Paths of Racism, Flows of Labour:
Nation-State Formation, Capitalism and the Metamorphosis of Racism in Italy

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43. For some account on labor and mode of production within the crisis, see Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra (eds.), Crisis in the Global Economy (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010).

44. See the 2013 report of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).


47. Dati Svimez 2013 (11/13).

48. For some accounts of the retail logistics workers struggles in Italy, see Anna Curcio, “Practicing militant inquiry: Composition, strike and betting in the logistics workers struggles in Italy,” ephemera, 14 no. 3 (2014), 375-390; Anna Curcio, “The Revolution in Logistics,” in New Forms of Worker Organization and Struggles, Autonomous Labor Responses in Times of Crisis, Dario Azzellini, Michale G. Kraft (eds.) (Brill, forthcoming).

The recent European elections in May 2014 were a startling display of the rise of radical racism in Europe. But the triumph of Ukip in the United Kingdom, the Front National and Marine Le Pen in France, and the Golden Dawn in Greece, whose members have been involved in several racist attacks and murders of immigrants and leftists, are merely the more institutional evidence of a deeper trend. In Italy, where I write this text, the European elections led to the victory of the leftist, but strongly neoliberal, Democratic Party (PD), the former PCI. Nevertheless, racism increasingly circulates within the country, perpetrated by the leaders and members of both left- and right-wing parties as well as private citizens.1

During the spring of 2013, Cécile Kyenge, an immigrant from the Democratic Republic of Congo, became Minister of Integration in the centre-left government of Enrico Letta. The first black minister in Italy, Kyenge was targeted by racist attacks from members of the right-wing party Lega Nord, and described by Roberto Calderoli as “an orangutan.” Of course, racist attacks are not limited to verbal harassment. In December 2011, in Florence, a member of an extreme-right racist organization killed two Senegalese vendors, and injured a third, in a local market.2 In metropolitan contexts, such as Milan or Rome, racist assaults against black people are daily occurrences. In 2009, a nineteen-year-old second-generation migrant from Burkina Faso in Milan was killed by two kiosk owners for stealing a packet of biscuits – they ran after him and beat him with an iron bar, yelling, “fuck you, nigger.” We could go on to make a very lengthy list of such incidents, especially if we were to include the daily racism migrant workers face on the job.

As the examples from Italy show, the targets of such racist attacks are mostly immigrants. They are accused of “stealing jobs,” especially – but not only – since the outbreak of the economic crisis. On the institutional level, these “popular” or “daily” racist behaviours have been translated into a very strict control over labour mobility. In 2002, after two decades of mass immigration,2 the latest in a long series of racist laws – known as the Bossi-Fini law, after the two members of parliament who signed it (one from Lega Nord, and the other from Alleanza Nazionale, the successor of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano) – entered into force, fully differentiating between migrants and natives. According to the law, immigrants can reside on national territory only if they hold a formal contract of employment, and they may be jailed on administrative charges, such as not holding a residential permit.3 The common assumption in Italian politics is that these outbreaks of racism are the combined effect of mass migrations and financial crisis: since the crisis has narrowed the labor market, competition between native and immigrant workers has intensified.

But what this interpretation misses is that Italian racism, and European racism in general, is not a transitory or contingent effect of social phenomena such as economic crisis, mass migrations, or right-wing politics; rather, it is linked to the very core of European modernity, at the nexus of the rise of capitalism, the formation of the nation-state, and the colonial project.
In what follows I will discuss Italian and European racial thinking, the roots of which can be traced to the origins of the narrative of modern Europe. Since the mid-19th century, Europe has been characterised by a “double path” of racism, directed against Southerners on the one hand, and the African colonised population on the other. To understand the present, not just the question of racism, but of Europe’s “Southern” problem, and of underdevelopment itself, it will be necessary to consider the metamorphosis of Italian racism through the 20th century, and the shape taken by European racism within the crisis. It will be just as important to identify new possible antiracist practices, which can both identify and struggle against the material basis of racism.

THE MATERIAL BASIS OF RACISM

To reject the assumption that racism is the effect of other social phenomena, an incidental issue in the analysis of society and politics, means identifying it as an enduring factor in the history of modern capitalist societies. I reflect here on racism as a historical fracture in the narrative of European modernity, which has shaped social relations at the local, continental, and transnational level, especially in the organisation of the labour market. In this sense, in contrast with the mainstream debate about racism in Europe, I stress the material basis of racism, including race and racialisation. I mean by racialisation a means for disciplining intersubjective social relationships, or better, for the construction of institutional and non-institutional practices and discourses oriented towards the hierarchical representation of differences, both real and imagined. In this sense, my aim is to start with the histories of economic and cultural processes of essentialisation and discrimination against certain social groups, which results in manifestations of material and symbolic violence.

As Frantz Fanon has powerfully pointed out, racism is “the shameless exploitation of one group of men by another” which entails processes of “inferiorisation” and the “gigantic work of economic, and even biological, enslavement”, that is to say, it is not a constant of the human mind, but a tendency arising within the history of the system which has imposed white supremacy on the social fabric and in the labour market. Thus, once again in contradistinction to a mainstream European reading of racism as ideological-cultural-ontological-psychological need, as an “ancestral sin” that describes a “deferential racism” or a “racism without race,” I focus on the material and structuring nature of racism, placing it at the very centre of the constitution of colonial modernity and at the core of the construction and narration of modern nation-states.

In the history of capitalism, from its outset and at all latitudes, class domination has largely been intertwined with and supported by race discourses, assuming different historical inflections, always according to new or contingent political and economical circumstances – or, in Marxian terms, according to the character of the capitalist transition and forms of accumulation. From this perspective – and again against the idea of racism as psychological or ancestral sin – it is possible to analyse the metamorphosis of racism in Italy, considering

29. In this regard it should be noticed that in Italy since the late 20s enrollment in the Fascist Party had become an indispensable prerequisite to enter the labor market. On 29 March 1929, the Grand Council of Fascism (the supreme organ of government during the fascist regime) had decreed that members of the Fascist Party would take precedence for employment, which led many workers, including those of the Jewish faith, to take the party card, often beyond their political beliefs.


36. On the concept of the “mass worker” see Romano Alquiati, Sulla Fiat e altri scritti (Roma: Feltrinelli, 1975). For English excerpts of these works, including the concept of the “mass worker” see Viewpoint Magazine 3 (2013).

37. Étienne Balibar has noted that in contemporary times, the word “migrant” has become synonymous with race. See Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities (London: Verso 1991).

38. It should be noted that migrants from Eastern Europe, despite their white skin, were not excluded from racialization. Rather, they were immediately subjected to marginalization and criminalization, and thanks to the press, were quickly represented as dangerous criminals to isolate and expel. Exactly because they are white-skinned migrants, they have been perceived by Italian racism as even more dangerous, because – as a vendor from Bologna put it – they are not immediately “recognizable” as migrants.


40. It should be noticed that the acronym PIGS also appears as PIIGS or PI(I)GS, referring, in some cases at least, even to Ireland. Ireland, while not part of Mediterranean area, brings with it the weight of a long process of racialization (and even hierarchical differentiation on the ground of religion in its relationship with UK), rooted in the already mentioned need to emphasize the primacy of Protestant Great Britain at the dawn of capitalism. For an useful discussion of the racialization of Ireland during the 19th century, see, among others, Kevin B. Anderson, Marx at the Margins (London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

14. My reference on this topic is: Atanasio Mozzillo ed., *Viaggiatori stranieri nel sud* (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1964) a volume which collects travel reports from the XVIII and XIX century by authors including Maxim Du Camp, Wolfgang Goethe, Alexis de Tocqueville and others.


16. Please note here the use of “race” internal to positivism.

17. Alfredo Niceforo’s work on the so-called “Two Italies” is collected in a trilogy which includes: Alfredo Niceforo, *La delinquenza in Sardegna* (1897); Alfredo Niceforo, *L’Italia barbara contemporanea (studi e appunti)* (1898); Alfredo Niceforo, *Italiani del nord e italiani del sud* (1901).


19. Unsurprisingly, in the context of the correspondence drawn between southern Italians and Africans by the positivist anthropological school, Southern workers were often called “Africa,” in a derogatory sense. See, among other sources, the movie *I compagni* by Mario Monicelli (Lux Film, 1963).


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**THE DOUBLE PATH IN ITALIAN RACISM**

Italian racism, and indeed European racism in general, has followed a “double path”: first, the invention of the “geographically close” Other in the South of the country (strictly intertwined with the racialisation of Southern or Mediterranean Europe, a sort of joint-space between Europe and Africa); second, the construction of the colonial Other in Africa. These two process, which led to Italian nation-building and the formation of modern Europe itself, have been bound up with one other, each describing a specific facet of Italian racism.

After its birth as a nation-state in 1861, Italy immediately had to negotiate the narration of its identity at the European level. In fact, in order to enter the ranks of the modern European state, Italy had to shake off the image of a backward, poor, oppressed, and irrational country, deeply ingrained in the cultural taxonomy of modern Europe. Travel literature at the turn of the 19th century largely describes Italy as a country of incredible natural beauty, but one that is economically backward, lagging behind the social and political development of other European countries. The South of the country especially is described as “picturesque” and yet “primitive,” with little sense of morality, dedicated instead to civil inertia. It is “a paradise inhabited by devils,” according to the famous definition of Naples attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This image was
clearly antithetical to the reputation of Europe for dynamism and technological advancement, represented above all by Great Britain in its transition to capitalism and the first Industrial Revolution.²⁵

In this scenario, the narration of the newborn nation-state found its basis in the idea of the existence of “Two Italies,” coined by the Italian positivist anthropologist Alfredo Niceforo of the Lombrosian School. In the 1890s, Niceforo – providing “scientific” support for the racialisation of southern Italians – described the existence of two races in Italy: the “Aryan and Caucasian” in the North and a “Negroid” in the South. According to Niceforo, the Italian populations of Germanic descent in the North were “easier to discipline and educate” and “much inclined to the common interest,” while the Latin populations originating in the South were “rebels, undisciplined, and too often averse to education.” Furthermore, just as the “Germans” were “civilians” capable of self-government, the “Latinas” were considered less civilized, and, especially, politically immature.²⁶ As a result, the existence of “Two Italies,” each one inhabited by a different racial group, signifies the existence of two different moral and sociopolitical inclinations, where the “Negroid” ancestry of southern Italians becomes the evidence of their inferiority and criminal behaviours, as well as the justification for brutal repression of social uprisings in the South.

Thus, the racialisation of southern Italians and the invention of an “accursed race” [razza maledetta] – according to the forceful expression of the Meridionalist Napoleone Colajanni in a 1898 pamphlet strongly critical of the racial theory of the Lombrosian criminal anthropology school – constituted the basis from which the narration of modern Italy was built. On the one hand, the existence of “Two Italies” gave Italian political elites the opportunity to mark a positivist difference between the North and the South of the country, offering a tidy explanation for the internal social and economic gap to other European countries. The South was given the main responsibility for the severe economic crisis affecting Italy in the last decade of the 19th century, covering over the incompetence and irresponsibility of national policy in addressing this issue. On the other hand, “Two Italies” also allowed the construction of a vast supply of cheap (because it was racialised) labour that enabled the economic development of the country. The development of Italian capitalism was the first concrete translation in the local context of the “modern racial capitalism”²⁷that was developing in the United States and Australia.

Following the coordinates mapped by white supremacy, Southerners, who had been considered lazy and unintelligent because of the presence of “Negro” blood in theirs veins,²² were subjected to harsh forms of exploitation and wage discrimination, becoming cheap labour-power in service of the development of Italian capitalism. This was not much different from what was happening in the United States, where race management, drawing important lessons from the work of Alfredo Niceforo, was producing a real taxonomy of race. According to David Roediger’s analysis of American race management in the early 20th century, German workers (who “embodied strength, doggedness, and thrift”) occupied the highest levels of wage and labour hierarchies, while all other workers gradually found placement in the lower ranks: Italians, especially those

NOTES

1. The first actual racist immigration law, the Turco-Napolitano law from 1998 – which established detention for “illegal” migrants – was signed by leftists from the former PCI.
2. For commentary on this event, see Anna Curcio, “Italy is a racist country,” Uninomade, 2011.
3. Unlike other European countries that experienced big migration flows from the former colonies during the period of decolonisation, in Italy mass migration began during the 1980s.
4. More precisely, according to Italian immigration laws, the immigrant who does not hold a residence permit is subject to expulsion from the country after a period of detention in special centers called CIE (Centers for Identification and Expulsion) – effectively prisons in which immigrants can be detained for years.
5. I would like to emphasise that although I consider the different historical shapes of Italian and European racism, I do not have in mind any simple and linear continuity between one and the other, nor a harsh break between them. The diverse shapes of racism are always overlapping each other, and the lines between them continually blurred.
justice that actually allowed racism, in its continuous and different forms, to continue to spread.

However, understanding racism within a materialist theory gives us the possibility of challenging it by starting exactly from a questioning of the dispositifs of exploitation and control that are built on the ground of race, that is to say, to challenge the race management that has historically accompanied the capitalist transition and accumulation. It is, in other words, to bring together struggles against racism in the workplace with labour struggles at the level of antiracism.

Today, in Italy, the struggles in the retail logistics industry, in which the workforce is largely composed of migrants, are a nascent way of touching on this. In moving the main focus of anti-racist struggle from citizenship to racialised labour, these logistics struggles are producing effective transformations of the labour and life conditions for workers (mainly racialised migrants) in the industry. Therefore, to challenge race hierarchies in the management of retail logistics in Italy has meant a considerable improvement in working conditions, as well as an end to racial blackmail and abuse. At the same time, these struggles, developed within large social networks and involving other figures such as students and precarious workers, political collectives and social centers, are producing forms of cooperation that are delineating new kinds of relationships between native and foreign workers. What is taking shape in the blockades at the retail logistics warehouses is a common plan of struggle, which, by bringing students and temporary workers together with warehouse workers to block the flow of goods, connects these different sectors of struggle. Thus, what is at stake in Italy and Europe within the crisis is this common ground of struggle. The welding together of different figures of labour and the social is literally terrorising government and capital – it aims to reshape social relationships and challenge the processes of impoverishment and déclassément imposed by the neoliberal capital in crisis.

The other path of Italian racism, namely the construction of the colonial Other in Africa, took place almost simultaneously with the invention of the "accursed race." Italy had just been unified for twenty years when, between 1882 and 1885, it gave way to its first colonial experience, once again aiming – among other reasons – to become a member of modern Europe in all respects. In conquering Africa, all the rhetoric used for the racialisation of Southern Italians was put to work. Much of positivist anthropology, starting from the assumed inclination to indolence and laziness because of “Negroid” descent, was drawn upon in order to racialise the colonised population in Africa. This was the basis for a correspondence between Southern Italians and Africans. At that time, this correspondence was so strong, as historians of colonial Italy point out, that “when the government began to talk about Africa, the left opposition [which was against the colonial expansion] warned that ‘Italy had Africa at home.’”

The idea of “Africa at home” played a specific role in the construction of national identity, clearly revealing the Italian aspirations for redemption, which is the possibility of holding a different position in the European context. To become “empire builders” meant that Italy could represent itself as more European, politically stronger and more modern. At the same time, it provided an opportunity to mark a distance between Italians – as white colonizers – and racialised non-Europeans, seizing on the possibility to start a process of “whitening” in order to enter modernity in all respects. What is crucial, however, is that the colonial project expressed the material aspirations for managing the transition to capitalism.

On the one hand, it aimed to manage poverty in the South, and the rising migration away from the South. In a first stage of colonial expansion, many southern Italians moved to Africa, where they became a bit less “black” (or a bit more white) than they were at home. On the other hand, colonial expansion served to organise a colonial labour market in Africa, especially beginning with the process of industrialisation in the last decade of the 19th century. From this point on, the Italian colonial expansion in Africa took on a more markedly capitalist nature. And as investments became more massive, colonialist rhetoric took a more aggressive and violent drift, extolling “the superiority of race” over native populations. The production of labour segmentation and hierarchies intensified while journalism put the construction of racial taxonomies to work, such as the following description of the existence of four races in Tripolitania (now western Libya), each one with its own productive location: “Arabs... seem to be created to withstand long labours”; “Blacks... are the best servants”; “Jews [have] a strong disposition to business and commercial banking”; “the Turks... are soldiers, officers and officials.”

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THE METAMORPHOSIS OF RACISM

During the 20th century, Italian racism took on new characteristics, showing the ability to remodel and complexify itself according to the transformation of the mode of production and the new geopolitical context. In the aftermath of the earthquake that was the crisis of 1929, racism, on the entire European level, took on the task of managing new economic and social international arrangements, especially in the relationship between the mother country and the colonies. Such new articulations mainly meant a growing protectionism and a more strict use of colonial resources (raw materials and labour-power), as well as, simultaneously, the reorganisation of the international division of labour which had broken down following the collapse of the American stock market. In both cases, the alleged superiority of whiteness was the ground from which the two processes were redesigned. Italy, for its part, took a more precise and aggressive approach, producing a real breakthrough in the race management of the colonial context.

Between 1930 and 1933, 15 concentration camps were set up in the desert region of Sirtica in the middle of the Italian colony in Libya. More than 100,000 Libyan civilians were deported to Sirtica in order to break up the partnership between the civilian population and the insurgents engaged in anti-colonial resistance. More specifically, and what is more relevant for our purposes, this mass deportation can be described as an incredible laboratory of race management. The semi-nomadic farmers, forced to become sedentary, were transformed into a large pool of free labour that provided for both the construction of roads (mainly men) and the preparation of fields (mainly women), both of which largely contributed to the economic output of the colonies.23

However, a stronger process of racialisation in the colonies took shape in the aftermath of the proclamation of the empire during the fascist regime in May 1936. The new imperial identity aimed at erasing all traces of the past backwardness and civil inertia in which the country had long been placed, which required marking the differences between Italians and Africans. In support of this project, starting in 1937, two different legal circuits were activated: the metropolitan right and the colonial, both intending to segment and hierarchise labour-power along the color line. In the colonies, the segregation of the African black population was organised around all spheres of life: African black neighbourhoods were separated from the Italian white neighborhoods.24 At work, any native employee could be employed in tasks equal to or greater than Italians,25 but native workers earned only one-fifth of the daily wage of an Italian (7 lire vs. 33 lire);26 in the schools for natives (strictly separate from those for Italian whites), the only forms of teaching were oriented around the training of unskilled workers.27

In the homeland, the new imperial identity was structured as a "defence of race," taking the form of Aryanism, which in 1938 promoted the so-called "racial laws" and the persecution of Jews. On the one hand, these laws – fully in accordance with the functioning of race management and at the very core of the "invention of the white race"28 – were responding to the need to break the bonds the South is still feeding important flows of young workers, often highly educated, both towards the North of the country and outside the national border, the predictable outcome of the systematic neglect of universities and research, disinvestment in culture and innovation, and the draconian cuts imposed by the austerity measures.29 In 2012, residents in the Italian South working in the center–North counted almost 140,000 (+4.3%). They were mostly young people under 40, with a medium-high level of education, employed mainly in precarious conditions.30 Fifty thousand have left the country, reversing for the first time in recent years the balance between emigration and immigration in Italy. Again, a large part of them are "qualified youth" who move away, often sponsored by private universities.31 In 2012, Germany, as a real magnet of labour mobility in Europe, accepted 42,000 Italians, with an increase of 40% over the previous year, especially workers in creative and cognitive industries.32

Nevertheless, northern Europe, far from being a happy island, offers newcomers a highly deregulated labour market (characterised by short-term work and very high flexibility) that is crossed by processes of racialisation that translate the historical narrative of the intra-European fracture into the present. In this sense, young precarious cognitive workers who leave Italy or other countries in the South and move North live the deskillling and devaluing of their work, not only in terms of a penalty in the possibility of negotiating wages and labour guarantees (as was the case in the early 20th century or in the 1950s and 1960s, although in a different paradigm of production), but especially by dealing directly with precarity, the rising of social insecurity, and the blackmail of the discontinuity of income in an highly deregulated labour-market. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that these young skilled and specialised workers, subject to disqualification and downgrading in wages, protections, and guarantees, are today, together with international migrants, the central target of race management within intra-European labour mobility.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

With the historical foundation of race management in mind, it follows that struggling against racism cannot be disengaged from the struggle against the capitalist conditions of domination and exploitation. Therein especially lies the importance of understanding racism in its inherently material and structural nature, in order to approach it as a device of social control, segmentation, and hierarchicalisation, instead of an ideological-cultural-ontological-psychological need, or a social pathology. It is only by accepting racism as intimately linked with the system of production and capitalist exploitation that one can imagine and practice an actual way to challenge the social segmentation and hierarchies built around race. If we assume, instead, as the majority of the Italian and European debate does, that racism is a purely psychological practice, the only way to fight it would be through an educational project that has, however, revealed few possibilities for success, given that fact that the least fifty years (starting from the aftermath of World War II and the already mentioned "epistemological turn" of UNESCO) of good intentions and discourses of social
crisis and some of the worst features of the functioning of politics and economics in southern Europe. Alongside this production of imaginaries and discourses confirming the myth of white supremacy at the origin of the modern, capitalist, and colonial Europe emerges the idea that the South is always a kind of reverse of capitalist production, showing, today as in the past, a distinction between a North inclined to capitalist ethic and development, and a South undisciplined by this ethic and therefore underdeveloped.

As Luciano Ferrari Bravo usefully pointed out in his analysis of Southern Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, when internal migration was redrawing the social and productive structures, the whole gamble of capitalism has historically run between the concept of development and underdevelopment. Accordingly, in the capitalist narrative, so-called “underdevelopment” does not represent the not yet of development; it is rather a specific function of capitalism itself, “a material and political function of capitalism which, while it is determining itself, gives meaning to the process of capitalist socialisation,” allowing the reproduction of capitalism itself. From this perspective, the social, economic, and political underdevelopment that is today attributed to Mediterranean Europe, is what makes possible the very existence of the neoliberal European capitalism in crisis. In other words, such underdevelopment represents the space of the capitalist accumulation (just as in Ferrari Bravo’s analysis southern Italy supports the very existence of the growing Italian capitalism during the 1950s and 1960s). The distinction between virtuous economies in northern Europe and weak economies in southern Europe has a specific function in contemporary capitalist valorisation: transferring the material and symbolic costs of the crisis to the South, by way of the austerity programs that the European “Troika” have, mostly unilaterally, imposed on the Mediterranean countries.

Within the crisis of Eurozone, while a growing share of migrant labour-power has been moved into the most deregulated sectors of production (especially the building industry and agricultural work) and mechanisms of “differential inclusion” – such as the measures for regularising the residency status of workers, especially women, employed in care and domestic labour, in 2009 – aim to produce new internal fractures, the racialisation of southern Europe (and in a microcosmic way, southern Italy) provides the means for interpreting the economic crisis, supporting the reorganisation of European (and Italian) governance, and the implementation of austerity policies. In this sense, the renewed rhetoric of “laziness and corruption” used to characterise people living in the South is deployed on the one hand to support and justify the imposition of austerity programs in countries such as Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain, the so-called PIGS, and on the other hand to establish new labour hierarchies for managing the reorganisation of the labour market on the national and European level.

From this perspective, and as part of the historical trend of race management that goes hand in hand with the development of capitalism, the South, both in Italy and at the continental European level, emerges once again as a supply of cheap labour. Low-skilled wage labour, such as call centres, are relocating to southern Italy, counting on a two-thirds reduction of wages. At the same time, of solidarity among workers, facing the real possibility of an explosion of dissent amidst growing uncertainties in the geopolitical context on the eve of the outbreak of the World War II. On the other hand the systematic exclusion of “citizens from the Jewish race” by many working environments, which was a prelude to further persecution such as searches and concentration camps, managed the reorganisation of the internal labour market after the 1929 crisis. Starting in the late 1930s, violent propaganda marginalized shops run by Jews; Jews were expelled from the Fascist party, causing a large rise in unemployment. As a result of the process of “Aryanisation” of the Italian culture, all Jewish scholars and teachers were expelled from schools and universities. Nevertheless, as evidence of the material (rather than psychological) basis of racism, and of race as an actual changeable dispositif for labour hierarchisation and social control, in November 1938 an exception was made to the provision preventing Jews from having Italian citizens of the “Aryan race” as servants, allowing for “special reasons of expediency.” More than 2,500 “Aryan” workers, mainly women working as servants, were able to return to work.

In the aftermath of World War II and as result of the horrors produced by Nazi and Fascist eugenics, the word “race” become a taboo, disappearing from both the scientific vocabulary and everyday discourse in Europe. Nevertheless, it remained an actual dispositif of segmentation and hierarchisation of social relations. Although racism was radically reinterpreted through what has been called the “epistemological turn,” put into motion through UNESCO’s statements on the racial issue in 1950 and 1951, which erased the material and structuring nature of racism, no longer regarding it as system of inequalities (an objective phenomenon), but rather as original “vice” or “injury” (subjective phenomenon), race would continue to organise the labour market at the national and continental levels.

The racialisation of Italian workers who migrated to Germany, France, Switzerland, or Belgium ran along very similar lines as the life and work experience of other Italians at the beginning of the century in United States, where they came to be “classified” as “Colour: White/Complexion: Dark,” and downgraded in labour and wage hierarchies. Similarly, during the aftermath of World War II in Europe, Italian racialised workers were pushed to the low ranks of labour hierarchies, finding very insecure jobs, which resulted in tragic events such as the explosion at the coal mine in Marcinelle, Belgium, in 1956, when over a hundred Italian workers died.

Within the Italian borders the process of reinterpretting racism was translated as the removal of one of the most revolting pages in the history of the country from collective discourses and imaginaries. The new national identity put forth by the partisans of resistance against fascism left no room for such a detestable story, and quickly tried to rid itself of the uncomfortable legacy of racism at home and in the colonies, together with mass murders and atrocities. Nevertheless, race survived, and the Italian post-war reconstruction, and especially the economic boom that followed, could once again benefit from the processes of racialisation and race management.
In Italy, the post-war transition highlighted the shift from a still predominantly agricultural economy to a more distinctly industrial one, and showed the revival of myths and representations from the post-unification period, which re-proposed the distinction between a “backward” South assimilated to Africa and a “modern” and “civilised” North holding its place within the European matrix. Through government decisions, all productive activities of the emerging industrial capitalism were placed in the Northwest of the country; in the South, the few industrial complexes were dismantled, while the drastic reduction of arable land produced a surge in unemployment. In the following two decades, the South “offered” more than two million people to the North, who were employed in various capacities of industrial production.

In Northern cities, migrant workers from the South found an uncomfortable social climate marked by misinterpretation and mistrust, with blatant discrimination that made it difficult to even find a home or access adequate education. Meanwhile, the representation of a southern Otherness, largely circulated through the media, had been mainly articulated around the concepts of poverty, backwardness, and violence. Marginalised and subjected to processes of subordination, workers from the South were driven to unskilled jobs, often with irregular administrative positions, and forced to accept shorter labour contracts and very low wages. Many of them worked by either piecework or subcontracting in the building industry. Others, especially women, were “illegally” employed in sort of renewed “craft” jobs within the satellite industries. And, until 1961, when the law that controlled the internal mobility of labour was repealed, only workers holding the status of “resident” could find work in the industrial plants.

In sum, the racialisation of workers from the South had the task of managing the particular phase of capitalist transition, introducing the mechanisation of production into Italy. These transformations were increasingly rendering obsolete the figure of the “craft workers,” predominantly from the North, in favour of the introduction of the system of new, generic, and low-skilled labour-power that was the young workers from the South (which we will eventually call “mass worker”). Therefore, the construction of race hierarchies aimed both at devaluing the new labour-power that was entering the labour market, and undermining the forms of solidarity among workers that could challenge the recovery of Italian industry. The racialisation of southern workers in the aftermath of World War II allowed the creation of a large pool of cheap and docile labour-power that enabled the so-called “Italian miracle.” However, here it should be also noted that at the end of the 1960s, young and low-skilled racialized workers from the South were the main actors of an extraordinary season of labour struggles in Italy, which started a profound process of social transformation, calling into question both labour hierarchies and hierarchies constructed around the Otherness of the South. These struggles demonstrate how the processes of racialization — and therefore racism understood as material and structuring phenomenon — constitute a battleground in which racial hierarchies can be reversed.

Nevertheless, the ability of workers’ struggles in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge racial hierarchies did not mean, of course, the end of racism in Italy. Within the processes of globalisation, as the country dealt for the first time with international immigration, racism developed new roots, contributing to the construction of what, following Etienne Balibar, one could define as a “migrant race.” In a manner different from other European countries such as England and France, which had experienced a steady stream of migrants from former colonies since the time of decolonisation, Italy met its colonial Other at home for the first time only in the late 1980s. Then, the aggressive racism already seen in the African colonies was quickly set ablaze, affecting newcomers especially from North Africa and Eastern Europe (mainly from the former Soviet States after 1989).

Starting from the end of the 1990s, legislative measures to control and govern global labour mobility were largely responsible for the management of globalisation and the increasing mass phenomenon of immigration. Similar to other European countries, the management of labour mobility in Italy has privileged processes of differentiation and selection of migrant workers, “including” rather than “excluding” them, although in a subordinate position. Status with respect to citizenship, the non-recognition of education and degrees, and the often stereotypical interpretation of signs of recognition, such as clothing or language, work as dispositifs of “differential inclusion,” continuing to ensure a large supply of low-cost labour. All Italian immigration laws have been shaped and continue to be shaped in this direction, such as the aforementioned Bossi-Fini law that is now fundamental in regulating labour mobility.

RACISM AND THE CRISIS

In recent years, the double path of Italian (and European) racism, and their simultaneous operation, has taken on a renewed existence within the economic crisis. On the one hand, the crisis exacerbated the aforementioned racism against international immigrants, which finds its roots in the invention of the colonial Other. On the other hand, it marked an updating of the racism against Southerners that refers to the historical fracture between North and South of Europe. From this latter perspective, one could read the violent rhetoric against “laziness” and “corruption” of southern European countries that is taking form today. Such rhetoric largely contributes to images of marginalisation and inferiorisation, and discourses about the so-called PIGS, the nasty acronym used to dub Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain the “swine” of Europe, identified as the cause of the Eurozone crisis. In this respect, the international press and the gray literature that flanks the European “Troika” insist on identifying the origin of the crisis in some forms of politics and in the functioning of the economy in the countries of the Mediterranean. In this way, a productive North, which is rigorous and sober, is contrasted to the lazy South, which is wasteful and corrupt, exactly as at the beginning of European modernity. In an explicit way, Hans-Jurgen Schlamp wrote in Der Spiegel International: “The true problem of the south isn’t the economic and financial crisis — it’s corruption, waste and nepotism,” thereby establishing a linear relationship between the Eurozone