, culminating in a rich series of initiatives organized in the spring in Torino, the first capital of the Kingdom of Italy. Several observers have considered this particular anniversary a success in spite of the polemics and contestations that surrounded it: citizens, particularly in the northern regions, participated in unexpectedly high numbers.³ Part of this success was no doubt due to the urgency with which many Italians felt the need to reassert their national identity as they faced the continuing anti-Italian attacks of the Northern League and of the (much smaller) autonomist movements that have sprouted in the south of the country after the emergence of the Northern League. Even when in power in a coalition that included national flag wavers such as Forza Italia and National Alliance, the League continued to define itself as committed to "the independence of Padania" (a secessionist slogan adopted in 1997 when the League was not in government). Over the years the territorial boundaries of this imaginary entity were expanded to include Tuscany.⁴ These days the references to Padania have all but disappeared, except in the official name of the party.

³ See for example the evaluations of M. Di Napoli and G. Limiti, "The Celebrations Between History and Politics," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 19:1 (2014), pp. 44-52, and the introduction of F. Catastini, F. Mineccia e C. Spagnolo to the special issue of *Ricerche storiche* devoted to the anniversary: "Centocinquanta: una storia d'Italia à la carte," 42:2 (2012). The latter points out the extent to which local initiatives more than compensated for the weak support given by the central government which, at least in the phase of preparation, was controlled by the right.

⁴ See J. Agnew and C. Brusa, "New Rules for a National Identity? The Northern League and Political Identity in Contemporary Northern Italy," *National Identities* 1:2 (1999), pp. 117-133.

The emphasis on the celebration of national unification is part of the renationalization of Italian political culture since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the old party system in the early 1990s, although some signs of the process were already visible in the 1980s, when for example the Socialist Party –under the leadership of Bettino Craxi - draped itself in the national flag on the occasion of the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of Giuseppe Garibaldi's death (1882). In the 1990s the emergence of a national-patriotic discourse was evident in the slogans of the new center-right wing parties such as Berlusconi's Forza Italia (Go Italy), and of course among the neo-fascists who renamed themselves Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance). But the national colors soon acquired a strong place also in the symbols and discourse of the center-left parties, which meanwhile abandoned any references to class language. To be sure, right and left did not have the same political vision of the nation. This fact was well apparent in the memory wars that immediately broke out. The parties of the new heterogeneous right-wing coalition, unified on the basis of a strong anti-left sentiment, attacked the anti-fascist Resistance which had been the founding myth of the postwar Republic and was still a main point of reference for the center-left coalition.⁵ Yet, as we will see later, the distance between these political formations with respect to other dimensions of the nation was not as wide.

The reassertion of national identity occurred in the midst of other crucial changes of a transnational and global kind, namely the growing process of integration within the European Union and the changes in political economy that go under the name of globalization, an aspect of which is Italy's transformation from a migrant-sending to an immigrant-receiving country.

⁵ I analyzed the beginning of this trend in my essay "Italian Neo-patriotism: Debating National Identity in the 1990s," *Modern Italy* 6:1 (2001), pp. 21-34. See also S. Mezzadra, "The New European Migratory Regime and the Shifting Patterns of Contemporary Racism," in *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. C. Lombardi-Diop and C. Romeo (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.37-38.

According to official census figures, the foreign population of Italy increased tenfold between 1971 and 2001 (from .22% to 2.34%)⁶ and tripled in the following decade (from about 1.3 million in 2001 to more than 4 million in 2011) thus becoming about 8% of the total population by the second decade of the two thousands.⁷ As a consequence, and particularly in the context of a condition of high “native” unemployment, anti-immigrant feelings, intertwined with flag-waving, have been on the rise and the Northern League has been giving them a vociferous expression. This is of course not just an Italian phenomenon, but is happening in other parts of Europe and the world. On a global scale, geographer Saskia Sassen has called attention to the role of immigration more generally in feeding the renationalization of political discourse which has been taking place in many countries while globalization brought about a denationalized economic space.⁸ Everywhere the two processes appear closely linked.

“Padani/Italians/Europeans”: Against Immigration *and* a Multiracial Society

Opposition to immigration does not necessarily entail racism, but the two often travel together, especially in Northern League territory and among those strata of the population who have become the victims of processes of industrial delocalization in the post-Fordist age, as well

⁶ See the data reported in L. Einaudi, *Le politiche dell’immigrazione in Italia dall’Unità a oggi* (Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2007), p. 405.

⁷ See data in the official website of Istat: <http://www.istat.it/it/immigrati/tutti-i-dati/dati-del-censimento> (accessed on June 21, 2014). This statistics does not include the undocumented immigrant population estimated at about 500-700,000. Mainly due to the Italian citizenship law, which is heavily based on *jus sanguinis*, the category of foreigners includes also the children of non-citizens born in Italy who in order to become citizens need to apply within a year from when they turn eighteen and have to demonstrate their continuing presence on Italian soil and attendance at Italian schools. The rate of naturalization is very low: see G. Zincone, ed., *Familismo legale: come (non) diventare italiani* (Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006).

⁸ See S. Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996). Sassen also underlines that nation states have not just been passive actors in the process of economic globalization and they are also protagonists of the renationalization of the political field.

as of the contemporary dissolving of class solidarities' ideologies.⁹ In this context juxtaposition and hostility to the Other work as a glue that serves to strengthen feelings of closeness and recreate community with the "same."¹⁰ Since its very beginning the Northern League has thrived on the opposition between "us" and "them," and the meaning of "them" has been changing over time and according to context. Scholars have debated how to classify the Northern League – whether as a protest or a federalist movement, a populist or an extreme right party, but as Damian Tambini has noticed, this essentialist approach does not work because this party "is constantly redefining identity, interests and goals."¹¹ There is however one feature that better than others defines the true nature of the Northern League as a political party, and that is the systematic use of juxtaposition and hostility to another group defined as the enemy, be it "Rome" (namely the national government), the Southerners, or the immigrants, especially those of non-European ancestry. While at first the Northern League's hostility was directed against Rome and the South, anti-immigration, picked up in the late 1990s and since then it became – even more than the demand for the federalization of the political system - the dominant feature of the party's message.¹² Already at the time opposition to immigration has had a clear racial connotation.

Particularly telling on the subject of race was an article in the League's daily *La Padania* of 29 January 1999 entitled "Americans and multiracials or Padani (italians) and Europeans?"

⁹ For an analysis of the dynamics taking place among these strata see Aldo Bonomi, *Il rancore. Alle radici del malessere del Nord* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 2008).

¹⁰ On racism as a form of community making see E. Balibar, "Is There Neo-racism?" in E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein, *Race, Class, Nation. Ambiguous Identities* (London, Verso, 1992).

¹¹ D. Tambini, *Nationalism in Italian Politics. The Stories of the Northern League, 1980-2000* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), p. 6. Like other political scientists, the author underestimates the racism of the League because he ignores its visual propaganda.

¹² This is a feature noted by several scholars: see for example P. Ignazi, *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 57.

The article asked the readers to answer a question formulated by leader Umberto Bossi on whether they wanted an electoral system of an “Anglo-Saxon winner take-all [*maggioritario*]” type (which they claimed corresponded to an “individualist” form of capitalism and a multiracial type of society, without a pension system guaranteed by the state and without a health system) or a “European proportional representation” type (corresponding to a form of “social capitalism” with pensions and a health system and a society “based on peoples”).¹³ At the time two referenda were being discussed, one on the abolition of the proportional quote in parliamentary elections and the other on the abolition of the Turco-Napolitano law on immigration. This was a law passed in 1998 by the center-left government. In spite of its security features (introduction of “temporary permanence centers” for the identification of irregular immigrants) the right criticized it strongly as too lax.¹⁴ In the rhetoric of the League the choice of the electoral system implied also the choice between two different “ways of life”: “Americans, multiracials, or Europeans, Italians, Padani.” Considering the extent to which the Northern League has become *tout court* an anti-European party in recent years, this vision of coexisting identities –local, national, supranational – may appear quite striking. In the late 1990s, however, Europe itself was not the enemy, the enemy were “the bankers’ Europe,” while the political unity of the continent was hailed as a positive development.¹⁵

In this juxtaposition between Europe and America, the US was not just represented as the land of unbridled capitalism, but as a multiracial society in contrast to the “pure” Italian people, of which “Padani” are supposed to be a part. “Pure” in the sense of non- racially mixed: that is

¹³ “Americani e multirazziali o Padani (italiani) ed europei?”, *La Padania*, 29 January 1999.

¹⁴ On this piece of legislation see Einaudi, *Le politiche dell'immigrazione*, pp. 208-228.

¹⁵ See for example the article entitled “È un referendum anti-Europa” (subtitle “Bossi: no alla UE dei banchieri, sí all’unità politica del continente,”) *La Padania* 26 January, 1999.

the meaning which the Northern League always deploys in the construction of its notion of the “people.” In his speeches, Umberto Bossi repeated this notion multiple times evoking the specter of an international conspiracy to deprive the inhabitants of Padania of their identity and oblige them to become like Americans.¹⁶ This type of anti-Americanism and especially the overt opposition to a multiracial society may not be directly inspired by fascism, but they certainly recall fascist racism and especially its dislike of mixed-race and interracial relations.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, the League has had no qualms making friends with Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National whose antisemitism is well known (in spite of the efforts by his daughter to distance the party from it).¹⁸ Moreover, among the League’s members there are violent racist extremists such as Mario Borghezio, a former member of the Jeune Europe movement (founded by Jean Thiriart) and a deputy at the European parliament, who in spite of publicly justifying the ideology of the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik was not expelled from the party.¹⁹ Violent rhetoric in any case has been the order of the day in the League milieu for quite some time. Party founder Umberto Bossi was not the only one to propose to sink the boats carrying migrants and refugees to Italy from Africa, and its current secretary, Matteo Salvini, also became

¹⁶ Some of Bossi’s speeches are reported in L. Dematteo, *L’idiota in politica. Antropologia della Lega Nord* (Milan, Feltrinelli, 2011), ch. 4.

¹⁷ Unions between Italian and colonial subjects were prohibited in 1937 before the passage of the antisemitic laws of 1938. On fascist racism see especially F. Cassata, “*La Difesa della razza*”. *Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista* (Turin, Einaudi, 2008).

¹⁸ In any case the Northern League is not exempt from antisemitism: one of his most vocal senators, Gianluca Buonanno, a former neofascist, has been recently at the center of a polemic for the antisemitic statements he made against the journalist and anchor of a popular TV show on a private network, Gad Lerner, by calling him “that Jew” and by deploying antisemitic stereotypes: see “Caso Kyenge, Gad Lerner nel mirino di Buonanno: ‘Non accetto lezioni da quell’ebreo’”, *La Repubblica* 17 January 2014 (available online at: http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2014/01/17/news/lerner_contro_buonanno_lega_razzista_incontrario-76179286/?ref=search).

¹⁹ On the public statements of Borghezio see “Borghezio: ‘Idee di Breivik condivisibili’ E Calderoli chiede scusa alla Norvegia” (available online at http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2011/07/26/news/borghezio_norvegia-19635604/ accessed on June 24, 2014).

notorious a few years ago for proposing the introduction of cars “for Milanese only” in the Milan subway in order to protect them from “crime-prone” immigrants.²⁰

Most European countries in the past thirty or forty years have witnessed the rise of anti-immigration and xenophobic parties and thus the Italian case is certainly not exceptional. There is, however, an Italian anomaly, namely the fact that the Northern League was in power for several years not only at the local but also at the national level, thus giving huge legitimacy to attitudes of intolerance and contempt towards foreigners - especially those with a darker skin color - already present in Italian society. Its coalition allies never clearly distanced themselves from the violence of its rhetoric and of course were also responsible for the policies it pushed when in power. Along with postfascist Alleanza Nazionale, the League had a direct and fundamental role in producing the current legislation on immigration. First, the Bossi-Fini law of 2002 introduced extremely burdensome regulations for immigrant workers, also drastically reducing investment in initiatives favoring integration and cultural exchange.²¹ Then, when the right-wing coalition came to power again in 2008, one of the first pieces of legislation it introduced – proposed by the leghista minister of Interior Roberto Maroni - was the criminalization of undocumented immigrants.²² This is a measure difficult to enforce, but it is certainly able to make life more difficult for people who stand out because of the color of their skin. Neither the “technical” government of Prime Minister Monti (November 2011-April 2013) nor the two center-left/center-right coalition governments that succeeded it have repealed it.

²⁰ See “Milano, la proposta della Lega, ‘Carrozze metro per soli milanesi’,” *La Repubblica* 7 May 2009 (available online at: <http://www.repubblica.it/2009/05/sezioni/cronaca/metro-riservata-milanesi/metro-riservata-milanesi/metro-riservata-milanesi.html>).

²¹ See Einaudi, *Le politiche dell’immigrazione*, pp. 307-343.

²² For a description of the measures introduced in 2008-09 see the following government website http://www.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/sezioni/sala_stampa/speciali/Pacchetto_sicurezza/index_2.html (accessed on June 24, 2014).

In the two past three years, in part to offset its electoral decline after the scandals surrounding its founding leader and his family in the spring of 2012, the Northern League has been playing the racist card even more virulently, attacking in particular the introduction of a partial reform of the citizenship law proposed by the minister of integration in the Letta government (in power from February 2013 to April 2014), the Congolese-Italian Cecile Kyenge. They attacked not only the law, but even more the person who proposed it. Northern League politicians with high institutional roles (such as one of the vice-presidents of the Senate, Roberto Calderoli) made extremely crude racist remarks about the physical appearance of the minister without paying any price for it.²³ But even a well-known Italian *politologo*, Giovanni Sartori, in a series of editorials published on the mainstream daily *Corriere della Sera* in the summer of 2013 strongly opposed her proposal, repeatedly questioning her competence in misogynist and not so veiled racist ways.²⁴ A “reason” Sartori deployed in his opposition to an even modest widening of *jus soli* - that Italy was not a *meticcias* [mixed-race] nation” - shows the extent to which the conceptions and policies advocated by the League find support in other quarters of Italian society. They also show a disconcerting (unselfconscious?) racism.

Multiple Racisms

²³ Calderoli’s remarks were made at a rally of Northern League sympathizers: see “Roberto Calderoli, Italian Politician, Compares First Black Minister Cecile Kyenge to Orangutan,” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/14/roberto-calderoli-organutan-cecile-kyenge_n_3594320.html.

²⁴ Sartori’s editorials are the following: Giovanni Sartori, “L’Italia non è una nazione meticcias. Ecco perché lo ius soli non funziona” *Corriere della Sera* 17 June 2013 (available at http://www.corriere.it/opinioni/13_giugno_17/sartori-ius-soli-integrazione-catena-equivoci_686dbf54-d728-11e2-a4df-7eff8733b462.shtml); “Terzomondismo in salsa italiana”, *Corriere della Sera* 17 July 2013 (http://www.corriere.it/editoriali/13_luglio_17/terzomondismo-salsa-italica_59bala3c-ee9a-11e2-b3f4-5da735a06505.shtml); “Previsioni del tempo” http://www.corriere.it/editoriali/13_agosto_15/previsioni-tempo_e7431c84-0563-11e3-95f7-ac31e2b74e2c.shtml

While most Italian media and many politicians have tended to downplay the Northern League's xenophobia as a kind of folkloric phenomenon and the League itself has tried to convey the image of an "inoffensive" type of racism,²⁵ a number of scholars have pointed out the reality and legitimating uses of this racism for quite some time.²⁶ Much work has been done on the continuities between the anti-Southern prejudices of the Northern League and the long history of negative images of the South, a South conceived as the Other of the new Italy that the nineteenth-century national-patriots wanted to build.²⁷ Less emphasized, however, is the link between the Northern League's construction of northern - and more generally Italian - identity and the long-term history of ideas of race and the assumption of the whiteness of the Italian people. In fact a comprehensive history of ideas of race and racism in modern Italy is still missing. Italian historians, moreover, have begun to confront their history of colonialism only recently and research on racism has concentrated primarily on the fascist period, neglecting developments in the liberal state and even more in the post-fascist and postcolonial periods when many of the ideas and mentalities of colonialism and fascism persisted.²⁸

²⁵ M. Avanza, "The Northern League and Its 'Innocuous' Xenophobia," in *Italy Today. The Sick Man of Europe*, eds. By A. Mammone and G. A. Veltri (London and New York, Routledge, 2010), pp. 131-142.

²⁶ Among the early studies see A. Bonomi e P. P. Poggio, eds., *Ethnos e Demos. Dal leghismo al neopopulismo* (Milano, Mimesis, 1995) and A. Cento Bull, "Ethnicity, Racism and the Northern League," in *Italian Regionalism. History, Identity and Politics*, ed. C. Levy (Oxford-Washington, DC, Berg, 1996), pp. 171-187. For a more recent account see C. Ruzza and S. Fella, *Re-Inventing the Italian Right. Territorial Politics, Populism and 'Post-Fascism* (London and New York, Routledge, 2009).

²⁷ On the South as "Other" of Italy after unification see J. Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999) and N. Moe, *The View from Vesuvius. Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley- Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 2002).

²⁸ An important collection of essays on Italian racism published in the late 1990s still covered only the period until 1945: A. Burgio, ed., *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia 1870-1945* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1999). Cultural studies scholars have so far contributed the most to the study of the post-1945 period. For a valuable attempt to draw a long-term overview of the racial identity of the Italians see C. Lombardi-Diop and Gaia Giuliani, *Bianco e nero. L'identità razziale degli italiani* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2013).

The identity conceptions of the Northern League go well beyond the exploitation of prejudices against southerners as internal Others and are part of a longer history of intimate connections between ideas of nation and ideas of race that are integral part of Italian national identity. Without considering this longer history it would be difficult to understand the strength of anti-black feelings in today's Italy. Italian identity was assumed to be European (and white) from the beginning of the movement for national unification and the purpose of Italian unification was to bring Italy back to its rightful place in Europe after centuries of decline and subjection to other European powers. Ideas of the Italians' civilizational superiority were not uncommon even among democrats in the Risorgimento and the post-Risorgimento state and so was the justification of colonialism for civilizational purposes which Giuseppe Mazzini himself subscribed to in his later years.²⁹

When examining Northern League's racism scholars have tended to consider it as a kind of cultural differentialism,³⁰ namely a racism "without races" which places its emphasis on the alleged existence of essentially different cultures, unable to coexist and integrate, rather than on the idea of biological races. To be sure, the Northern League and its allies have been keen to say that they do not discriminate against people of a different skin color,³¹ and that they only prefer that people with different cultures remain in their places of origin. However, the differentialist

²⁹ I elaborate more on this issue in my essay "Relazioni pericolose: 'razza' e nazione nel Risorgimento," in *La costruzione dello Stato-nazione in Italia*, ed. A. Roccucci (Rome, Viella, 2012), pp. 109-119.

³⁰ See for example Cento Bull, "Ethnicity," pp. 174-175 and Ruzza and Fella, *Re-Inventing the Italian Right*, pp. 96-98. On differentialist racism see P.-A. Taguieff, *The Force of Prejudice: on Racism and Its Doubles* (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, orig. French: 1989)

³¹ As an example of their "open" attitude, they used to refer to one of their mayors in a small town in Lombardy who was partly African-American, Sandra "Sandy" Maria Cane, but she recently decided to leave the movement because she felt she was being used: "Lega: l'addio del primo sindaco nero d'Italia: sto per lasciare il Carroccio, mi hanno usata," *La Stampa* 2 October, 2014 (available at <http://www.lastampa.it/2014/10/02/italia/politica/lega-laddio-del-primo-sindaco-nero-ditalia-sto-per-lasciare-il-carroccio-mi-hanno-usata-bYSqjizsf72m66o2hifMJ/pagina.html>) (last accessed on 31 May, 2014).

racism interpretation originates in an analysis almost exclusively focused on the verbal language of the Northern League. Analyses that only focus on language lose the racism conveyed by images –and forget that racism, as George Mosse noted some time ago, is primarily a visual ideology.³² Indeed, the Northern League in its visual political propaganda uses very crude stereotypes of ethnic groups to convey its message to the voters. Figures 1 and 2 reproduce posters that the League used in the region of Piedmont in the administrative elections of 2010, which a League politician won as candidate of the right-wing coalition for the presidency, even though with a small margin.



³² George Mosse, *Towards the Final Solution. A History of European Racism* (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).



The first poster represents in crude and racialized fashion various foreigners (including a “gypsy” woman), all making claims on the Italian welfare state at the expenses of the old white Italian man (in some versions the old man holds hands with a child). The top and center captions read “Guess who is the last one? For rights on housing, work and healthcare”). The second one features the stereotypical representation of the gypsy woman ready to break into someone’s house. It appeals to the unemployed workers “forgotten” by the center-left government in Piedmont accusing the latter of wasting public money on the Roma and Sinti minority.³³ It is difficult not to be reminded of other posters of the interwar period that used the same rhetoric and structure of juxtaposition and scapegoating: today’s populist right has certainly not forgotten

³³ On the racism against gypsies see N. Sigona, “‘Gypsies out of Italy!’: Social exclusion and racial discrimination of Roma and Sinti in Italy,” in Mammone and Veltri, *Italy Today*, pp.143-157.

that lesson in success. In all these cases physical appearance is a central component of the stereotype. If we consider this practice, the previously mentioned attacks to the Congolese-Italian Cecile Kyenge, while achieving a new peak of crudeness and nastiness (her looks were compared to those of an ape), is nothing new. Biological racism is indeed an option always present in the racist repertory of the party: not by chance the anti-immigrant images in the daily *La Padania* have been regularly featuring people with a dark skin even though the majority of immigrants are white.

Constructing the Italian People: Long-Term Continuities

Even if the League were to rely primarily on a differentialist or culturalist type of racism, it would be wrong to think this is a completely new phenomenon. The use of ideas of culture, “spirit,” or civilization to construct an essential and ineradicable difference among peoples is not just the way in which racism was kept alive after 1945, namely after biological racism became discredited,³⁴ but has been present in European racism since its very beginning. In Italian history both liberals and fascists theorized the “spiritual” (today we would say cultural) superiority of the Italians. Many fascists insisted that their “spiritual racism” was a “better” type of racism - better than the Nazi one, that is – and that it was their own, original type of racism.³⁵ “Spiritual” racism moreover is a type of racism that best adapted to the discrediting of biological racism in

³⁴ On the history of the rearticulation of racist ideas after 1945 see N. MacMaster, *Racism in Europe 1870-2000* (Houndmills-New York, Palgrave, 2001), pp. 193-98.

³⁵ On the importance of this type of racism for Italian fascism see F. Germinario, *Fascismo e antisemitismo. Progetto razziale e ideologia totalitaria* (Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2009). This author too notes that the two types at times overlapped and were intertwined, and that “spiritual” racism provided a basis for the “explosion” of cultural and differentialist racism in the post-1945 period.

the post-1945 period.³⁶ It is today the basis of all the Italian cultural supremacy verbiage that is still possible to read in the (mainstream) right-wing press. One needs only to peruse the newspaper of the Berlusconi family, the daily *Il Giornale*, to see this type of racist discourse in articles by anthropologist Ida Magli and popular historian Giordano Bruno Guerri bloviating on the superiority of Italian culture and civilization and maintaining especially the incompatibility between Christians and Muslims.³⁷

A propos religion. Another rather “mainstream” ingredient of the League’s construction of Italian identity is religion. In spite of some claims of being a secular party, leghisti have become strong assertors of the Catholic faith as an essential component of the cultural identity of the Italians, and have strongly supported the presence of the crucifix in schools and public offices, which of course blatantly contrasts with the premises of a secular state. This interest in religion is functional to the role that leghisti have taken as anti-Muslim crusaders fighting against the Muslim “invasion” to preserve the “true” Italian identity. There is an objective convergence of interests here with the Catholic Church and its idea of Italian identity as a Catholic identity – although, to be sure, the Church has been and continues to be a critic of racism.³⁸ The convergence with the Catholic Church occurs also in relation to the policies towards homosexuality. The homophobic element is very strong in a party which since its beginning

³⁶ On this adaptive capacity see A. Cavaglion, “Due modeste proposte,” in *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d’Italia 1870-1945*, ed. A. Burgio (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000), pp.379-386.

³⁷ See for example I. Magli, “Due culture incompatibili e la nostra si umilia,” *Il Giornale*, 8 December 2010 and Id., “Il razzismo al contrario: adesso si rischia di contagiare l’Italia,” September 11, 2010 (where the A. also claims that “physical alterity is the most important characteristic which makes it impossible for men to ‘identify’ in each others”), and G. B. Guerri, “Cosa significa essere italiani? Dibattito sull’identità nazionale,” *Il Giornale* 13 January 2010.

³⁸ Yet even in this respect the position of the Catholic Church shows some ambiguities: see E. Garau, “The Catholic Church, Universal Truth and the debate on national Identity and Immigration: a New Model of ‘Selective Solidarity’,” in Mammone and Veltri, *Italy Today*, pp. 158-170.

relied on an extremely masculinist language.³⁹ As studies of nationalism have shown, nationalism, particularly in its right-version, is a homosocial language with a strong homophobic component.⁴⁰ Thus, not by chance, the League presents itself as the defender of heterosexuality and the “traditional” family.

All of these elements can be directly associated with a conception of Italian identity that fully crystallized during fascism, a regime which, among other things, undid the separation between Church-state by signing the Lateran Pact (maintained in the democratic Constitution of 1948). This conception has never disappeared from Italian culture in the period after the Second World War in spite of the decline of nationalism in Cold War political discourse. If the purging of fascist personnel from the state administrations was very limited, continuity was even more pronounced in the culture arena where plenty of writers and journalists went from writing on fascist newspapers to writing in the mainstream press. Among them there were convinced supporters of the fascist racial and colonial policies who never changed their minds, and filled their writings with the same racial stereotypes that circulated during fascism.⁴¹

I am bringing up this issue of fascist elements in the League’s construction of Italian identity because I see a tendency to neglect the impact of some enduring traits of Italian national identity, as if racism were purely the consequence of the arrival of immigrants in Italy since the 1980s - as if the latter bore the main responsibility for the society’s racism. In fact, since the

³⁹ See M. Huyseune, “Masculinity and Secessionism in Italy: An Assessment,” *Nations and Nationalism* 6:4 (2004), pp. 591-610.

⁴⁰ See the classical study by George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁴¹ One of these journalists was Paolo Monelli who had complained about *Faccetta nera* the most famous fascist song celebrating Italy conquest of Ethiopia for alluding to interracial sex which he called a “crime against the race”: see P. Monelli, “Mogli e buoi dei paesi tuoi,” *Gazzetta del Popolo* 13 giugno 1936 (reproduced in G. Rochat, *Il colonialismo italiano*, Turin, Loescher, 1974, pp. 191-193). For his deprecation of interracial sex after the war see “Stamburata nera,” *La Stampa* 21 September, 1947.

establishment of the nation state, Italian national citizenship has been strongly based on the principle of (patrilineal) descent and thus on a deterministic or naturalistic element.⁴² This principle of inclusion (and exclusion) has only become stronger in the context of immigration from non-European countries. It is not by chance that the new citizenship law passed in 1992 (when the old parties of the so-called “first Republic” were still in power) further strengthened the principle of *jus sanguinis* at the expenses of *jus soli*. The new law made it much easier for descendants of Italian emigrants abroad to obtain Italian citizenship while at the same time making the requirements for naturalization in the case of residents of non-European origins more demanding. To be sure, *jus sanguinis* does not imply racial exclusion, but it contributes to an ethnicization of the citizenry by its insistence on descent and its reference to “blood.”

Conclusion

While national identity was not a prominent issue in the political culture of the “first Republic,” it has become a fundamental component of that of its successor. More unwittingly at first than wittingly, the Northern League has played a crucial role in increasing the awareness of national identity in Italy and in articulating an opposition to the development of a multiracial society. It has and continues to operate in a social and cultural environment that provides plenty of “supportive resources” for racism, namely plenty of elements of a cultural tradition that can be easily deployed to this goal, as the coverage of black Italian soccer player Mario Balotelli in mainstream media shows only too well.⁴³ In a society that often does not even seem to realize

⁴² On the deterministic conception of identity in Italy and the legislation based on this conception see the works of A. M. Banti and especially his *Sublime madre nostra. La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al Fascismo* (Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2011).

⁴³ One of the most outrageous examples of ordinary racism in the Italian press (and one that may not even be aware of itself) is the cartoon in *Gazzetta dello Sport* of June 26, 2012, which represented Balotelli as King Kong on top of the Big Ben on which see <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/euro2012/article-2165160/Euro-2012-Mario-Balotelli->

what racism consists of, the “Northern League for the Independence of Padania” (still the name that appears on its current website) is only the party that proposes the most strictly defined and exclusivist idea of *Italian* (and not just northern Italian) identity.

Exclusivity, however, is inscribed in the very idea of Italian national identity which, from its beginning, privileged the principle of *jus sanguinis*, the right of blood. This principle, as mentioned earlier, was even strengthened in a law of 1992 which gave descendants of Italians who had migrated abroad - and may never have seen Italy - the possibility of claiming Italian citizenship. Another law passed in 2001 gave Italian emigrants who reside and pay taxes abroad the right to vote for their own representatives in the Italian Parliament. As Guido Tintori has pointed out, by making it easier for descendants of Italian emigrants to acquire Italian citizenship and for other Italians who have taken residency abroad to preserve their political rights, it gives considerable privileges to people who never paid or no longer pay taxes to the Italian state. At the same time, the law disadvantages the actual people who by currently residing and working in Italy contribute to the state finances. These people encounter all sort of bureaucratic hurdles if they want to become citizens. It is a paradoxical situation which perversely combines representation without taxation with taxation without representation.⁴⁴

After the political earthquake determined by the elections of 2013, which brought to the fore a new “antipolitical” protest movement, Beppe Grillo’s Movimento Cinque Stelle, sociologist Ilvo Diamanti, one of the major authorities on the Northern League in Italy, claimed that the League had become a “normal party,” in the sense that it had become more and more

[race-storm-newspaper-cartoon.html](#) (accessed on June 25, 2014). The newspaper had to apologize. More generally on racism in the Italian media see Faloppa, Federico, *Razzisti a parole (per tacer dei fatti)* (Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011).

⁴⁴ G. Tintori, *Fardelli d’Italia? Conseguenze nazionali e transnazionali delle politiche di cittadinanza italiane* (Rome, Carocci, 2009).

like any other party that has been in power for a certain number of years, namely corrupted by power dynamics. As such it could no longer express the discontent of certain segments of the electorate whose votes were instead captured by Grillo's political movement.⁴⁵ The price of this "normality," however, has also been the normalization of racist views in Italian society, views that have a long historical background. The noxious legacies of colonialism and fascism are still at work. Particularly since the post-fascists were included in a government of the Republic, fascism too has been banalized to a dangerous degree in the mind of many Italians. During the much reviled "first Republic" nobody would have dared to build a monument to a fascist war criminal such as general Rodolfo Graziani as it happened in a small town near Rome in 2012.⁴⁶

To return to the issue of the permanent "crisis" of Italian politics with which we opened this essay. The political system may have been in a crisis after the fall of the party system of the "first Republic," but it was certainly not paralyzed in terms of legislation. Indeed, the Berlusconi governments quickly passed the pieces of legislation which had high priority in their agenda. Labor "flexibility" laws, lower penalties for white collar crime, and anti-immigrants measures clearly must be placed in this category. But these same governments have shown their limitations and lack of vision with regard to the issue of the changing demographics and composition of Italian society. The insufficient policies aiming at integrating immigrants - who along with their children now constitute about eight percent of the population - cannot but have negative consequences for the fabric of Italian society in the long run, besides causing needless

⁴⁵ I. Diamanti, "Ora è un partito fin troppo normale," *La Repubblica* 8 April 2013.

⁴⁶ On the building of this memorial and the reactions to it see "Italy memorial to the Fascist hero Graziani sparks row" available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-19267099> (accessed on June 24, 2014). The governor of the region eventually stopped the funding to the municipality which was originally supposed to go to the building of a monument to the Unknown Soldier. Graziani was responsible for many atrocities in the repression of Libyan resistance to Italian occupation in the 1920s and in the Ethiopian war of the 1930s.

suffering and humiliation among the foreign born population and their children born in Italy. A much worse crisis may be in the making.