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**Group: Social inequality and discrimination, racism and gender in European societies**

**Popular racism, modernity and Europe  
An ethnography on Turin (Italy)**

**Introduction**

In this paper I am going to explore how ideas of Europe and European identity are used to articulate popular discourses on immigration and immigrants. In contrast with the literature on European identity and immigration which has mostly looked at institutions, adopting a top-down approach, I will look at popular discourses, adopting an approach from the bottom-up. I will base my analysis on ethnographic research carried out between 1997 and 1999 in a quarter of Turin, San Salvatio, where there have been strong protests against the presence of immigrants. I will focus in particular on the interviews with some members of a grass-roots Committee created “*to fight criminality brought in the quarter by the presence of immigrants*”.

As a first step, I will focus on those studies which have analysed how issues of European identity and immigration have been constructed at an institutional level. Then, I will consider how Europe and immigration have become important grounds on which Italian identities are negotiated following the global and national changes of the 1980's and the 1990's and I will analyse how they are perceived among my interviewees.

My argument is that ideas of Europe have been elaborated at institutional level in exclusionary terms in relation to immigrants and presented in terms of “modernity”; and that these ideas have had an influence on popular discourses on immigration and contribute to the production of racialised representations of immigrants. In other words, I will argue that ideas of Europe and modernity can be used to articulate popular racialised discourses of immigration.

**Institutional constructions of Europe**

Sociological and anthropological literature on European identity and immigration has usually focused on institutional policies, adopting a top-down approach. Scholars have shown how, at a European institutional level, constructions of Europe and European identity are articulated in exclusionary terms. The literature on this issue is wide: I will just refer to some of the main issues that scholars have pointed out in relation to the definition of European identity, European citizenship and immigration policies.

First, some scholars have pointed out that the construction of European Union has been mainly an economic construction. For this reason, the construction of a European

citizenship has been seen as necessary to the functioning of the European internal market leaving untouched the national identities of the different states. For this reason, it has been constructed in traditional nationalistic terms consequently excluding immigrants from non-western countries (e.g. Martiniello 1995; Shore & Black 1994). Some other scholars have focused on European Union immigration policies, based on the control of borders, highlighting the process of construction of a fortress Europe in which immigrants have been constructed as a threat to European society both in cultural, political and economic terms (e.g. Huysmans 1995; den Boer 1995). It has also been pointed out that cultural policies finalised to build up a “European identity” often construct Europe as a unified cultural entity in opposition to other external cultural entity, such as - for example - Islam (e.g. Collinson 1996).

More recent studies have highlighted how the opposition between Europe and “the others” has been articulated in terms of “modernity” versus “backwardness”. In this case, I understand modernity as a whole range of characteristics that are usually attributed to Western countries and in particular to Europe at different levels, such as democracy and market economy. It has been pointed out that at an institutional level, Europe has been constructed as “modern” in opposition to “the others” which are non-democratic and under-developed both in cultural, political and economic terms - in one word, “backward”. Some authors (among the others Miles 1993; Brah 1996) have pointed out that racialised ideas of Europe were generated within the colonial era to support the exploitation of colonial others and that contemporary ideas of Europe, can traced back to that origin even if today have new forms and take place in a new context. On the one hand, Marfleet (1999) points out that the cultural promotion of Europe, is based on the theory of the “clash of civilisations” which has been taken on board by European bureaucrats. And that in this project Europe is articulated in terms of common cultural and political heritage (Greek Roman tradition, Christian religion, democracy etc.) in opposition to the “others”. He also argues that until the 1980’s “the others” were identified with the communist countries but that since then “the others” have been identified with Islam. On the other hand, Kurti (1997) analyses how Eastern Europe is being conceptualised by intellectuals in the process of making of Central Europe. He argues that the representation of Eastern Europe as backward was begun by intellectuals in the middle of nineteenth century, amplified with the critique of the whole socialist project and that this representation is being taken on board by contemporary European elite. Kurti argues that we should “*look at the remaking of European boundaries as an ideological separation of the backward East from the rest*”(31) and in terms of an “orientalising” process similar to that of colonialism. In this process, he continues, Eastern Europe is spoken about “*as an area that lags behind the developed and democratic West*” and “*assists in a new bipolarisation and hierarchisation of Europe*” (31).

These studies certainly enlighten us on the dangerous implications present in the construction of Europe and European identity. Nevertheless, the top-down approach adopted in these studies assumes an influence of these discourses on people’s ideas, but never discusses or shows it. The influence that these politics have at popular level has remained unexplored. In the next sections, I will explore how these ideas have been promoted in Italy and how they have become part of popular imagery.

## **Europe, immigration and the renegotiation of identities in Italy**

Global, national and local changes in the 1990's have a sense of insecurity in the perceptions of identities in Italy. As it has been pointed out by some authors, Italian identities are mainly constructed around political identities (in terms of oppositions such as fascists/antifascists, communists/anticommunists), Catholicism and the North and South divide (Parker 1996; Pratt 1996; Dickie 1996; Gribaudi 1996; Maher 1996). The fall of the Berlin wall, the redefinition of the Italian political system, the economic crisis, the issue of the entry of Europe and immigration from non-EU countries have created a space for the renegotiation of Italian identities. These changes have been perceived strongly also among my interviewees in Turin. To some of them the collapse of Communist countries and the end of the Italian Communist Party have been perceived as a "tragedy" by someone, but also have opened up the space for grass roots - often Catholic - commitment and for the re-birth of fascist ideologies. The political crisis together with economic crisis have opened up the space for localistic ideologies which envisage the political division of Northern Italy from Southern Italy (Lega Nord). It is in this framework that immigration and Europe have become part of people's discourses and therefore constitute new points of reference for the renegotiation of identities.

As it has been pointed out by different scholars (Gundle & Parker 1996; Sassoon 1997), the entry into the Economic and Monetary Union, has been considered by all the Italian parties (except Rifondazione Comunista) as a chance not to be missed. All the Italian governments since 1991, date of the signing of the Maastricht Treaty - governments lead by Ciampi, Amato, Berlusconi, Dini, Prodi, D'Alema and again Amato today - have promoted politics to bring Italy to meet the criteria of economic convergence set up by the Maastricht Treaty in order to join the European monetary union. The goodness of the "entry in Europe" has been taken for granted and remained undiscussed within the Italian context, differently from other European countries where a wide public debate on this issue has taken place. On the media, the entry into the monetary union has been advertised as "the European train" which Italians do not have to miss. At the same time, in the last decade, governments and media have stressed how Italy did not meet any of the requirements of the Maastricht Treaty, differently from other more developed European countries such as Germany and France. Also the Northern League, promoted an idea of Northern Italy which had to join Germany and Europe leaving Southern Italy behind. In other words, the entry in Europe has been presented by Italian politicians and media in terms of modernity and as a unique chance to get out from Italian backwardness, and it has remained unquestioned. If we consider that Italy has always been represented and has represented itself, in opposition to other central European countries, as "late" and "backward" (Dickie 1996; Gribaudi 1996), it is possible to understand how this idea of Europe and modernity has been pretty appealing for Italian people and it has become a terms of reference for the redefinition of Italian identities.

In the same years, immigration has also become an important ground for the renegotiation of identities and the discussion of different political and social issues. Immigration is talked about, by politicians and media, in relation to a wide range of issues, from public order and urban security to unemployment, from the control of the borders to taxation and social provisions. Immigration has also been one of the arguments mostly used by the right wing coalitions to argue against the centre-left

government. Nevertheless, the new law on immigration, promulgated under the centre-left wing D'Alema government in 1998, has taken on board popular and right wing worries and also EU directives as it has been elaborated under the passwords "closure of borders, integration for those who are here".

As it is possible to see from what I have just described, in the 1990's Italian governments and media took on board the important issues elaborated at a EU level, both in relation to the European internal market and monetary union and in relation to the control of immigration. Let me now turn to the way discourses on immigration and Europe are articulated among the inhabitants of the San Salvario quarter in Turin.

### **Popular racism, immigration and Europe in San Salvario, Turin**

The analysis I am here proposing is based on ethnographic research undertaken between 1997 and 1999 in San Salvario, Turin. The data I am presenting do not have a statistical significance, nevertheless, they are meaningful as certain discourses are made possible by the fact that are shared by a wider context.

Among my interviewees, the representation of immigrants is articulated in terms of difference from a normative and undiscussed "us", and these differences are organised in hierarchical and exclusionary terms. Immigrants are considered as different from Italians at cultural, political, economic and moral level. They are often represented through animalising metaphors which exclude them from the human world and that exclude them from "modernity".

In San Salvario, immigrants are mainly represented as drugdealers and prostitutes. These activities are considered as a result of their being poor, but poverty is also considered as product of their culture. And their culture is a sort of "genetic" characteristic. The same man uses first an economic argument against immigration:

*the Law has to be restrictive, in relation to the economic possibility of the country, otherwise all these people come here and become beggars, prostitutes and drug-dealers...*

but then he easily switches towards a cultural argument.

*First we have to talk about public order then we can talk about integration... then we will be able to talk of Centro Interculturale, then we will go to people and say that foreigners are here, will be here in the future, will have children that will be called Ali and Mohammed and that will be Torinesi (natives from Turin), and that will acquire the Italian culture... only when issues of public order will be solved, we will go to people and we will say "OK, their mother was a whore, their father was a pusher, but now they think like our sons, they have understood that they can not do certain things"... (...) probably one day their children, the children of whores and pushers will learn our culture and will refuse the culture of their parents... when things will be like this, we will be able to talk of certain projects, but not now...*

In the above statement it is absolutely clear how immigrants are constructed in terms of radical difference from a the normative "our culture" which is understood as superior.

But also when are not represented as criminal or prostitutes, immigrants are described as backward in opposition to a modern and civilised “us”. Their political and social organisation is for example represented in opposition to the democratic West. To one of the persons to which I talked, all Africans are organised in a “*myriad of nations, little states, tribes etc*” which are unintelligible to our Western minds. As our political and social organisation is unintelligible to them: “... *probably at their own home they live better, because they have their tribe, their clan, their habitat - probably they would live better if they were accompanied to their country of origin and helped towards development...*”. In this case immigrants from African countries are represented in terms of underdeveloped and “primitive” forms of social and political organisation (the “tribes”), and through the word “habitat” she links them to nature in opposition to the urban developed context they find in the country of immigration. By doing this, she states that they should stay at home, where, like children they have to be “accompanied” and “helped” towards development by the developed “us”. This other man, describes Nigerians as “*a pretty pugnacious and hot-blooded people*” as “*the opposition has been executed in the open air, in public in Nigeria..*” . In this case, the norm is considered the democratic Italian state, and the authoritarianism of Nigerian government is turned into an issue of nature and blood.

The same opposition is present in people’s discourses about Islam. Islam is in fact represented as a threat to the ordered and democratic western/Italian world and it is also seen as opposed to peaceful Christianity. A man, which had some experience as a volunteer in a Catholic mission in an African country states:

*for the service that we were doing down there... we used to have young volunteers... we were considered those who were bringing... let’s say... those who were bringing the peace to these people...*

Instead, when he talks about the Islamisation of Europe he states:

*Islam is invading Europe - this is my opinion - probably because I lived in Africa and I saw how things are... in Africa Islam is spreading around, is becoming diffuse... let’s bear in mind that in Algeria some people loaded themselves with bombs to blow-up markets...*

*if we do not block this migratory flow, this invasion - because it is an invasion - we will find ourselves in a future in which women will maybe go around with chador...*

In this case, he represents Muslims as having all the stereotypical attributes which are present in the popular and institutional culture.

Even in matter of life style - which can include cookery habits or housing conditions - immigrants are described in terms of dirt and promiscuity. In the following statements, food is sold and consumed in inappropriate places characterised by sexual promiscuity, chaos, dirt and smell. Below, we can see a Dantesque description of a street with prostitutes and drugdealers, where food is sold from the footpath.

*with little Albanian girls offering their services, making love in the middle of the street... .not to talk about the market that starts in the afternoon,*

*with those people who sell food putting it on the footpath and maybe, between the food, there are also some heroin doses...*

In the following quote, instead, an Easter meal (but probably, an end-of-Ramadan meal) is described through the association with blood, dismembered bodies, death and putrefaction.

*it's clear that I get disturbed by the fact that at Easter, these fourteen people have transported on the stairs a whole calf which was bleeding (...) it's clear that this thing makes me panic... what's going to happen, then? ... I don't know whether this was a little calf or a lamb, probably, not a calf - a dead animal... legs, head, everything, legs, which were dropping blood on the stairs... it's anyway an uncomfortable situation.... I mean, it's not that I get irritated or worried for my safety, but makes feel a bit.... ... because they live here upstairs, they do not have light, they do not have gas, they do not have heating... they have just a toilet, that is a WC, just one, end of the program... and these people take upstairs a... this makes me think that they will eat this meat that will go bad very soon, in very few hours...*

In these quotations, immigrants' cookery practices are not only recognised different from the local norm, but are also described in derogatory terms and consequently pushed out from "the" respectable civilised world. It is clear, that the power of these description resides in three different sites: first, in the "purity and danger" discursive strategies, secondly, in the fact that these strategies are based on common sense, and thirdly, in the fact that common sense allows to leave undiscussed and uncontested what is considered the norm.

The list could go on. Nevertheless, in all these cases immigrants are considered as different and hierarchically inferior from a central normative and undiscussed "us" and in this way they are racialised. In all the quoted cases, the normative "us" from which immigrants are considered incommensurably different is implicitly understood in terms of "Western" culture and "modernity". All the interviewees seem to say that immigrants are backward, their cultures are backward as they are not democratic, they are promiscuous and dirt. Nevertheless, in some cases the normative "us" associated to the "western" and "modern" world is explicitly presented.

In the following quote, while linking "western culture" to a refrigerator, this woman understands cultural differences in terms of backwardness and modernity. And immigrants are represented as sort of "primitive" children which should even be taught that meat has to be put in refrigerator.

*instead of letting them come here we should invest in their countries of origin... I mean we should teach them (the immigrants) Western culture in their countries of origin.... I mean... you have to learn to put meat in the refrigerator, if you eat it after it has been out for three days, it will harm you...*

In other cases, Europe is the explicit term of reference in opposition to which immigration is constructed. In the following quote, the disorder brought - in this man's opinion - by immigrants is clearly considered in opposition to an idea of Europe that is more modern and developed than Italy and to which Italy has to refer.

*we want to bring the image of Turin to a European level, for the Olympic games of 2006... otherwise you arrive, you get out of the train in Porta Nuova and you feel the smell of urine, you feel it in your throat, and you go in via Roma and you find people sleeping under the arcades or in Porta Nuova and people begging for money .... and then you go to Porta Palazzo and you find the kid who puts his hands in your pockets... two or three days ago this happened to me... this is not... we won't make a good impression...*

In other cases, it is possible to point out how ideas of “fortress Europe” have become part of popular imagery. And the “entry in Europe” is considered antithetical to immigration. In the following quote, the unquestioned possibility to remain in Europe is seen dependent on the closure of Italian borders.

*I am convinced that Italy, at a certain point, can't receive all the people of the world... at a certain point will have to close these blessed (immigration) flows... these people who arrive... and I am convinced that Italy, if it wants to remain in Europe, will have to close these flows...*

In all the above statements, immigration is constructed in opposition to Europe and modernity. Europe, modernity and immigration constitute a privileged ground on which Italian identities are renegotiated. In a moment of crisis for Italian identities Europe/modernity and immigration constitute the two terms of reference through which Italians discuss their sense of identity and the possibility to say “we are not backward anymore”.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusions drawn in this paper are that, even if it is not possible to establish a direct, causal link between European policies of immigration and identity, there is a striking similarity between institutional and popular representations of immigrants. If, then we consider, as different authors have done (Bauman 1989; Bauman 1997; Brah 1996; Miles 1993), that “modernity” and “backwardness” have always been one of the possible articulations of racist discourses and some of the pillars of colonial experience, it seems to me that when we come to talk about Europe “old racisms” (Cohen 1999) are not so far away.

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