

MIGRATION AND MULTICULTURALISM IN ITALY: CONFLICTING NARRATIVES OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

Despite the fact that immigration to Italy is not a new phenomenon, the Italian dominant discourse still treats it like an emergency. This attitude has important consequences for the way in which immigrants are represented in mainstream media and often fuels feelings of 'hysteria' about immigrants (Law, 2010: 208). In this paper I will discuss the politics of representation of dominant political and media discourses and will juxtapose them to the emerging counterdiscourses of "second generation" activists who, while refusing to be called 'immigrants', claim their right to representation, and effectively contribute to the creation of a multicultural country.

Keywords: Italy, racism, multiculturalism, immigrants, media, countercultures

1. Introduction

Migration and Italy: up until sixty years ago, any discussion on this topic would have been centred on the number of Italians who have left the country in over a century (Bonifazi et al., 2009: 6). Before becoming a country of destination, the door to "Fortress Europe", Italy has in fact been a country of emigration for decades, with nearly 19 millions people leaving in between 1876 and 1942 (Zanfrini, 2013: 1). Given these premises, one would expect Italy to be a country rather sensitive, if not expert, in migration issues. Which is to say that the first-hand experience that so many Italian families have had with migration could lead us to assume that they would adopt a rather understanding approach towards the hardship faced by immigrants moving to Italy. And yet, according to a survey conducted by Eurobarometer (the EU institution which conducts researches on behalf of the EU Parliament) in Autumn 2014, 75% of the Italian population seems to have 'total negative' feelings towards immigrants, while only 18% of the population see them in positive terms (the remaining 7% doesn't know what to think). Why is a country of emigrants so negative towards immigrants? In order to understand this hostility, it may be useful to look at the way in which the immigration issue is constructed within the dominant discourse in Italy.

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Italy's transformation from a country of emigration into a country of destination, which took place in between the 1970s and the 1980s (Allievi, 2014: 725; Bonifazi et al., 2009:78) has proved rather challenging for Italian politics and society. As Italy was becoming a pluralistic country in terms of its social and cultural composition, a weak and often contradictory legislative approach to migration² has been matched by a quasi-total absence of a public debate on multiculturalism (Allievi, 2014: 726; Dal Lago and Orton, 2009: 30). This is to say that, while national regulations on immigration have progressively prescribed the integration of immigrants through their access to education, welfare, housing and social services³ (Bonifazi et al., 2009: 59-76), until very recently Italy has avoided any acknowledgement of the fact that integration works both ways and that the arrival of people from different countries was inevitably producing a structural change within Italian society. Instead, the immigration question has been inscribed for decades within an 'emergency' framework (hence a temporary issue) which has done very little to promote a critical reflection on the actual changes taking place within society (Dal Lago and Orton, 2009: 31).

2. Framing the immigration discourse

The codification of immigration as an emergency has had important consequences on the way in which immigrants have come to be perceived by the Italian population: if in the 1980 there had been a relative sympathy towards them, especially thanks to the activism of NGOs and the Church (Allievi, 2014: 727), "from the beginning of the 1990s, according to public opinion, migrants have become the cause of the social crises" (Dal Lago and Orton, 2009: 31). We should also note that this is the same period in which right-winged anti-immigrants parties such as the Northern League, which employed a rather intolerant and xenophobic language, began to get a larger support in Italy, eventually entering the government in 2001 (Allievi, 2014: 727-728; Jacomella, 2010: 28). As immigration became more and more politicised within the Italian public culture (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004: 105) the perception of immigration as a threat to security gained terrain and immigrants came to be seen by a large part of the population as a threat in three main areas: in the economic sector (the idea that migrants steal work from native Italians); in the social sector (as a consequence of the equation between immigration and crime); and finally as a threat to national identity: "a concern about invasion" and the presumed unshakable 'otherness' of the immigrant"

² For a detailed description of the various laws on immigration issued by Italian governments from the 1980s until nowadays see Allievi, 2014; Arango and Finotelli, 2011; Bonifazi et al. 2009; Dal Lago and Orton, 2009.

³ It has been especially municipal and regional councils which have undertaken the task of promoting integration amongst different sectors of society, with more or less successful policies (Bonifazi et al., 2009: 73; Allievi, 2014: 726).

(Bonifazi et al, 2009: 53; see also the Fondazione Leone Moressa Report, 2014: 7-12).

From this moment on, the dominant discourse on immigration in Italy has been basically organized around these three main points⁴. Of course, media have given a large contribution to this process: since the 1990s the mainstream Italian weeklies and newspapers have increasingly framed migration within themes of deviance and public order⁵ (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004: 109), whereas “news items regarding foreigners’ participation in the labour market and more generally in the Italian economy practically disappear” (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004: 110). As the large majority of articles on immigration in the mainstream press, be it right or left leaning (see Jacomella 2010: 9, 83; Taylor 2009: 5) has progressively linked immigration with crime and ‘sbarchi’ (the arrival of boats), crime and protests (the topics most newspapers tackle), the dominant discourse on migration has been fixed within these terms, thus contributing to the perpetuation of the stereotype of immigrants as “those who arrive by boat, usually illegally, and are involved in criminal activities” (Fondazione Leone Moressa Report, 2014: 3). But it is not only printed media that picture migrants in such negative terms: the 2012 European Commission report against Racism and Intolerance in fact expressed its concern regarding prime-time television broadcast’s negative portrayal of migrants as a threat for public security (ECRI, 2012: 23).

The terms of representation of immigration within Italian media is of course of primary importance to understand the dominant discourse on migration in Italy. As Stuart Hall reminds us, the act of representation is never ideologically neutral, but on the contrary it is the (re)presentation of an event which proceeds in giving meaning to the event itself (1997). News media then do not merely describe events, “but actively (re-)construct them” (van Dijk, 1989: 203) often reproducing and legitimising “the ideology of the political, socio-economic and cultural elites” (Hall et al., 1980, quoted in Van Dijk, 1989: 203). The analysis of mainstream news media’s reports on immigration is of key importance because, as Van Dijk observes, “language, discourse and communication” play a crucial role in the “(re-)reproduction of ethnicism and racism” (1989: 202). We only need to think of the popularity of the word ‘clandestino’, which has been increasingly adopted by media since the 1990s, (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004: 107) and which is connotatively associated with criminality, considering the penal (and not administrative) criminalisation of illegal entrance in Italy sanctioned by the Bossi-

⁴ The inconsistency of these three myths is confirmed by several researches on migration, the last being a research conducted by the Fondazione Leone Moressa with the support of the Open Society Foundation (2014).

⁵ Although Colombo and Sciortino specify that the increasing attention on immigration and criminality could be due to a change in perception of ‘newsworthiness’ and the rise of immigrants’ involvement in those crimes which are deemed newsworthy (2004: 108-110).

Fini law of 2002 (and recently de-penalised as an administrative offense). As Jacomella observes, the word ‘clandestino’ is also evocative of images of invasion and fear: “it can’t but convey a narrative of obscure, shadowy and gloomy presences, hiding in the belly of ships and fleeing from daylight, lurking in the darkness and trying to sneak in our houses and seek shelter in our cellars or dusty attics, just like in XIX century’s feuilletons” (Jacomella, 2010: 68).

Moreover, another striking element of Italian newspapers’ approach to migration is the underrepresentation of immigrants. They are in fact rarely consulted when discussing migration-related issues, their voices silenced even when they are the principal actors in a public event, such as the revolt which took place in Rosarno in 2010⁶ (Jacomella, 2010: 62). These findings are consistent with Van Dijk’s analysis of Western media’s reports on migration issues, as in fact he makes a point in saying that news about ethnic minorities are usually discussed by the “White institution, such as the government, the city council or the police” while the representatives of these minority groups are generally excluded (van Dijk, 1989: 204). Such an approach to migration, according to van Dijk, bears a crucial ideological connotation, for:

White journalists primarily write as White ingroup members, and hence represent minorities as ‘them’. [...] This means that there is a complex ideological framework in which intergroup perception, prejudices, White group dominance, cognitive strategies as well as journalistic news values [the preference for negative events] all contribute to the negative representation of ethnic minorities in the press. (van Dijk, 1989: 204)

The ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dialectic emerges clearly in the Italian press, which, according to Jacomella, foregrounds “an identification of the ‘migrant issue’ with disturbing concepts such as emergency, segregation, and cultural differences” (Jacomella, 2010: 55).

The emphasis on cultural differences, together with the conflation of the different experiences of people moving to Italy within the all-encompassing word ‘immigrant’ (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004: 103) contributes to the polarisation of society in a binary framework (Triandafyllidou, 1999: 80) which poses immigrants as the absolute Other, excluded from the social texture of Italian society and as a threat to our nation. Such a construction of the ‘immigrant’ bears a clear racist mark. As Stuart Hall observed, racism “operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories [the ‘immigrant’ in Italy] and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and

⁶ Where immigrants organized a protest against inhuman condition of living and working that turned into violence. See Jacomella, 2010: 42-45.

attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belonging and otherness” (1996: 167).

The exclusionary and racialized character of the media news’ coverage of migration-related issues is inevitably connected to the increasing racialization of Italian society and politics (see Balbo, 2009: 213-220; Curcio and Mellino, 2010; Smith, 2014; Siebert, 2010) which is in turn often linked to the lack of a colonial memory of racism (see Allievi, 2014: 733, but also Balbo, 2009: 216-219). In the 2010 issue of *darkmatter* dedicated to Italian racism, Siebert calls for the need to read the blatant forms of racism that we find in our contemporary society in relation to the failure of a process of critical self-assessment, “as if no awareness or – we could say – no watchful super-ego towards racism’s dangers had developed in the socialization processes of the new generations and the re-socialization processes of the generations involved in Fascism and its crimes” (Siebert, 2010). The removal of the racist experience of Fascism can be linked to the failure to recognise the rise of racist behaviours and practices as such, for they are in fact systematically “*dismantled* and *translated* by social agents and media and political mainstream discourses as simply problems of labour, housing, migration, identity, economic or crime” (Curcio and Mellino, 2010). This consideration complies with Jacomella’s observation of racism being “the ‘Achilles’ heel of the Italian debate on migration” (Jacomella, 2010: 47).

Perhaps the most blatant expression of racism in Italian politics and society (given the response that they elicited) are the racist attacks addressed at the former Minister of Integration Cécile Kyenge. Kyenge, an Italian citizen born in Congo, was appointed Minister in 2013 by the newly-formed Letta government. The decision to establish a Ministry of Integration and to appoint a Black, Congo-born citizen, had a clear symbolic meaning: the beginning of a new era in Italian politics, characterised by openness rather than closure. However, no sooner had she been appointed that a few members of Northern League and other extremist parties began to attack her: Dolores Velandro, on June 13th, 2013, wrote a post on her Facebook page in which she called for “someone to rape Kyenge”, in a clear reference to the widespread misconception that “it is only immigrants who rape Italian women”. Velandro has been since then expelled by her party, and later condemned by an Italian court⁷. But a disturbing element of her attack lies in the fact that it has become increasingly acceptable to use such a violent and racialised language in the public discourse, as observed by the 2012 European Commission Report on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). As a matter of fact, Velandro’s Facebook post is only one of the several racial insults directed at the former Minister. Not only a group of people threw bananas at her during a political

⁷ <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2013-07-17/dolores-valandro-condannata-anno-163314.shtml?uuid=AbQAY1EI>

meeting in July 2013 (it was members of the right-wing extremist movement Forza Nuova); but also a Northern League senator, Roberto Calderoli (the same one who, in 2001, walked with a pig on the site where the Muslim community of Lodi had decided to build a mosque), compared her to an orang-utan. The most shocking result of his racist insult though is perhaps the fact that not only Calderoli, unlike Velandro, has not been expelled from his party, but also that on 17 September 2015 the Italian Senate has decided not to proceed against him, as in fact Senators from both right and left-wing parties have decided that his were not, in fact, racist insults – and therefore he won't have to face a trial.

By reporting the simultaneous racialized nature of Italian media and society I am not suggesting that there is a straightforward link between the two though in terms of media's influence on society. My own research experience within the Sikh community of Novellara (North-central Italy) suggests that people's attitude towards migration is complicated by their actual experience with immigrants (Clini, 2014: 214). But it is nevertheless apparent that the framework within which migration is discussed deeply affects, and limits, the scope of the debate. Having said that, against the racialized character of mainstream media, there are several other outlets which carry on a daily activity of counter-information. Amongst these, websites such as "seconde generazioni"; "stranieri in Italia", "seconda a chi?", along with quite popular weeklies such as "Internazionale" broaden the debate by engaging with the long-denied multi-ethnic character of Italy and the question of rights.

3. *Counternarratives*

Amidst this alternative voices, I would like to focus on one in particular: the Liberian-Italian MC, Karima Gehnyei. I first met Gehnyei in June 2015, when she presented her work at John Cabot University in Rome. Born in Italy (1980) to Liberian parents, she is an artist who uses her music as a political weapon to challenge the marginalization of the "immigrant as other" within Italian society and politics. Her voice is of utter importance because it doesn't only challenge the marginal position of the Other in Italian society; it also reclaims a space of representation which has been denied for too long within Italian public culture. Her music mixes together different influences, from reggae and the African music of the 1970s (which her father used to listen to when she was a child) to electronica and hip-hop, and is accompanied by lyrics sung in Pidgin English (Santoro, 2014).

Her debut album, "Karima 2G" produced by a label which she co-founded, Soupu Music, was released in 2014 and it deals with Italian politics, (institutional) racism, the African diaspora and the lack of rights for all those people who, like her, were born in Italy but are not recognized as Italian citizens by the law (which follows the "ius-sanguinis" principle). The question of citizenship rights is particularly

important for her, as the title of her album suggests. The “2G” stands in fact for “second generation”, a reference to the label “second generation immigrants” commonly used within the Italian dominant discourse to talk about the offspring of immigrants. Gehnyei deeply resents this term, as she refuses the idea of being labelled as an immigrant just because her parents have migrated. She argues that the term is just another word used to conflate together groups of people who have had very different experiences, for, in her words, it is “an imposed Ghetto [...] a discriminatory and class-conscious word” (Tamagnone, 2014). Her decision to use the label while erasing the word ‘immigrant’ responds to a desire to appropriate it and turn it into something else: “I wanted to turn something negative into something positive”, she says (Tamagnone, 2014). The appropriation of the term thus comes from a desire to challenge the exclusionary character of the label itself. But this is not an easy process. The sense of marginalization deriving from exclusionary politics and the widespread racism of Italian society (she recalls being six years old the first time she was called “nigger”), made it very difficult for her to find a space of identity:

*To be a second generation between two cultures is very complex. It's very hard and stressful to find your identity in this country, as the government contributes towards the sense of being a foreign stranger. You feel that you do not belong in this society. (interview in *The Colloqua Dialogues*, 2014)*

Inevitably, her own sense of identity, to borrow Avtar Brah's words, is linked to “the complex political and personal struggles over the social regulation of belonging” (Brah, 1996: 194). Overwhelmed by this sense of (un)belonging but determined to find a space for herself, in 2013 Gehnyei decided to go to Liberia for the first time, looking for her roots, and it was this experience that, in her words, gave her the strength to write a political album and to fight against injustice (*The Colloqua Dialogues*). This is not because she finally found a place of belonging, but rather because she felt that in order to find her own identity she had to explore her origins. As Stuart Hall maintains:

Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, 1993: 225)

Gehnyei positions herself in dialogue with her past, the history of her parents and their country, and against the marginalising landscape of Italian society, she claims her right to be different, to have a different heritage and yet be part of Italian society: “I feel myself to be an Italian, but at the same time I am most proud to be Liberian”, she says (Adrienne). So her “politics of position” (Hall, 1996: 213) aims at challenging the supposed homogeneity of Italian society and it is sets to unmask

the reality of a country which is more plural and diverse than it is willing to admit. Paraphrasing Pnina Werbner's words, she claims her right to combine "transnational loyalty and local national citizenship" (2002: 126). The process of introspection that led her to visit Liberia culminated in the decision to eschew the position of victimhood in which she felt due the "racist Italian system" (Santoro) and made her all the more determined to fight back. Speaking about her debut single, *Orangutang*, she says: "While I was writing it, I could image a woman who hasn't been able to talk for a long time, as she was overwhelmed by fear, and then she finally free herself with a cry of relief" (Tamagnone, 2014).

The decision to sing in Pidgin English rather than Italian follows a similar logic: it is a way for her to claim her right to be different and to assert her pride in her heritage, but at the same time it is again a political move to remind her audience of the historical processes of colonialism and imperialism which produced modern diasporas around the world who keep using this language (Vogue). Moreover, she wants to reach out to all the sons and daughters of colonialism who live in the diaspora and exhort them to speak out against racism and to take pride in their cultural heritage (The Colloquia Dialogues, Santoro, Tamagnone). By using Pidgin English as the language to discuss Italian politics from within, Gehnyei then exposes the myth of the homogeneity of Italian society and highlights the inconsistency of the supposedly correspondent relationship between nation and state (see Butler and Spivak, 2007: 30-33).

Questions of identity, belonging and rights then for Gehnyei go hand in hand. It is impossible for her to develop a sense of belonging when large sections of society continue to be left at the margin. She thus fights for the "right to have rights", to borrow a famous formulation from Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1996: 268, quoted in Butler and Spivak, 2007: 47). Her work is of critical importance because it already represents a change within Italian public culture. As Butler and Spivak argue:

The call for that exercise of freedom that comes with citizenship is the exercise of that freedom in its incipient form: it starts to take what it asks for. [...] To make the demand on freedom is already to begin its exercise and then to ask for its legitimation is also to announce the gap between its exercise and its realization and to put both into public discourse in a way so that that gap is seen, so that that gap can be mobilized. (Butler and Spivak, 2007: 68-69)

Furthermore, in her criticism of racism and of the marginalization of the "immigrant" within the Italian dominant discourse, Gehnyei argues that an inclusive politics of citizenship cannot be detached from the respect for cultural difference.

This is a question that Italian politics is set to face now. As the government seems to be on the verge of changing the law on citizenship to finally include children of

immigrants, it will also have to come to terms with the changing face of Italian society and finally to engage in that discourse over difference and equal opportunities which is often discussed as “multiculturalism”. As Lord Parekh observes: “a multicultural society cannot be stable and last long without developing a common sense of belonging among its citizens” (2000: 341). Citizenship represents the first step towards the development of such a sentiment, but as Parekh also remarks: “commitment or belonging is reciprocal in nature. Citizens cannot be committed to their political community unless it is also committed to them, and they cannot belong to it unless it accepts them as belonging to it” (Parekh, 2000: 342). As soon as Italy finally grants citizenship to “second generations”, it will have to take action against the widespread racism that characterises Italian society and politics. Ideally, in recognising the plural character of society, Italy will take on board Ketan Malik’s recommendation to embrace the actual diversity of society while resolving “to treat everyone as citizens, rather than constructing a national identity by characterising certain groups as alien to the nation” (Malik 2015). It remains to be seen what direction Italy will take, but the existence of artists like Gehnyei signals that a change is already taking place.

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