

The civic discourse: representing immigrants in the Italian Extreme Right

The Mediterranean immigration crisis that sees Italy as the primary recipient of African and Middle Eastern migrants has challenged the historically homogeneous Italian nation (Allen and Russo 1997; Nevola 2003). This challenge has fuelled, in particular, a xenophobic turn in the Italian Extreme Right's discourse on immigrants, which is curiously often covered by a civic cloak. Due to the urgency of tackling this phenomenon, and the paucity of academic literature focusing on this topic, this paper seeks to investigate to what extent the Italian Extreme Right's discourse on immigration deploys a civic façade behind which xenophobic representations are seething.

Adopting Mudde's (2002) definition of Extreme Right as a benchmark, Lega Nord and Fratelli d'Italia can be classified as the major current Italian Extreme Right parties. While the Italian Extreme Right's general ideology (Ignazi 2010; Mudde 2002; Perlmutter 1996) and immigration policies (Carvalho 2013) find ample reference in the literature, there are very few sources on the current Italian Extreme Right parties' discourse. Indeed, the latter is the focus of this paper, which applies Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1998), particularly useful to unearth dynamics of power inequality and racism (Essed 1991), to semistructured interviews with the Italian Extreme Right's representatives. The main drawback inherent to Critical Discourse Analysis is its subjective nature (Widdowson 2004), which will be carefully averted by applying a methodical analysis as objective as possible. Semistructured interviews are appropriate for this project, as they allow for some flexibility in the questions, capturing the spontaneity of the interviewees, while retaining a set of more targeted questions to maximise validity (Bruter and Harrison 2011).

Drawing inspiration from Halikiopoulou, Mock and Vasilopoulou's (2013) article on the civic zeitgeist of European Extreme Right parties, this paper examines the extent to which the interviewed parties' representatives shroud their discursive construction of the immigrant in a civic cloak, behind which vivid xenophobic tones are strategically hidden. Indeed, the preliminary results point towards the Italian Extreme Right's representatives' strategy of using a civic façade, intentionally depicting themselves as distant from xenophobia, both theoretically and pragmatically. For instance, some interviewees declared that there are no races, compulsory education should operate by mixing Italian and immigrant children in the same classrooms, and refugees are "our brothers". However, closer scrutiny reveals that this civic rhetoric covers deep-seated xenophobic beliefs and practices. In fact, the analysis of the core discourse of the Italian Extreme Right has uncovered the processes of Othering (whereby immigrants are enemies), criminalization (which depicts immigrants as inherently criminal and linked to a Muslim holy war), inferiorization (which paints immigrants as devoid of values) and abjectification (whereby immigrants become cast off from the pure Italian body due to their association with dirt and contagion). Paradoxically, often the xenophobic and the civic dimensions are entangled in the same discourse of Italian Extreme Right's representatives, although some interviewees even remove this façade of "civicness" resorting to purely and admittedly xenophobic representations.

References

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