Post-colonial studies and irregular migration: deconstructing a narrative in Italy[1]

Maria Missoni[*]

Abstract

L'immigrazione irregolare in Italia ha rappresentato – e continua ad essere – una materia di discussione e polarizzazione dell'opinione pubblica. La ricerca analizza la narrativa e, conseguentemente la semplificazione politica del discorso e le *political rationalities* che sostengono la problematizzazione del tema. L'oggetto della ricerca riguarda la semplificazione del discorso dal punto di vista politico giustificando la traduzione di questo in specifici programmi di governo. Si considerano le linee di trasformazione dell'oggetto della ricerca negli anni che vanno dal 2013 al 2018 in una prospettiva post-coloniale.

Parole chiave: Italia, migrazione irregolare, discorso, narrativa, studi post-coloniali.

In Italy, irregular immigration has been – and currently is – a matter for discussion and polarization of public opinion. The research analyses the narrative, the consequently simplified political *discourse* and the political rationalities that sustain the problematization of the theme. The object of the research is a simplified *discourse* from formal political settings that justifies the translation into a specific programme of government. It considers the lines of transformation of the object of research observing the years between 2013 and 2018 under a post-colonial perspective.

Keywords: Italy, irregular migration, discourse, narrative, post-colonial studies.

---

[*] Independent researcher, Ph.D. in Managerial and actuarial sciences, Università degli Studi di Udine, e-mail: maria.missoni@gmail.com.

Introduction

In Italy, the arrivals of migrants by sea decreased by 80% (23,400) in 2018 compared to those in 2017 (119,400)[2]. During these years, the immigration trend in Italy seemed to be one of the most visible – and domestic – political debates with a growing predominance of a dualistic rhetoric in favour of, or against, the closing of ports. As reported by Monzini, Italy has been experiencing the problem of irregular immigration and smuggling since the 1990s[3]. However, irregular immigration has also been – and still is – a matter for discussion with the European Union (EU) and has a political impact on the dialogue with other EU member States in terms of reception.

This work tries to analyse the narrative, and the consequently simplified political *discourse*, in Italy on irregular migration during a times span (2013-2018) according to the political rationalities[4]. The research is supported by consolidated data, in historical terms, about some reception modalities between 2013 and 2016 through a report of the Italian Court of Auditors of 2018. The year 2018 is considered the decreasing point of arrivals by sea, if compared with 2017, as premised[5]. Therefore, the periods and points in time, instead of a "linear" description of rhetoric/number of arrivals until 2018, allow the points of the *discourse* to be highlighted[6]. Expressly, the time span is part of the epistemological construct that *follows* the (re)presentation of reality (*discourses*). This could be useful to describe further mechanisms of reproduction of *practices* «[…] but they are never repeated in exactly the same way»[7].

Indeed, the object of the research is not represented by a simplified rhetoric *tout court* but by a simplified *discourse* from formal (political) settings that justifies the translation into a specific programme of government.

---

[2] UNHCR, *Desperate Journeys, January-December 2018. Refugees and migrants arriving in Europe and at Europe's borders*, 2019, <http://www.unhcr.org> (last accessed: 26/01/2024).

[3] P. Monzini, *Sea-Border Crossings: The Organization of Irregular Migration to Italy*, in «Mediterranean Politics», XII, n. 2, 2007, pp. 163-184: 164.

[4] The period considers different governments, from centre-left to populist movement and centre-right-wing parties: Letta Government between April 2013 and February 2014; Renzi Government between February 2014 and December 2016; Gentiloni Government between December 2016 and June 2018; Conte Government between June 2018 and September 2019.

[5] About consolidated data see Italy, Court of Auditors, *La "prima accoglienza" degli immigrati: la gestione del fondo nazionale per le politiche e i servizi dell'asilo (2013-2016), Deliberation n. 3/2018/G*, 2018. About the decreasing point, in addition to other considerations concerning the Mediterranean routes: «Although sea arrivals to Italy had already dropped significantly from July 2017 onwards, they fell even further from June 2018 onwards; that followed Italy's decision to no longer allow refugees and migrants rescued off the coast of Libya by NGOs and merchant vessels, in what became the Libyan Search and Rescue Region (SRR)». UNHCR, *Desperate Journeys, January-December 2018*, cit., p. 9.

[6] Recalling genealogy technique in M. Foucault: R. Weiskop, H. Willmott, *Michel Foucault (1926-1984)*, in J. Helin, T. Hernes, D. Hjorth, R. Holt (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Process Philosophy & Organization Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 515-533: 520.

[7] *Ibidem.*

A critical approach makes it possible to go deeper than a "European – centered" perspective as Serequeberhan explains and, to observe the current reverberation of past policies in third countries with a broader interpretation (e.g. E.W. Said) than simply West/East – North/South relations[8].

1. *Theoretical foundations*

The definition of *irregular immigration* has been chosen in this essay to describe the «(M)ovement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination» as delineated by the Glossary on Migration of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and currently reported by the European Commission with a relevant explanation about the significance of the words[9]. In these terms, the movement of persons does not imply, for the purposes of this contribution, a spatial limitation but a general transition across borders (such as across the Mediterranean Sea between the African coast and Europe) in a non "authorised" or non "documented" form.

Indeed, the object of analysis is represented by a post-colonial reading of irregular migration and "how" different narratives have been used not to explain the phenomenon but as the solution in political and consequently, managerial terms. The explanation of "how" aims to understand the political rationalities at the base of the narrative about irregular migration that authorised certain, defined managerial instruments, mechanisms and tools.

The dualistic narrative was encased as a *discourse* for public opinion, unsophisticated. It was constructed by simple concepts that had a direct and immediate impact. It represented a separate issue: to be in favour of, or to be against irregular immigration.

Under this level there is a wide literature that tries to explain how immigration represents a complex phenomenon, which could be presented in a simple way or could be de-constructed and read with a different perspective. The de-naturalization of a Eurocentric narrative has been described in post-colonial studies and this work refers in particular to Said's *orientalism*. This simplifies the description of the

[8] J. Brewis, G.A. Jack, *Culture. Broadening the critical repertoire*, in M. Alvesson, T. Bridgman, H. Willmott (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009, pp. 232-250. T. Serequeberhan, *The critique of eurocentrism*, in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin (ed.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge, Oxford - New York 2006, pp. 89-92. E.W. Said, *Orientalism,* in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin (ed.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, cit., pp. 24-27.
[9] European Commission, *Definition(s)*, <https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu> (last accessed: 26/01/2024). A. Sironi, C. Bauloz, M. Emmanuel (ed.), *Glossary on Migration*, *International Migration Law*, 34, IOM, Geneva 2019, p. 116, <https://publications.iom.int/> (last accessed: 26/01/2024).

phenomenon, declaring a propensity for the comprehension of irregular migration from other points of view[10].

Serequeberhan explains the construction of a Eurocentric narrative. He reopens the concept of a sort of «general philosophy» or «idea» – quoting Said in *The Question of Palestine* – of the European existence that could be retraced in Kant and in Hegel and Marx[11]. This idea produces what is "the consolidation of the real" and what is "other". In the same speculative way, Serequeberhan not only assumes the existence of another paradigm to understand these narratives but underlines how, these [different narratives] have the same similar bases (although conflicting) in supporting general principles (such as for instance "universal freedom") leading to a «European-centered conception of humanity»[12].

These theoretical assumptions, which could seem detached from the reality of irregular migration have a preeminent impact on the *discourses*. Indeed, the philosophical stances are different, if observed from a non "European-centered conception". The process called "de-naturalization" represents a deconstruction of what is taken for granted, in this case the foundation of a Eurocentric perspective. For this reason, the post–colonial studies, in their different theoretical approaches, could help the deconstruction of naturalized boundaries of thought that produce, voluntary or involuntary, political rationalities and consequently *discourses*.

Farrier reminds us of a paradigm expressed by Agamben about the concept of inclusion/exclusion. As explained by Farrier, what is called by Agamben "ban" is a simultaneous inclusion and exclusion in which the person (in this case, the asylum seeker) is «casted out» but included in the political order «by a vested interest in its exclusion».[13] The mechanism reported by Farrier overcomes the material relation of time-space- borders/boundaries and opens up to a conception of "abeyance" within the biopolitical models of power. This "suspensive" condition is not a merely philosophical (de)construction but a real condition perceived by public opinion duelling between (rhetorical) sovereignty conceptions and humanitarian response (narratives).

Under these paradigms we discuss some events.

2. Chronicles

In Italy, irregular migration has produced – and still produces – a double narrative about migrants' reception, that raises the question of shared responsibility between the Member States of the European Union.

---

[10] J. Brewis, G.A. Jack, *Culture. Broadening the critical repertoire*, cit.

[11] T. Serequeberhan, *The critique of eurocentrism*, cit., p. 90. Serequeberhan refers to the work of E.W. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979.

[12] T. Serequeberhan, *The critique of eurocentrism*, cit., p. 92.

[13] D. Farrier, P. Tuitt, *Beyond Biopolitics: Agamben, Asylum, and Postcolonial Critique*, in G. Huggan (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 253-270: 256.

The Italian government that took office in 2018 decided to "close the ports of landing" or, at least, this has been constantly declared. As reported by a national economic newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore* (2018) the national authorities in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (commonly called Montego Bay Convention) can base this position on article 19.[14] This article concerns the explanation of the meaning of "innocent passage": «passage is innocent so long as it is not prejudicial to the peace, good order and security of the coastal State»[15]. This article has been recalled and interpreted with other national and European provisions in force and with simultaneous actions undertaken at European level. This represents one side of the narrative concerning the reception of irregular immigrants.

Until June 2018, before the new government settlement, the narrative concerning the reception of immigrants did not fall under a matter of "good order and security": the landing of irregular immigrants was managed in permanent emergency terms[16].

However, since 2017 judicial investigations in Sicily have been questioning the management of some emergency situations in the Mediterranean Sea and tried to unveil potential grey zones of rescue and reception of irregular migrants. Indeed, in mid–December 2016 the Financial Times published an article concerning possible interactions between migrant smugglers and charities[17]. The grey zone involved in the judicial investigations (e.g. La Stampa) dealt with the migrant smuggling roots and hypothetical connections with charities[18]. However, following judicial investigation some of these hypotheses concerning the relations between (some subjects) of NGOs and migrant smuggling have been closed (e.g. Il Sole 24 Ore)[19].

Furthermore, in addition to the use of internal and international legislation (in order to declare that "Italian ports are closed to landing") and the ongoing judicial investigations about smugglers and charities, there was also a growing concern in public opinion about the costs of the reception of immigrants during the previous governments, and the responsibilities of the EU Member States for the relocation of irregular migrants.

The mediatic point of friction was reached in mid-2019. As reported by The Guardian, the captain of a rescue ship carrying migrants, Carola Rackete, was arrested

---

[14] Il Sole 24 Ore, *Migranti, perché Salvini può chiudere i porti (anche se la scelta fa discutere)*, June 10, 2018, <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/> (last accessed: 26/01/2024).

[15] United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, art. 19, 1982.

[16] About the "logic of emergency" see: P. Castelli Gattinara, *The 'refugee crisis' in Italy as a crisis of legitimacy*, in «Contemporary Italian Politics», IX, n. 3, 2017, pp. 318-331: 329.

[17] D. Robinson, *EU border force flags concerns over charities' interaction with migrant smugglers*, in «Financial Times», December 15, 2016.

[18] La Stampa, *Il pm di Trapani: "Indagini su alcuni membri delle Ong per immigrazione clandestina"*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.lastampa.it/> (last accessed: 26/01/2024).

[19] Il Sole 24 Ore, *Migranti, Open Arms: il Gip di Catania archivia l'inchiesta,* May 15, 2019, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/> (last accessed: 26/01/2024).

for disregarding an authority decision, entering the vessel in Lampedusa in opposition to an Italian normative prohibition[20].

3. *Supranational political rationalities*

In 2015, the Communication from the Commission, a *European Agenda on Migration* defined long-term policies and short-term measures for «a consistent and clear common policy» for migration[21]. The "immediate" action consisted in saving lives at sea, targeting criminal smuggling networks, responding to high-volumes of arrivals within the EU with relocation instruments, protecting displaced persons with comprehensive resettlement measures and working *in partnership* with third countries to tackle migration upstream. The four pillars for managing migration described in the plan consist in a reduction of the incentives for irregular migration, management of external borders, an implementation of the asylum system in the EU and a new model of legal migration.

The document distinguished between "relocation" defined as «the distribution among Members States of persons in clear need of international protection» and "resettlement" defined as «the transfer of individual displaced persons in clear need of international protection, on submission of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and in agreement with the country of resettlement, from a Third country to a Member State, where they will be admitted and granted the right to stay and any other rights comparable to those granted to a beneficiary of international protection»[22].

This Agenda includes a European scheme with the percentage of relocation and resettlement for recipient country. The relocation measure represented a mechanism between Member States indeed «[…] The proposal will include a temporary distribution scheme for persons in clear need of international protection to ensure a fair and balanced participation of all Member States to this common effort. […]»[23]. At the time, further lasting normative solutions were envisaged. However, the relocations between Member States – a voluntary measure – was not accomplished in a "solidarity" manner.

The question of "solidarity" between Member States is still a matter of recent discussion. In 2023, different tendencies divided the positions about the development of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.

---

[20] L. Tondo, *Rescue ship captain arrested for breaking Italian blockade*, in «The Guardian»*,* June 19, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/> (last accessed: 26/01/2024). A. Geddes, A. Pettrachin, *Italian migratory policy and politics: Exacerbating paradoxes*, in «Contemporary Italian Politics», XII, n. 2, 2020, pp. 227-242: 228.

[21] European Commission, *A European Agenda on Migration*, COM(2015) 240 final, p. 2, <EUR-Lex - 52015DC0240 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)> (last accessed: 26/01/2024).

[22] Ivi, p. 19.

[23] *Ibidem*.

4. *Managerial implications*

The central control unit of the management of State administration of the Italian Court of Auditors presented a report in 2018 on the initial reception of immigrants in Italy from 2013 until 2016, highlighting the administration of the national fund for asylum policies and services.

The Court of Auditors controls the management of the Public Administration, verifying if the results of the administrative processes are in line with the objectives established by the rules and regulations, and evaluates the administrative action. The Court specifies that the report analyses the management of resources concerning the initial reception procedures of immigrants who request asylum and, irregular immigrants who are object of repatriation[24].

The Court of Auditors explains that the EU contribution in terms of funds in 2016 (from Frontex agency and the Fund for asylum, migration and integration) represents only 2.7% of the burden on the budget of the State. At the date of 15th October 2017, the failed relocation of migrants in other European countries amounts to not less than approximately 762.5 million euros, which represents a cost for Italy.[25]

The report highlighted the need for permanent controls of reception conditions to respect the standard and the necessity, by competent territorial authorities, of previous controls, for instance regarding anti-mafia procedures on private structures of reception. The guarantee of competition in tender procedures and transparency represented another aspect of controls that make it possible to preserve the procedures, considering that immigration – in accordance with the Court – should no longer be considered an *emergency*. Permanent evaluation of reception standards and interaction with local communities represented other aspects suggested by the Court, as well as the implementation of information technology systems for data collection and treatment.

5. *Discussion*

Irregular migration became a strongly ideologized question, which refers primarily to internal elements, until reaching a point in the political debate that gradually loses sight of the real subject matter of the dispute. On the one hand there were humanitarian reasons and a constant emergency, on the other, security reasons. On the one hand a sort of righteousness covered the reception of irregular migrants "at all costs"; on the other, there was the need to explain to (a part of) domestic public opinion the high number of arrivals and to urgently fix the problem.

---

[24] Italy, Court of Auditors, *Deliberation n. 3/2018/G*, cit., p. 15.
[25] Ivi, p. 69.

Although, if this research considers a time span, until the end of 2018, it is necessary for completeness to report that the mediatic point of friction of this confrontation was reached in 2019 with the Sea-Watch 3 accident in Lampedusa.

Despite the rhetoric between reception and "closure of the ports", the results in managerial terms, at least until 2016 (as described by the Audit authority) show a protracted state of emergency for the first reception and some grey areas in procedures and controls. The delicate balance between humanitarian reasons and the fight against migrant smugglers outlines the creation of grey areas and an accounting and auditing difficulty in the management of hosting.

At European level there was a difficulty to extend under a real "community method" – not in legal Treaties terms – the political approach to irregular migration and to overcome the National-State conception in this field of particular interest.

Irregular migration required a political reasoning about the *roots of the phenomenon* and the *economic advantages of human trafficking*. The lack of these assumptions' *ab origine* presented only a part of the history. This is the beginning of the – voluntary or involuntary – simplification of a reasoning[26]. In addition, the structural paradox of a "permanent state of emergency" produced institutional difficulties in managing the arrivals and controlling the transparency of reception.

The assumptions which originate from this work could be extended to the following periods, and to the current Italian *discourse*, to understand *how* a strongly ideologized rhetoric, affects not only the public opinion but the real policies. The assimilation of the post – colonial complexity in the *discourse* does not imply *tout court* the capacity to integrate it in coherent policies.

Conclusions

In Italy, the political debate about the management of irregular migration showed, during the final years of last decade, a dualistic rhetoric.

This recent past shows *discourses* aimed to cope with the necessity to give an immediate reply to public opinion. This was represented by the reception of migrants under a moral imperative or by recalling a conservative sense of sovereignty, not necessarily sovereignism.

Through a reflexive deconstruction it is possible to understand the *political rationalities* that sustain these *discourses*. It also seems possible to trace, without expecting the reconstruction of patterns of repetition, the lines of transformation of the *Discourse*.

The comprehension of the need for a balance between the pragmatism of reception and national and European interest, could pass through a "third way", which encompasses the immediate need for political appreciation and embraces a

---

[26] Other considerations, such as, for instance, the level of the cultural debate in Italy, the role of media, the electoral appreciation – which are not the object of this work – can be further analysed.

wider interpretation of the phenomenon. A profound reasoning about irregular migration, and a careful choice of words, represent the current public opinion need, which is awaited and which is certainty capable of being received.