

The social representation of migrants in the press

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Abstract. The topic of immigration, central to the latest electoral campaigns of all European countries, has gained space and visibility also in the Italian PUBLIC debate. Like the specifically political debate, even that taking place in the public sphere and the press is strongly polarized: the immigrant is the angel to be saved or the black soul to be demonized. The paper, which is part of a research that will last until 2019, traces these different images by analyzing newspaper articles. The emptying of public opinion has created around the immigrant a symbolic space in which the vision of the present and of the future of democracy is projected.

Keywords: Immigration, social representation, stigma

1. Introduction

Many years have gone by since the day the island of Lampedusa proudly presented its Nobel prize nomination for its work sheltering migrants. This small island had never been so world-famous. Since then, print media has never stopped discussing immigration. Observations made in reaction to the emergency have, at least in part, given way to controversy, plans, complex assessments and the creation of a truly adversarial public debate. A symbolic arena has developed around the issue of immigration where visions of the world clash, a field of meanings that go far beyond the topic's actual scope. The image that emerges from the debate is often a flattened, divided one; it is one of the issues where the positions of the media and public opinion become polarised; critical and analytical voices seem truly fragmentary if not totally isolated. The topic therefore cannot be seen as collective or one where basic assumptions are shared by public opinion and print media; what is at stake here goes beyond the current emergency and it is a vision of the world, of the past and future of Italy and of Europe that is at risk. There are many players involved; what we are witnessing every day is nothing short of an arena where meanings battle against each other. From the moment the issue attracted the most media attention at an international level up until today much has been done. The real cultural problem, though, is not based on the general way in which newspapers communicate and inform the public, rather the way information influences mentalities, stances, collective experience and perhaps, above all, our ability to empathise – in a long-term, profound way – with today's victims (Rossi, 2012, pp. 21-31). However, whilst on the one hand, information is supposed to raise awareness, on the other we can clearly see the role that some newspapers have played in stigmatising immigrants, relegating them to the category of a danger to the public and to that of an emergency. The negative depiction of this phenomenon immediately presents it as a serious social crisis. The description of a series of legislative measures and actions by the police gives the impression of a society that is defending itself, creating a scapegoat. Once the issue becomes central to the political sphere, it has no trouble migrating to that of the media. However, the media machine strengthens and creates the political agenda in turn, so that the two reciprocally reflect and strengthen each other, creating a common meaning and interpretational frame.

The strategy of creating a symbolic threat, of seeking solutions, scaremongering and stirring the public's emotions has a long history that has repeated itself with stunning regularity. The mentality of an emergency and the widespread adoption of a feeling of being under threat create episodes of

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moral panic amongst members of the public (Goode & Ben Yehuda, 1994). They are the emotional waves with which those who study public opinion are entirely familiar, against which any kind of action inspired by reason seems pointless (Tocqueville, 1999). The wave sweeps away all the normal coordinates that guide everyday life and appears both urgent and extraordinary (Colombo, 2012). Once the wave has passed, everything settles back to where it was before, or at least should do. In this way, the depiction of immigrants perfectly dovetails with the need of those who ‘belong’, who are in crisis and suffering hardship, to see those ‘invisible’, homeless foreigners as the enemy that can be blamed for the social and economic crisis.

The political atmosphere supported by the papers and legitimised by opinion polls follows and confirms the dominant narrative. The language used is the most important litmus test: on the one hand, what emerges is the specific desire to create and strengthen a paradigm and a prejudice that presents immigrants as deviant (Dal Lago, 1999) whilst on the other hand there is a desire to create the image of a victim who must be saved and assisted, an image which seems to have frozen the concept of migrants in time. The language adopted, which is never neutral, imposes its own grammar and its own models. The political terms picked up by the media have become part of collective culture. Just one of many examples is the Italian word *extra-comunitario* (‘non-European’), which does not refer to Americans or Japanese people; a term that originally indicated, in a neutral way, the absence of European citizenship but has become the distinctive mark of a ‘certain type of human being’. A discussion regarding the language of fear is also found in an article of February 5, 2018, by Paolo Di Paolo in *La Repubblica* newspaper, where he analyses the language used by politicians and quotes the German journalist Carolin Emcke when remarking on how indifference has become the most widespread feeling: ‘Hatred is made possible and fostered by those who do not intervene, who would never act like that themselves, but who tolerate, who do not hate but allow others to hate.’

The research put forward here is a kind of introduction to a more extensive project that began in 2017 and will be completed in 2019.

It is a research/action that has involved 134 participants in the m&M media&Migranti seminar. This project involved an introductory phase involving two meetings I presented, in my capacity as the research programme’s director, and continued with three seminars. Working groups were set up to concentrate on different kinds of media: television, print media and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. As far as television was concerned, the main news programmes were examined, as well as talk shows and programmes specifically discussing these issues. As far as print media was concerned, the project focused on a selection of the country’s most important national newspapers, such as *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Foglio*, *Il Giornale*, *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *Il Manifesto*. The initial phase involved the collection of information dating from November 2017, stretching into the period leading up to the election campaign. The methodology adopted for this phase of the research/action was based on cooperative learning, which took place with the exchange of information on the Padlet platform, where participants shared the various phases of their work and the material they had collected. The flexible, modular nature of the platform made forms of extended, in-depth cooperation possible, especially when researching and sharing the various different newspapers, but also during the intermediate phase of the research. The comparison of the profile given to news and how it was presented took place on the platform and in a classroom presentation.

All working groups share the same approach, involving content analysis and the examination of language. The research will continue in November 2018 and November 2019. As far as print media is concerned in particular, a comparative study during the three years of the project is envisaged, analysing the rate with which the various terms used in articles regarding migrants are repeated. The words analysed are: migrants, immigrants, asylum-seekers, refugees, illegals and *extra-comunitari*. Instead of using textual analysis, the research will involve entering data using Iramuteq software.

The newspaper articles we examine here create and promote symbolic meanings, they are an

arena of confrontation and conflict, they are in themselves the public sphere and initiators of collective culture. Their role therefore consists in reproducing and constructing social representations (Berger & Luckmann, 1969). The activation of extremely rare fragments of collective memory concerning Italian emigration during the twentieth century and beyond is particularly interesting. We cannot reconstruct all the effects of this association with the past, however these comparisons turn up in narratives, comparisons that are sometimes unsuitable when compared to other waves of migration. Apart from their practical role, integration policies also indicate the intention to make a serious investment in the construction of awareness founded on the recognition of otherness. The concept of *alter*, of what is foreign, is a cause and an effect of a stigmatising approach adopted by a section of society. Otherness always has two faces: that of the poor (Simmel, 2005) and that of immigrants. The migrant phenomenon is relatively recent in Italy. The way Italian people see themselves as welcoming and fundamentally decent has become a narrative adopted in collective culture, though controversial, in media narratives and in debates. It is interesting to note how collective meaning changes when a critical stance manages to push through the dominant narrative. It is hard to say who introduced the new concept or how, because the processes involved are always complex and there is always more than one reason behind them. Nevertheless, when we look through the articles, we can clearly tell the difference between those that propose a familiar interpretation, an established rationale, and those who put forward an alternative view that lies outside collective culture and makes new associations, straying into uncharted territory. The different terms that are used to denote people who arrive in our country and in Europe are an important linguistic indicator that reveal a particular attitude or are the sign of a lack of clarity regarding the issue. The terms legal immigrant, illegal immigrant, *clandestino*, asylum-seeker, refugee and displaced (Benhabib, 2006) are sometimes used interchangeably, without stopping to make due distinctions. The ideological dichotomy that idealises immigrants that need saving or demonises them as bringers of evil and doom certainly does not help us grasp the reality of the situation. The amount of ‘fake news’ (Pitruzzella, Pollicino & Quintarelli, 2017) created for political ends or that is sometimes merely the result of the Internet’s power, in a harmful graft with racist prejudice, should also be stressed.

2. Talking past each other

What immediately becomes clear with the perusal of the newspapers printed before the Italian election of 4th March 2018 is the polarisation of the debate concerning immigration, almost as if it were reflecting the categorical juxtaposition that characterised the election campaign. As early as 2017, the year the research began, the newspapers’ constant preoccupation with the issue of immigration became clear, with its appearance in different editorial sections: from current affairs to foreign affairs, from politics on the front pages to, admittedly, less frequent appearances in editorial columns.

A scaremongering tone of alarm has undoubtedly helped create and crystallise, on the one hand, the image of poor, desperate immigrants and, on the other hand, the concept of danger and the links between criminality, deviance and immigration. In both cases, an identity has formed and crystallised that is hard to shake off. The newspaper that is farthest from crystallising the debate and attempts to analyse the facts is *La Stampa* where, for example, it analysed the situation of migrants, their dreams and ‘adventures’ in three different cities – Bardonecchia, Gorizia and Ventimiglia – in an article published on 16th December 2017. *La Stampa* often chooses to tell individual stories, the story of Sami for example – a 30-year-old Syrian rescued at sea whilst escaping from Libya – or the story of the town that chased away 30 asylum-seekers (see the article by Poletti in the daily newspaper *La Stampa* of February 8, 2018, p. 3) *La Repubblica* almost always focuses on the economic side and the importance of immigrants for the development of our country, or tackles the issue from the point of view of its effects on national politics, for example regarding the issue of *Ius Soli* voting rights. One article that particularly stood out in *La Repubblica* was Gianfranco

Cadalanu's story 'In Cerca di un Altrove' (*La Repubblica*, March 19, 2018, pp. 20-21), which describes Turkey's conquest of Afrin, the bombing of Ghouta, divided Congo, starving Venezuela and the millions of desperate people who are trying to save themselves amidst so much suffering and xenophobia. Cadalanu describes different worlds in different parts of the globe but all with a common denominator: the escape from desperation and the hope of a better life. The article is extensive, detailed and also includes photographs that have been seen all over the world. The one that stands out is a picture of a father who carries his young son away from Eastern Ghouta in a suitcase. Behind the journalistic debate are the statistics produced by the Censis social study and research institute, which were picked up to some extent by all the newspapers. What emerges is a country full of resentment against politicians, against the future, against the freeze on mobility and, of course, against immigrants. Censis produced a snapshot of a country in the grip of fear. In such circumstances, 'immigration evokes negative feelings among 59% of Italians, a rate that rises the lower a person is on the social scale: 72% of housewives, 71% of the unemployed and 63% among manual labour (www.ilmattino.it/primopiano/cronaca/censis_ripresa_italia_rancore_anti_immigrati_dalle_fake_news_1_dicembre_2017-3401530.html.)

Italians are resentful and feel defenceless. Faced with such a situation, Giancarlo Bosetti (Bosetti, *La Repubblica*) writing for *La Repubblica* attempts to explain this widespread feeling that the country's political and cultural elite entirely fail to understand. He does so by introducing a new point of view in the debate in *La Repubblica* and in print news in general: that of a young researcher based at the European University Institute in Florence, Liav Orgad, who believes that 'liberal leaders have proved unable to empathise with the anxiety felt by millions of people due to the upheavals that are happening all around us: war, unemployment, refugees, migrations, they have been unable to adopt an "us" that many can relate to because they react automatically, holding that the only thing that is important to them are the rights of minorities, which prevents them from talking about the rights of the majority.' In this way, he provides a key to understanding the fear of immigration and the victory of the various populist movements that thrive in Italy and in the rest of the world: the inability to feel and speak the language of the majority of the population. It is an entirely liberal argument that is far from anti-immigration scaremongering, which asks that the rights of the majority be given, at the very least, the same weight as those of minorities: a taboo amongst short-sighted democrats who believe that the majority can defend itself and that minorities are the ones who need constitutional safeguards. The public debate becomes more complex when it gains new views that take into account the everyday anxiety of those who voted for 'reassuring' parties that feed on fear. It is no coincidence . (Coppola, *Corriere della Sera*) that an article published before the election campaign attempted to explain how immigration influenced elections in four different European countries, where nationalists made a difference without winning outright. The issue of immigration was also at the centre of the public debate in the European countries that had elections in 2007. Research published by the ISMU Foundation, of which Italian journalists are aware, examined elections in the Netherlands, France, Great Britain and Germany where 'antimmigration parties did not present themselves as governments-in-waiting but instead occupied the political scene and won significant public approval.' The analysis was less concerned with the traditional polarisation between left and right, and more with the polarisation between the acceptance and rejection of immigration. In two cases out of those four, rejection parties won a relative majority: in Great Britain and France. In any case, voting responded to the fundamental issue: the fear of foreign invasion.

At the forefront of election campaigns and on the front page of newspapers, the issue of migration takes pride of place whether an article continues in the financial pages or involves commentary, politics or simply reporting news, such as, for example, in the case of Fiorenza Sarzanini's article in *Corriere della Sera* regarding the agreement between Rome and Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. The result of the agreement, which was handled by Minister Marco Minniti, changed the rules concerning arrivals by sea and envisages that refugees

rescued in the Mediterranean Sea must be delivered to the port closest to the site of the rescue. As often occurs, the articles are complete with up-to-date figures regarding the number of arrivals by sea and migrants' nationalities. The events that occurred in Macerata merit special attention, as they highlighted – according to the Demos research institute's *Atlante Politico* (Biorcio- Bordignon La Repubblica) – ‘a growing tolerance of intolerance’, while the fear of foreigners is felt by four out of ten people. If we go back a couple of months, we note that the economic slant of the debate often comes up in mainstream newspapers like *Corriere della Sera*, where Danilo Taino, in the commentary section, tells his readers that helping developing countries will not stop waves of migrants from arriving; on the contrary, it has been shown that it increases the rate of emigration in countries where there is a higher income per capita. *Il Messaggero* (Mangani & Pirone, *Il Messaggero*, February 6, 2018, pp. 1, 7) also regularly reports the war on the statistics regarding illegal immigrants, and clearly and directly associates the election campaign with the battle over the statistics and the terms that should be used. In the tables drawn up by the ISPI (the Italian Institute for International Political Studies) based on figures published by Istat (the Italian National Institute of Statistics), the Ministry of the Interior and the IOM (the International Organisation for Migration), the word *clandestino* (‘illegal immigrant’) disappears altogether whilst reference is made to arrivals by sea, legal and illegal immigration, unlike the diagram published by the ISMU Foundation which shows the 2017 figures for *clandestini*. *Il Giornale* has a completely different point of view regarding the powerful argument that states that immigrants play an important role in the Italian economy. In an article on the front page of *Il Giornale*, Riccardo Pelliccetti (Pelliccetti, *Il Giornale*) claims that research by the Bank of Italy reveals a U-turn. In 2041, the contribution of *extra-comunitari* to the country's GDP growth will be negative. It is an article that goes against all the ideas – defined there as bleeding-heart liberalism – held by Laura Boldrini, Emma Bonino and Tito Boeri. ‘The Bank of Italy's dossier proves the bleeding-heart liberal left wrong when it says immigration is an essential factor if we want to save Italy.’ Nevertheless, it is clear that this article, which bases its slant on a scientific study published in *La Repubblica*, is being used as a political attack against sections of the left. The article that appeared in *Il Manifesto* adopted an entirely different tone, passionate and damning of the weaknesses and shortcomings of Italian politics. The title speaks for itself, denouncing the silent and indifferent reaction to the murder of Idy Diène, which occurred in the wake of the overheated electoral climate. The writer asks if this crime was a total coincidence and the answer is of course no, just as the hope of finding suitable answers to the climate of indifference and racism is uncertain. (Cheick Tidiane Gaye, *Il Manifesto*, March 14, 2018, p. 6).¹ Cheikh Tidiane Gaye is a Senegalese writer and poet and a naturalised Italian citizen. He is well known in the field of Italian-language migrant literature. He translated Leopold Sèdar Senghor, the poet of *negritude* and Senegal's first president. ‘The proposals that politicians put forward regarding immigration are not reassuring.’ The article ends by expressing the extreme solitude felt by the Senegalese immigrant community in Florence: ‘All we can do is mourn our dead, alone, in a country that continues to expand thanks to the sweat and blood of millions of honest immigrants who feel Italian to all intents and purposes.’ This article stands out from the rest because it is the only one that gives a voice to an Italian of Senegalese origins. When it comes to the debate regarding immigrants, they are in actual fact notably absent; they are always the subject of the discussion but never the speaker. Another article of similar sensibility is that of the psychoanalyst Sarantis Thanopoulos, (*Il Manifesto*, March 31, 2018, p. 14) of Greek origins, who recalls the arrival of 20,000 Albanian immigrants in the Puglia region in 1991, penned up in *Stadio della Vittoria* stadium and kept in inhumane conditions until, exhausted, they agreed to be sent back to their country. Here too, the article ends with a moving conclusion: ‘We have lost our *aidòs*. In Ancient Greek, this meant the shame-discretion that comes from the reverential fear of damaging others and brings us to respect them.’

The real turning point in the perception and awareness of the issue of migration came with the publication of the photograph of the corpse of a drowned child washed up on a beach in all national

and local newspapers. It was a strong signal that stirred public opinion worldwide. The tendency to dramatise and hype the news increased with images of sea arrivals. The continuous coverage of the issue in the media, not always for objective ends, fostered the creation of a background climate tinged by the fear of migrants. In such an atmosphere, as we have seen when examining the articles, the newspapers are diametrically opposed, occupying a ridge that divides attitudes of openness and closure. Acting within their role as symbolic mediators, the media create social circumstances. Their adoption of the language of exclusion leaves its mark on society, encouraging, above all, social indifference. *La Repubblica* confirms this when it publishes fake news about migrants, such as (to name just a few of many examples): migrants live in luxury hotels' (The housing of immigrants in hotels is part of the CAS [*Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria*], a system of "emergency reception centers").

Immigrants chase Italians away, refugees are fakes because they have smartphones, immigrants carry ebola, scabies and other 'medieval' illnesses etc. Despite rational arguments that disprove prejudices, convictions still probably continue to spread and resentment against immigrants is pervasively growing far and wide. The stakes we are playing for, today in the public arena, concern the quality of information and of democracy, with its power to be inclusive.

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