RACISM, IMMIGRATION AND NEW IDENTITIES IN ITALY

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Introduction

It has often been said that the Italians have never had a racist tradition. But the myth of the ‘brava gente’ (Bidussa, 1994; Ben-Ghiat, 2004; Focardi and Klinkhammer, 2004; Favero, 2010; Meret et al., 2013), the good Italians who ignored or sabotaged the anti-Semitic policies of the Fascist regime after 1938 or lived in open contradiction to an Italian form of apartheid in the African colonies, has been undermined by the research of historians over the past thirty years (see Pergher in this volume). More recently the display of openly xenophobic and racist politics in Italy since the 1980s has also undermined another assumption. Since the late 1970s Italy has been transformed from a nation which exported emigrants to the four corners of the globe to an immigrant-receiving nation (on the overall theme of emigration, see Tintori and Colucci in this volume). In the course of this process Italy has become a multicultural country in which over one million Muslims are now residents and/or citizens. The foreign resident population of Italy increased fivefold from 1992 to 2008, and naturalised and second-generation ‘New Italians’ and the ‘host community’ have forged hybrid cultures which have undermined the prevalent ethnic basis of Italian citizenship; indeed the extension of voting rights to overseas Italians and the liberalisation of citizenship laws for the descendants of Italian migrants in the global diaspora confused the issue even further (Pastore, 2004; Battison and Mascitelli, 2008; Bigot and Fella, 2008; Tintori, 2009; Finotelli, 2009; Finotelli and Scintorno, 2009; Clough Marinaro and Walston, 2010: 13; Thomassen, 2010; Gilmour, 2011: 21).

In 2012, the proportion of the population of foreign origin was close to 10 per cent, the immigrant population of Lombardy was one million out of a total of nine million, while 24 per cent of this dynamic region’s schoolchildren did not possess Italian citizenship (Gilardoni, 2011: 450–1). There were over 600,000 Romanians living in Italy; Prato had a large and dynamic population of Chinese traders, small industrialists and shopkeepers; and Rome’s Esquilino and Monti districts hosted a growing South Asian population (Mudu, 2006; Cingolani, 2009; Johanson et al., 2009; Chang, 2010). Nevertheless, the default position of many Italians was to self-identify Italy as white and Catholic (Clough Marinaro and Walston, 2010: 14–16; Bianchi, 2011: 331; Saitta and Cole, 2011).
In the 1980s and 1990s the half-forgotten Empire struck back. Italian armed forces were once again involved in Somalia and Albania, no longer as imperialist conquerors but as peace keepers and peace enforcers under the flag of the United Nations. However, several incidents involving violence and sexual abuse tarnished this new remit. The ramifications of the Ethiopian/Eritrean Wars spilt over into the peninsula (Del Boca, 1994a; Del Boca, 1994b; Triulzi, 2002). Waves of Albanian refugees in the early and late 1990s caused major political crises in Italy (King and Mai, 2008). The break-up of Yugoslavia briefly reopened the question of Istria, when the National Alliance in the first Berlusconi government (1994) lobbied for the rights of Istrians in Slovenia, reawakening anti-Slavic sentiments (Ballinger, 2003: 104–5). The unprecedented rise of the populist and regionalist Northern League saw the stoking of long-term prejudice against the South. The saloon bar commonplaces of its charismatic leader, Umberto Bossi, were disseminated on television, radio, newspapers and the Internet, and by the 2000s, the outrageous behaviour of representatives of the Northern League (see Anna Cento Bull’s chapter in this volume) and others on the Far Right, indeed in a broader spectrum of the political world, was commonplace: a government minister demanded that cannon fire be directed on boatloads of refugees (Geddes, 2008), another suggested that the grounds of a mosque be polluted with the corpses of pigs (Moore, 2008), and a local politician proposed having ‘Milanese’ only underground carriages on that city’s lines (Duff, 2009), while the inevitable linkage of violent crime with extracomunitari by the broader media saw a disconnect with the ‘Italian’ violence of the lethal Camorra and the ‘Ndrangheta (except perhaps by those leghisti who had forgotten that their script had been altered: the target had moved from the Southern Italian to the global Southern or Eastern ‘Others’) (Sciortino and Colombo, 2004; Hanretty and Hermanin, 2010); and there were the provocative ‘White Christmases’ of certain Northern mayors (Hooper, 2009). Italy’s first black government minister, Cécile Kyenge, named minister for integration in April 2013, had bananas thrown at her, and she sustained a barrage of racist insults including one from the Lega Nord senator, Roberto Calderoli, who compared her to an orang-utan. (Kington, 2013a; BBC, 2013). Behaviour which would have led to prosecution for provoking racial and religious hatred in some of Italy’s neighbours was ignored or sloughed off as ‘folkloric’ and practitioners of this dirty art on the streets of Italy’s towns and cities were careful to remain peaceful; the stress was on innocuous-looking middle-aged citizens of the ‘Green Patrols’ rather than muscular, shaven-headed, sullen young men (Squires, 2009; Avanza, 2010).

With the end of the so-called First Republic in the early 1990s, debates on the fate of the Italian nation and ‘Italian character’ stimulated by revisionist historians argued that the nation state and patriotism had for too long been suppressed or ignored by a joint ‘conspiracy’ of the Cold War Christian Democratic regime and the politically correct, ‘anti-Italian’ Italian Left (Rusconi, 1993; Gentile, 1997; Galli della Loggia, 1999). When did the Italian nation start to die and how could one revive it? The antidote for the revisionists was the celebration of Italian achievements, and with careful, but increasingly rather haphazard surgery, Fascism was reappraised and contrasted with the supposedly postnational Cold War ‘consociational regime’ (Levy, 1999; Mammone, 2006; Ventresca, 2006; Cento Bull, 2008). Wishful thinking or exercises in serial anachronism characterized these instant history books (Patriarca, 2001; Patriarca, 2010). But the reinvention of the Italian past (Cossu, 2010) was allied to the demand for the reinstatement of the ethno-linguistic basis of Italy and/or the North, just when legislation was being passed to allow the teaching of other languages in schools and just when immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers were turning the great Italian cities into cosmopolitan urban centres (Lepschy et al., 1996; King, 1999; Moss, 2000; Colombo and Sciortino, 2004; Clough Marinaro and Thomassen, 2014).
Rising tensions for nearly two decades culminated during the general election in 2008, which, was fought when anti-immigrant sentiment was at a fever pitch, indeed a fever induced by the media and the knee-jerk reaction of politicians on the Left and Right to a series of violent and murderous incidents involving Roma Romanians (Sigona, 2010). In what then seemed the last hurrah of the Northern League, working-class voters in northern suburbs and small towns rallied to Umberto Bossi’s party. The headlines shouted that Italy was ageing, Italy was falling down the economic pecking order (indeed it was predicted that Romania would surpass Italy in a decade or so), while a series of public opinion surveys showed that Italians felt like aliens in their ‘own’ piazzas. Fear of crime was mixed uneasily and incoherently with fear of newcomers from Albania, Romania, North Africa or China, while the image of Italians being swamped by more fecund newcomers flooded the media. By the late 2000s unconscious reflex racism was widespread. The commonplace term extracomunitari was employed as a blanket term not for all non-EU citizens resident in Italy but those from the Global South and East, echoing and reinforcing earlier terms of exclusion such as marocchino, zingaro, meridionale, and, for the far right, ebreo. This hysteria culminated in a pogrom of Roma in the outskirts of Naples (such events had happened earlier too), which caused the UNHCR to draw comparisons with ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. In 2008, the newly installed Berlusconi government announced a fingerprint census of Roma during the seventieth anniversary of the census of the Jews by Mussolini’s regime in 1938. The incoming government may have confronted a budget deficit but it seemed also to suffer from an irony deficit (Clough Marinaro and Daniele, 2011; Clough Marinaro and Sigona, 2011; Sigona, 2011).

Academia was not slow to detect new fields of study. In 1999 the Centre for the Study of the History and Theory of Italian Racism was established at the University of Bologna. Italians embraced postcolonial studies from the middle of the 1990s onwards (Burgio, 2000: 9). Thus studies of Antonio Gramsci, moribund since the decline of Eurocommunism in the early 1980s, were revived. This comatose ‘Gramsci’ was revived through the interaction of his thought with Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Stuart Hall and the British School of Cultural Studies and perhaps most importantly, the Indian School of Subaltern Studies. In turn engagement with this ‘postcolonial Gramsci’ stimulated discussions of cultural hybridity and liminality, postnational citizenship and cosmopolitanism (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012; Srivastava and Bhattacharya, 2012). But the concerns of the postcolonialists were not alien to the growing debates over the place of first-, second- and even third-generation immigrants in Italy, ‘New or hyphenated’ Italians, modes of Italian citizenship (jus sanguinis, jus soli, multiculturalism), and dimensions of religious tolerance (and the ambiguous position of the Catholic Church). However the alarms, concerns, prejudices and neuroses of the Italians were not that different from their neighbours’ reactions. The context, the timing and the historical legacies of the peninsula merely produced a variation on a troubling European theme (Janoski, 2010). Thus on many different levels, questions of race and racism had become major concerns for Italians and the residents of Italy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Racisms in Italy from the 1990s to 2013

In other work I have traced the byways of Italian racism from 1861 though the post-war ‘First Republic’: ‘Orientalism’ and the Mezzogiorno (see also Schneider, 1998), colonialism and the colonial subject, the North-East, Trieste and the Slavic ‘Other’, anti-Semitism and the Shoah, the more complex, dominant/submissive relationship with the Habsburg Austrians, French and Germans, and Italian-Americans as not quite ‘white’ in the USA’s racialized culture. I have argued that anti-Southern stereotyping in the late nineteenth century foreshadowed the skin-
colour and anti-Semitic biological racism of the Fascist regime of the 1930s. In a similar fashion the anti-Southern rhetoric of the Northern League in the 1980s and 1990s slides easily into xenophobic reactions to asylum seekers, refugees, Roma, and immigrants from the Global South and East (Levy, forthcoming).

Racial discourse became widespread via the media presence of the Lega Nord. The Lega Nord set the pace of Italian politics in the nineties and first decade of the twenty-first century. At every crucial step in the transition of Italian politics over twenty years, the League was the catalyst or active agent, as Anna Cento Bull demonstrates in her chapter in this volume.

Thus, by the early 2000s Bossi was the kingmaker and regicide of Italian national politics and his anti-Southern and xenophobic pronouncements became commonplace, acceptable parts of the discourse of politics and social life in Italy (just as concurrently the sexist language and images of Berlusconi and his media outlets became the common sense of quotidian life of Italy).

By the 2000s, the Lega Nord had been transformed from a free-market, regionalist European and anti-Southern party into a xenophobic, Islamophobic, antiglobalist, protectionist political formation (see Cento Bull in this volume). It peddled a *Volksgemeinschaft* welfare state for ‘Padanian’ workers. This populist racist proletarian turn alienated a part of the League’s original free-market constituency, especially in the Veneto, where many businesses had met the challenges of globalisation by massive outsourcing in Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania, and whose trade association complained about the League’s ‘excess ideology’, which seemed to threaten their business plans (Messina, 2001). But despite these contretemps, the League helped shape or at least limit the flexibility of the immigration and citizenship policies of the Berlusconi governments (although Bossi and his son received their comeuppance by going ‘native’ in the most spectacular fashion when they were brought down in a scandal involving the Calabrian Mafia).

As Cento Bull explains in her chapter, the Northern League was and is a regionalist variation on the neo-populist conservative or Far Right party, common throughout Europe since the 1980s.

However, the League’s variety of racist neo-populism must be placed within the shifting parameters of both historical context and the effects of human agency (Bossi and Matteo Salvini). Like other neo-populist conservative or Far Right parties, outright classical racist discourse and open anti-Semitism have been banished from public consumption. Adapted from the strategy of the French New Right of the 1980s, racism was transformed into cultural difference (Bar-On, 2007; Bar-On, 2013). Thus the right of cultural difference (a strange but clever inversion of postmodern anti-racist discourse) and the proclamation of ethnic exclusivity for Italians (for the Far Right) and ‘Padanians’ (for the Lega Nord) were joined with the right of cultural exclusivity for the migrants in their original homes. Foreign aid should be targeted at immigrant-producing countries on the proviso that they keep their own people home. Some of these policies were not too dissimilar to those of the mainstream European Centre-Left and Centre-Right, and indeed some had been pioneered by the Centre-Right in Germany, for example, and thus they could then be used as camouflage or as an electoral bridge by neo-populists throughout Europe for their more radical plans (Bale, 2003).

However, the Italian case has had its unique characteristics. The Lega Nord started as an anti-fascist but racist party because it originally opposed the MSI/Alleanza Nazionale as a manifestation of Southernism: against all historical evidence Fascism was considered a Southern product, the North was the home of the Resistance; so went the rhetoric of the 1980s and early 1990s. But in due course the Lega Nord ended up as a devolutionist and racist party, more racist than (at least) the leadership and particularly Gianfranco Fini of the (traditionally Fascist) Alleanza Nazionale, as Fini and elements of his party journeyed to the Centre with policies on...
citizenship and voting rights that were on the left of Berlusconi’s coalition governments, and caused a variety of Extreme Right breakaways, although the Roma ‘crisis’ of 2008 revived older and more menacing tones in Fini. Eventually Fini was outmanoeuvred by Berlusconi (he came to see him as a political rival for the leadership of the Centre-Right) and some of the previously more racist and fascist formations ended up in Berlusconi’s electoral vehicle Il Popolo della Libertà (Mammone, forthcoming). The end result was that it was not always clear where on the Right one found the most racist remarks: a cacophony of insults was not always easily mapped onto the same political formations. As for Berlusconi himself, just like Umberto Bossi, the millionaire employed the same sort of banter but in a more jokey, homespun style than Il Lumbard; thus the notorious remark about the then recently elected President Obama’s sun tan (which one year later was followed by vulgar, sexist remarks and gestures on meeting the First Lady, Michelle Obama) (Glendinning, 2008; Leonard, 2009). However, in terms of policy on immigration and citizenship in the 2000s, Berlusconi through much of his time in power in this period let Fini, Roberto Maroni of the Lega Nord and Christian Democrat politicians fight it out: much in the manner of the Veneto industrialists mentioned previously, Berlusconi’s globalising and European market instincts made him wary of ‘excess ideology’. He was much more comfortable with ‘dog-whistle’ politics, unpleasant but insubstantial noise, catering to the populist vote, but joined to the acceptance of ‘managed migration’ for his own and the Italian economy’s interests (Calavita, 2005; Zincone, 2006; Geddes, 2008; Menz, 2009: 66–8; 232–49; Cento Bull, 2010).

But intolerance of the ‘Other’ transcended the Right/Left boundary and the red/white political cultures which were still very robust in the 1980s. Even given the uncontrolled spread of the periferia (suburbs and urban sprawl) since the 1950s, a series of sociological and historical studies have demonstrated the parochial nature of Italian political culture: national, North/South divide and regional forms of identities were and probably still are trumped by bedrock city, town, and indeed neighbourhood identities (for some provincial town studies, see Cento Bull, 1996; Daly 1999; Riccio, 1999). This came out very strongly in an extensive survey carried out by a team of American social scientists, published as long ago as 1994, which demonstrated that a parochial culture was not particularly open to outsiders sharing civil space with it (Sniderman et al., 2001). Thus not only did the Southern ‘Other’ become a template for transferring the fears and anxieties of Italians in the North onto other out groups (as the Lega Nord did when it shifted its mobilisation strategy from the South to the Islamic or Roma ‘Other’) but the arrival of migrants in small or medium-sized towns, or more to the point their suburbs, mobilised considerable electoral support for the Lega Nord in the 2008 and 2013 elections in the red zones of central Italy, as I have previously mentioned. Left-wing administrations in Rome or Bologna were not noted for their tolerance of or sensitivity towards migrant groups, particularly Roma from the Balkans (Diamanti, 2009: 202–13; Però, 1999; Clough Marinaro, 2003). The veteran centre-left journalist and historian Giorgio Bocca seemed to suffer from false memory syndrome when recalling Southern migration to the industrial northern cities from the 1950s to the 1970s as somehow different from the next wave of migrants in the 1990s. Thus the earlier Southerners were easier to integrate because they were ‘people who had language, religion, skin colour and cultural history in common with the Milanese’, even though cultural differences and even skin tone were regularly invoked as barriers by commentators when the migrations were actually occurring (Foot, 1999: 162).

Simultaneously, in the South one academic claimed that in Palermo racist sentiments were not present because Sicilians identified with the plight of the newcomers, but the later cases of Rosarno in Calabria and others elsewhere in the Mezzogiorno tell another story, although the recent positive example of Riace is closer to the original findings (Cole, 1997; Booth and Cole, 1999; Donaldio, 2010; Kington, 2013b). The violence against immigrants displayed in a series
of incidents in Florence in 1990, when shopkeepers and immigrant street hawkers clashed and neo-Nazis went on the rampage against immigrants, did not happen in Sicily in the 1980s and 1990s because here immigrants did not seem to endanger the livelihoods of shopkeepers. Violence was inflicted on foreign and Italian farmworkers alike by Mafia labour contractors, but this was merely the modus operandi of the Mafia, and in any case agricultural workers and fishermen from North Africa had been a feature of Sicilian life for decades (Ben-Yehoyada, 2011). But here too, it is hard to draw hard-and-fast conclusions. Violence against immigrants flared up in Naples and Bari, for example, throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, and marginality haunted the lives of many (Dines, 2012; Lucht, 2012). Most importantly, the seasonal arrival of boat people on the island of Lampedusa focused the debate on the deepest South of Italy.

Although Italy served as a temporary reception and transport centre for Jewish, East European, and Russian refugees from the end of the Second World War, through the Cold War, until the 1990s Italy did not operate fully under the 1951 Geneva Convention and then several challenges confronted Italy simultaneously. Waves of Albanians, Kurds, Yugoslav and Kosovar Roma and mixed migrations of refugee and economic migrants from the north coast of Africa became a feature of Italian life and from the early 1990s a perennial staple of Italian journalism. Italy wanted to qualify as a Schengen member, to prove to suspicious neighbours to its north that it was not a porous entry point for illegal migrants from the Global South. Thus Italy had to develop an asylum and refugee policy which at once nodded in the direction of the humanitarian and legal requirements of the Geneva Convention but simultaneously abided by the increasingly restrictive policies of the European Union following the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars of succession. If the Centre-Right governments of the 2000s adopted a more restrictive policy towards migrants, with the Bossi-Fini and other ‘security packages’, in turn magnified by bloodcurdling pronouncements of various politicians, it was not difficult to find similar cases amongst Italy’s partners (Cinalli, 2008; Finotelli, 2009; Finotelli and Sciortino, 2009). In what way was the illegal deportation of Romanian Roma from France by the none too tolerant administration of Nicolas Sarkozy any different from the Italian government’s ‘national emergency’ in the summer of 2008 and the illegal pushbacks of boat people by joint task forces of the Italian and Libyan navies and coast guards? (Indeed one of the unintended consequences of Berlusconi’s murky deals with the Libyans was a final settling of the legacy of colonial crimes inflicted on Libya by Liberal and Fascist Italy: Labanca, 2010; Paolletti, 2010.) Later, during the Arab Spring, for a brief moment the Italians and French engaged in a disgraceful game of pass the human parcel as Italian demands for stricter European help to control the Mediterranean led to channelling of boat people to the French border, which was then shut in retaliation (Richey, 2012); albeit the brief episode of Mare Nostrum was a remarkable change.

Restrictive policy in Italy, however, was accompanied in the 2000s by the two largest amnesties for illegal immigrants ever seen in Europe, which alarmed and angered her European partners. Thus, simultaneously, Italy was criticised in the European Union for being too liberal and too vocally racist. In fact Italy received more illegal immigrants from Germany through individuals (mainly from former Soviet states) with expired work visas who moved south than from Africa, and certainly more through airports than the alarming and heart-rending landings on Lampedusa, although the latter fed the populist grandstanding policies of maritime pushbacks in the Mediterranean and the shameful collaboration of the Italians in extraterritorial camps in Libya. In Germany the granting of asylum remained much more widespread than in Italy (although significantly restricted from its heyday in the early 1990s) but in practice a similar number of refugees found an ad hoc regime of protection through Italy’s porous, if precarious and exploitative, labour markets. How could one measure whether in practice German or Italian approaches were more racist (Levy, 2010: 103–4)? In any case, racist discourse within
the Centre-Right was at times contested by the voices of employers and certain Catholic currents whose motives ranged from the bottom line to religious ethics (Garau, 2010). Migrants, illegal or legal, were wanted but not welcome in much of Italy: the blast furnaces of ‘Deep North’ leghista Brescia would fall silent without their labour (Andall, 2007), and the Italian welfare state would have had to spend far more if migrant nannies tending to young children and carers helping the elderly were not present in the bosom of many Italian families (Andall, 2000; Colombo, 2007; van Hooren, 2010; Degiuli, 2011; Sciortino, 2013).

Conclusion: imperial memories, ‘New Italians’, agency and citizenship

Racism in Italy in the early twenty-first century is crafted by a series of historical legacies. The notion of the good Italian dies hard and prevents a realistic appraisal of where the nation is now. The parochial nature of much of Italian culture has not been exceptionally open to different cultures sharing space with it. Indeed it could be argued that the weakness of the Italian state, the contested legitimacy of the Left and Right in Italian politics even after the end of the Cold War, and the relatively recent emergence of a national culture, which has only partially supplanted regional or more importantly local subcultures, may have made it harder for Italians to deal with the reality of mass migration and the shifting contours of Italian identity and citizenship. Amnesia about the Italian imperial past perhaps initially made it harder to accept non-European cultures in Italian cities. Imperialism has always been a double-edged sword (see Pergher in this volume and also Labanca, 2002: 464–70; Palumbo, 2003; Triulzi, 2003; Andall and Duncan, 2005; Andall and Duncan, 2010; Barattieri, 2010). On the one hand, it fostered racism and cultural superiority but, on the other hand, the myth of a motherland for colonials to some extent forced the French and British, in their own ways, to come to terms with multicultural realities through historically determined path-dependent constitutional arrangements (from Anglican liberal-minded state Church (encased in the multi-ethnic British Isles) to the militant laicism and republicanism of the French) (Levy, 2010: 103–4). In any case, although Albanians and Romanians far exceed the populations of other newcomers, immigrants in Italy hail from nearly two hundred different ethnic and national groups, which are largely fragmented, relatively unorganised and largely without strong champions. Groups are not differentiated into such categories such as Afro-Caribbean or beur, although the Islamic marker may become one (for overviews, see Colombo and Sciortino, 2004; Bonifazi, 2007; Einaudi, 2007; Colombo and Sciortino, 2008). In the 1990s the Albanians (with their unique relationship to Italy), it was argued, had become the new Southerners: mirror to the nation, to be civilized, when not feared as criminal barbarians (Mai, 2003). By 2013 both the Albanians and non-Roma Romanians were being integrated into Italian society (King and Mai, 2008). The entry of Romania into the EU eased the way for hundreds of thousands of illegal Romanian migrants, and new commercial and chain migration networks seemed to assist this process (Anghel, 2008). Their scapegoat replacements, the Roma from the Balkans (Clough Marinaro, 2003; Sigona, 2003; Sigona, 2005; Clough Marinaro, 2009; Costi, 2010; Sigona, 2010; Clough Marinaro and Sigona, 2011; Tosi Cambini, 2011), did not even possess those rather dubious mitigating stereotypical features that acceptable migrants are sometimes given to ease their acceptance into the host nation (as for instance Italian-Americans in the USA) (Guglielmo, 2003; Guglielmo and Salerno, 2003), but, as we shall see, the Roma were not without their own agency.

The Catholic Church is still an important presence in Italian life and politics, even if daily religious practice languishes. Indeed the end of the ‘First Republic’ has witnessed the spread of noticeable political influence in the Centre-Right to the Centre-Left. The Church has become
an important veto player with reference to civil unions, stem cell research and other bioethical issues (Bernini, 2010). In terms of migration and citizenship, there are voices in the hierarchy reminiscent of inter-war anti-Semitism, which warned that followers of the Islamic faith may be tolerated as guests in Italy, but they can never be accepted into the intimate fabric of national life, while some of the last Pope’s statements and writings did not inspire confidence. Since the 1960s, the Church has undergone a painful reappraisal of its behaviour towards the Jews, and thus other currents within the Church, witnessing the events of the summer of 2008 and their shocking parallels to 1938 took a brave and principled stand. Indeed it could be argued that the defence of the Roma by Famiglia Cristiana (a mass-circulation family-oriented magazine) was far more forthright than anything the mainstream Left mounted (Famiglia Cristiana, 2008). And even if there is a disturbing anti-Islamic current in Catholic circles, it is also the case that the overlapping of Catholicism with the essence of Italian ethnicity by more sectarian elements in the hierarchy has given migrants from Catholic backgrounds (some Albanians, Filipinos or Latin Americans, and Poles) an opportunist route to the mainstream. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church’s privileged relationship with the State means that the growing numbers of Muslims in Italy, who do not possess the same guarantees, are set for further battles to assert their right to practise their religion publicly (Allievi, 2002; Clough Marinaro and Walston, 2010: 12; Garau, 2010).

The labelling of Roma as nomads, the generic and disconcerting term used for Roma and Sinti in Italy, which brings to mind the ambiguity of already mentioned extracomunitario, was first advanced as a progressive recognition by local authorities of their cultural rights, but just as the ‘concentration’ of the Jews into one legally recognised category after the Lateran Pacts of 1929 was at first applauded in the Jewish community by traditionalists and Zionists as a method of guaranteeing cultural autonomy through separateness, in both cases, the effect was and could be a way to make strict segregation easier to implement when other factors came or come into play. Thus the far-right mayor of Rome Gianni Alemanno during the 2008 ‘crisis’ redefined the Roma issue as a humanitarian problem that could be solved through the identification of ‘nomads’ (perhaps numbering 7,000 to 15,000), even if this was not intended to be the illegal practice of ethnic profiling. Like the Roma, the Jews of 1938 were a miniscule minority of the population but they too brought forth ‘extraordinary methods’: the Roma in 2008 and the Jews in 1938 were by their very presence in public society causing ‘an emergency’. The Roma were rehoused ‘for their own good’ so that the authorities ‘could look after their welfare’, while the Jews were driven from civil society and transformed into non-persons, ‘discriminated not persecuted’, so Mussolini argued, until their segregation was followed by a more sinister denouement after 1943 (for the Jews in 1938, see Visani, 2009 and for the Roma in 2008, see Lerner, 2008a and Lerner, 2008b).

It is vital to emphasise the differences between the two. Mayor Alemanno was obliged to abide by or at least acknowledge national, European and international, liberal, democratic human rights laws (and the concerned intervention of the Italian President); he was forced to address the Roma directly, and to allow them to ‘co-manage’ their own segregation on the periphery of Rome, but in so doing he gave them a voice they were never afforded under the previous ‘benevolent’ policies of the left-wing municipality of Bologna (Clough Marinaro and Daniele, 2011; Picker, 2011; for elsewhere in Italy, see Vitale, 2011; for the use of the law to defend the rights of citizen, resident and refugee Roma and Sinti in Italy, see Loy, 2009; Bonetti et al., 2011 (volumes one and two)). The paradoxes of liberal democracy and global capitalism also lessened the repressive impact of the Bossi-Fini immigration act of 2002 and other ‘security packages’ passed by later Berlusconi governments in the 2000s. Centre-Left policies in the 1990s shared characteristics with the ‘security packages’ of the 2000s. Both resulted in a
series of massive regularisations of undocumented immigrants and both maintained a basic if threadbare welfare system for undocumented immigrants. Thus the need for domestic, agricultural and industrial labour, the fragility of political coalitions, the contradictory messages of human rights laws, Schengen and the war on terrorism, but also and importantly the agency of ‘New Italians’, migrants, and the Roma shaped realities on the ground far more significantly than lurid but static accounts in newspapers or indeed the overblown pessimistic dystopias woven by Giorgio Agamben and his prolific followers would lead one to believe (for the agency of Roma women, see Pesarini, 2013 and for political participation of Roma in Italy, see Sigona, 2009; for an example of a vast and predictable literature influenced by Agamben, see Buckel and Wissel, 2010).

The role of agency leads us to the conclusion of this chapter. The definition of second-generation ‘New Italians’ may have its methodological and legal challenges; nevertheless, in the public square, young people have not waited for academics and policymakers to act, shaping a new Italian reality through such social movements as Rete G2 (Thomassen, 2010; Zinn, 2010; Zinn, 2011). Direct action however is played out through Italian legal realities. The comparison with Germany is instructive. Until fairly recently, the German citizenship law of 1913 emphasised parental descent as the chief basis of citizenship; in Italy a rather similar law of 1912 has shaped the parameters of the current debate. German and Italian diasporas and the privileging of their denizens’ roads to citizenship raised the issue of ‘New Italians’ and ‘New Germans’, who had far more immediate relationship with present-day Germany or Italy than those of Italian descent in Argentina or German speakers in the former Soviet Union. In Germany, the loosening of restrictions on naturalization only partly discredited the notion of jus sanguinis (Pastore, 2004; Tintori, 2009; Clough Marinaro and Walston, 2010). Indeed by the early twenty-first century the general consensus in Europe has settled for a modified form of jus sanguinis or at least a discrediting of a multicultural road to citizenship and constitutional patriotism, an unarticulated presumption that the essence of citizenship and belonging was rooted in a culture and history that transcended the mere acquisition of the legal, linguistic and educational competences of civic citizenship, that somehow ancestry made one a more authentic member of the national community, but accompanied by an equally official vigorous and public disclaimer of the rhetoric of biological racism or the notion of a Christian Europe (for the mainstream it was always Judaico-Christian, a term not generally used before 1945 or even perhaps the 1960s). Modern mass migration was a newer phenomenon than in Germany, Sweden or Britain, so the Italians have not yet caught up in policy and rhetoric with their neighbours: there is no grand bargain as witnessed in Germany, in which asylum laws were tightened (yes in both) and citizenship laws liberalised (not yet in Italy). Nevertheless, the situations are not so different: certain critiques of multiculturalism in Italy have been a convenient rhetorical blind for the advocates of an ethnically based Italianità who wish to keep their rather bog-standard ethnic nationalism hidden (Grillo and Pratt, 2002; Bianchi, 2011).

Nevertheless, fieldwork studies have demonstrated how hyphenated or otherwise defined Italians have forged their selves through multiple and shifting identities. The phrase ‘suspended between two worlds’ (Clough Marinaro and Walston, 2010: 9) is found frequently in this literature, but the New Italians have taken action, drawing on the legacies of their parents but also shaping a hybrid Italian culture from ‘translocal’ and European influences, even if their use of the geographical imaginary of Europe is rather different from the ethnic exclusivist connotations of the term extracomunitari by which many of these Italian-born individuals are still defined by their fellow Italians (Arnone, 2011; Bello, 2011; Colombo et al., 2011; Riccio and Russo, 2011). ‘We do not crave acceptance or fear rejection,’ declared a self-identified ‘Brown Italian’. ‘We are already part of your reality’ (Berrocal, 2010: 85–6). But it remains to
be seen whether or not the rich resources of their multilingual and cosmopolitan competences will be utilised in Italy (Menin, 2011; Pedone, 2011), or whether future generations of ‘New Italians’ will find themselves trapped in a state of alienated marginality. The Italian nation state is a recent development and the widespread use of the Italian language is relatively new, really only two generations old (Coluzzi, 2009). Thus Italians have the opportunity to use an imaginary which counters the myth of ethnogenesis and transcends the parochial xenophobic provocations of the Lega Nord, as Dario Franceschini, former head of the Partito Democratico argued in answer to their rhetoric (see also the potential of Trieste as a model for Italian and European cosmopolitanism in Waley, 2009):

Our own current identity, which we of course want to defend, is the result of thousands of years of encounters between different cultures and languages. Let us think of the cities of Northern Italy: I say this to the representatives of the Northern League. Let us think of Genoa, the crossroads of sailors and traders, where, over the course of centuries, our language has been enriched by Arabic, Spanish, French and many other influences. Or think of Venice, a crossroads, a miracle built by Italians but also by Byzantine mosaic artists, by Arabic carvers and Turkish decorators. Let us think of our dialects: of the Greek cadence of Barèse, of the Arabic tones of Sicilian and Calabrian; of the communities which, after thousands of years still speak ancient Albanian today; of the French influences on Piemontese; of the Spanish influences in Lombardy; of Slavic ones in the North-East. To this unique heritage we must give a future.

(Berrocal, 2010: 85–6)

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