

Racial Expectations on Italy's National Identity

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ABSTRACT

Current postcolonial democracies face the difficult challenge of rethinking state membership in times of globalisation. The legal frameworks currently available to assign citizenship, that is, the so-called *jus sanguinis* and *jus soli*, create complex relations between citizenship, race/ethnicity, and national identification. In Italy, the legal apparatus establishes that individuals born in the Italian territory to parents of non-Italian origin are not allowed to automatically acquire Italian citizenship, which creates a contradictory situation of inclusion and exclusion and plays a role in the creation of national identity and belonging. In sum, the inability of the Italian system to adapt to a postcolonial era reinforces and is embedded in colonial ethnocentric expectations of what makes the authentic Italian citizen. This paper investigates the controversial situation of individuals born in the Italian territory who do not have 'Italian blood' and are thus denied access to citizenship. In an attempt to bridge this discussion with the real struggle of Italians without citizenship, I consider the documentary *18 Ius Soli: Il diritto di essere italiani*, directed by Italian-Ghanaian Fred Kuwornu (2011), which narrates the lives of second-generation young Italians who struggle to stay in their homeland once they turn 18 years old. I explore the ways the film deconstructs colonial normativity in relation to identity while casting light on the deep transformations of what it means to be 'Italian' in the postcolonial era. Finally, drawing on Cristina Lombardi-Diop's (2012) notion of the post-racial in Italy, I explore to what extent self-recognition and representation of these individuals problematise racial assumptions in relation to Italianness.

INTRODUCTION

The struggle to shift the citizenship legislation from its current application on *jus sanguinis* to *jus soli* has been one of the most contentious debates surrounding Italian national identity for at least the past five years. It has been a point of friction especially around election times, dividing and influencing voters. However, the number of Italy-born children to parents of foreign descent is a growing reality. In the novel on the life of Italian-Somali Isabella

Marincola, *Timira. Romanzo meticcio*, Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed (2012), weaving fact into fiction, write:

[Nel 2011] Sono venuti alla luce, secondo le statistiche, otto milioni di neonati, e a Novi di Modena, un paese di undicimila abitanti, più della metà sono figli di stranieri. Giornali, siti e blog hanno scritto che in quel comune, per la prima volta in Italia, i bambini stranieri (o extracomunitari o immigrati) sono più del cinquanta per cento.

Despite the current political scenario that is unfavourable to certain categories of immigrants – particularly those non-white and non-Christian – these numbers on second-generation children born in Italy are not going to change for the foreseeable future.

As Miguel Mellino argues in ‘De-Provincializing Italy: Notes on race, racialization, and Italy’s coloniality’ (2012), Italy is a peculiar postcolonial country since its colonialism differs in length of time and format from other European countries. From his standpoint, Italy joins the postcolonial condition according to four main criteria: a) firstly, simply because of the fact that Italy had colonies, and its discourses, representations and stereotypes (on differences) are still embedded in the colonial period; b) the unsolved “Southern Question” which reflects and derives from colonial/imperial intentions, creating a sort of “internal colonial fracture” (84) that attributes to Northern rule the task of civilising the South; c) the flow of immigration of the last decades have played a major role in changing Italy’s social space, complexifying Italy’s racial composition which has sparked an increasing “material and symbolic racist violence against the postcolonial migrant” (84); d) and finally, Italy’s participation in the contemporary neoliberal capitalist economy that is embedded in colonial and imperial logics, which also places Italy in a postcolonial condition. All these aspects of Italian postcoloniality play a role in the on-going (re)construction of Italy’s national identity and its politics of racialisation.

In this essay, I engage with the documentary *18 Ius Soli: Il diritto di essere italiani* directed by Italian-Ghanaian Fred Kuwornu (2011) to forecast the inability of Italian law to adapt to a postcolonial era and recognise all individuals born on Italy’s territory and those who arrive at a very early age as its citizens. Currently, one is or becomes an Italian citizen if one is born to, adopted by or married to an Italian citizen. The person who is born in Italy to non-Italian parents might only be able to acquire citizenship if they have lived in Italy uninterruptedly until the age of 18. In the film, Kuwornu conducted 12 interviews with second-generation Italians, young men and women whose parents are originally from African, Asian, Latin American, and Eastern European countries, who have lived in the Italy their entire life but do not possess Italian citizenship and are, therefore, not yet recognised by the authorities as citizens of Italy. *18 Ius Soli* was made in order to support a bottom-up campaign promoted by, among others, local associations, activists, and mostly led by *Rete G2*, an organisation of children of migrants born and/or raised in Italy, that promotes the idea of reforming the present legislation on citizenship. Since 2013, the amendments to the law proposed in order to guarantee recognition (and all the rights that accompany it) of such individuals were approved by the Parliament’s House of Representatives but still await Senate approval.

I draw on Cristina Lombardi-Diop’s (2012) notion of “postracial” to suggest that Italy’s legal frameworks currently available to assign citizenship, that is, the so-called ‘right of the blood’ [*ius sanguinis*], re-establishes a colonial discourse that contributes to the (re)construction of ‘Us’ and the ‘Other’ through a paradoxical neo-colonising politics of white supremacy in the homeland’s territorial domain. Finally, I address the need to think of postcoloniality as de-coloniality or anti-coloniality of Italian identity and belonging in order

to resist practices of exclusion, in particular, thinking through the ideas of “border thinking” (Mignolo 2011) and de-provincialising Italy (Mellino 2012).

The colonial past in the postcolonial present

The Kuwornu documentary tells the individual stories of 12 young male and female second-generation Italians in contemporary Italy. At first, the director introduces them, focusing on their relations with Italy and what ‘makes’ them Italian, highlighting their relation with Italian food, their knowledge of local dialects and their attachment to the place where they were born and/or have lived most of their lives. In addition to the representation of singular stories, struggle and difficulties due to not having Italian citizenship, the documentary also presents interventions on their behalf by politicians and lawyers who explain the inadequacy of the current legislation. The President of the Chamber of Deputies in 2011, Gianfranco Fini, affirmed:

the concept of homeland, the concept of national identity is to be connected to the times where we live. Thus, the role of those who arrived here very young or who were born here and then become Italian, even without having Italian parents, is a role inevitably destined to grow (min. 12:35).

Fini's stance represents a call for the Italian legal system to be actualised, to adapt to a postcolonial era. The inability to do so reinforces and is embedded in colonial ethnocentric expectations of what constitutes the ‘authentic Italian citizen’, which is an element further presented in the film. In this respect, scholars and experts elucidate on the racialisation produced through the colonial imperative and its continuity through history. I focus on this aspect since Italy's national formation goes hand in hand with a colonial racialising discourse.

In *Empire* (2000), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the construction of the idea of people of a nation in Europe is inextricably related to a mechanism of colonial racism that created European people's identity in opposition to native Others. In fact, as the authors put it, “[t]he concepts of nation, people, and race are never very far apart. The construction of an absolute racial difference is the essential ground for the conception of a homogeneous national identity” (103). These constructions permeated the development of the nation state and created a misleading idea of the identity of people on “an imaginary plane that hid and/or eliminated differences, and this corresponded on the practical plane to racial subordination and social purification” (103). In Italy, this was particularly true as the Italian identity was being constructed as white during the fascist period. As Stephen Gundle (2005) affirms, the attempts to eliminate racial differences were part of a double Fascist strategy of, on the one hand, stating “the general assertion of the Aryan status of all Italians” (243) and, on the other, to put “Italy on an equal footing with France and Britain” (243) through the colonial endeavour.

Despite the attempt to portray Italy as a racially homogenous country during the Italian Fascist period, internal fractures and the process of racialisation also persisted during that time although they were largely silenced. This is due to the fact that race and class were intimately related (Gundle 2005). Indeed, the ‘Southern question’ concerns the subalternisation of the ‘Mediterranean people’ that resulted in an uneven division of Italian people between the poor racialised Mediterranean and the bourgeois whitened Northerner (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012). It is only during Italy's democratic post-Fascist period that, according to Cristina Lombardi-Diop (2012), whiteness as a category of racial identification found its peak and the colour line came to be further silenced. In the author's words:

The sense of aspiring to a privileged status identifiable with being white was – for the first time – no longer limited to the middle class and intellectual elites (as it was during Fascism). In the postwar years, it extended to and began to affect a larger pool of average, petit-bourgeois Italians, and ultimately mass society. Under the new visual regimes of booming advertising and TV broadcasting, the consolidation of the new identity of Italians as homogenously white facilitated the erasure from public awareness of past relations with race and blackness. The whitening up of Italians was a process of elevation to wealth, health, social privilege, access to resources, commodities, and technologies, all associated with whiteness at the expense of the exclusion, the restrictions, the marginalization, and the economic deprivation associated with blackness. In this sense, the process of race formation was also a process of class formation (177).

This process of homogenisation induced a situation where the more Italians identified themselves as white, the more the racial Other was pushed to the margins of Italian society. When Italy became a country of destination for different types of migrants, the intense movement of people under globalised capitalism intensified the attachment to Whiteness, resulting in racial/ethnocentric expectations regarding what supposedly makes the authentic Italian citizen. This phenomenon is what Lombardi-Diop identifies as the “nonraciality” and the “postraciality” of postcolonial Italy, in the sense that race is rendered invisible and unnamed, as if Italians were “racially unmarked” (2012: 176). The assumption that homogeneity is a feature of the nation-state is what nurtures politics of exclusion and racism, neglecting Italy's heterogeneity in the first place. On this account, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh, drawing on Benedict Anderson, reminds us that, by contrast to this essentialising and immutable label on identity, national identity is “the result of dynamics and, representative and heterogeneous processes, generated and disseminated from different systems of signification, or forms of discourse” (2016: 218).

In this regard, *18 Ius Solis* succeeds in bringing to life the coloniality of racism in the Italian context. The first intervention is a flashback to the story of Leone Jacovacci, a boxer who was the son of an Italian man and a Congolese princess, who was brought by his father to Italy and was raised in Rome. At the age of 16, Jacovacci, disguised as an Indian from Calcutta, hopped aboard a British merchant ship docked in Naples to work as cabin boy. In England, he adopted the name John Douglas Walker and discovered his interest in boxing after enrolling in the British army. Nevertheless, it was only in France that he started competing at a professional level, pretending to be an Afro-American named Jack Walker. His disclosure as Italian happened in 1925, at the beginning of the Fascist regime in Italy, and had considerably destabilising influences in the face of Fascist ideology. Telling Jacovacci's story – in the context of the documentary – is vital to demonstrate how engrained colonialism became in Italy's national discourse and how race has played a critical role in aligning nationality to ‘the right colour’, deleting the memory of the colonial experience and the high levels of interracial sociality (Lombardi-Diop, 2012).

Legal violence

On the matter of how imperative is the discourse on the racially unmarked Italian citizen, there is a need to address the complex construction of Italy as a nation embedded in the Fascist/colonial period that still resonates in contemporary Italy. The racial and masculine

ideology that is at the basis of the Fascist imperial impetus articulated a discourse on citizenship for the formation of a certain type of belonging to the motherland Italy, which necessarily entails an exclusion of others. The legislation currently available to assign citizenship, that is, the so-called *ius sanguinis*, perpetuates the complexity between citizenship, race/ethnicity, and national identification, resulting in practices of limited inclusion. Such legislation reinforces the invisibilisation of the Italian “colour line” (De Bois 1903)¹ whereas it creates two paradoxical situations: belonging without citizenship (the case of the second-generation young Italians of Kuwornu’s documentary) and citizenship without belonging (the case of descendants of emigrated Italians who never returned).

In *La finzione della razza, la linea del colore e il meticciato* (2016) and in *Il meticciato nell’Italia contemporanea* (2015), scholar Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh highlighted the close correlation between gender, race and citizenship in Italian legislation since Fascism. The Fascist laws of racist stamps refer to 1933 and 1937, first with the prohibition of sexual relations between colonisers and colonised and later with anti-Semitic laws, including the prohibition of mixed marriage, enforced segregation, etc. According to Petrovich Njegosh (2016) this is clearly related to the effort of creating a specific “colour line” of the “authentic Italian” and masking or eliminating racial *métissage*. Indeed, the Law of Citizenship 999 of 6 July 1933 allowed the assignment of citizenship to “the children of Italian men and women of *Africa Orientale Italiana* which exceed the test of race and manifest through a ‘visible’, phenotypic level their belonging to the ‘white’ race” (2016: 223). In other words, children of mixed parents (Italian/African) would only be assigned Italian citizenship if they looked white enough to be considered Italian. Such laws denounce the attempt to hide and mask the fact that the *métissage* did occur and, as Petrovich Njegosh asserts, reflect the instability and constructed nature surrounding the idea of Italianness.

Regarding the current legislation for the assignment of citizenship, Petrovich Njegosh notes two main paradoxes in the way citizenship is understood under Law 91 of 1992. The first one concerns the role of gender, since the law allows the acquisition of Italian citizenship through legal (heterosexual) marriage. The second concerns the very idea of *ius sanguinis*, namely the transmission of citizenship according to one’s descent or parentage. The author observes that both instances are problematic considering that “to become or to be an Italian citizen, it is sufficient to prove one’s own ascendancy (by birth or marriage) and to have not interrupted the chain of transmission of citizenship” (2016: 229). I would add that these conditions are not only anachronistic and fail to encompass a range of differences and mixture of a postcolonial era present in contemporary Italy such as second-generation migrants,² but also it fails in recognising that the very idea of *ius sanguinis* was only made possible through the attachment of those who first inhabited a piece of land. To put it differently, the *ius sanguinis* was originally implemented so as to guarantee that the children of emigrated Italians maintain a bond with the country of origin of their ancestors. Therefore, the paradox lies in the notion of a continuous attachment to the land when, in reality, those ‘Italians’ of the diaspora have never and perhaps will never step on Italian soil, whereas those born in the Italian territory are denied the right to fully belong. To mention only one of the problems that stand out is the fact that, for instance, the descendants of emigrated Italians are able to vote even from abroad, whereas Italians without citizenship are denied the right to participate in the political realm of their own realities (Battiston and Mascitelli 2012).

I further argue that the law constitutes a form of violence inasmuch it excludes subjects without citizenship from access to a range of civil rights that are instead guaranteed to the rest of the population. On this account, Valentino, one of the interviewees of Kuwornu’s

documentary says that “Not being a citizen means not being able to leave when you want to leave, not being able to compete for public calls when you want to compete for public calls” (min. 19). In this sense, I draw on the conceptualisation of *legal violence* proposed by Cecilia Menjívar and Leisy Abrego in their work on Central American immigrants in the US, in order to affirm that the Italian law reflects the authors’ argument that legal violence implies:

violations of their rights; and the exclusion and further barring of immigrants from education and other forms of socioeconomic resources necessary for mobility and incorporation. All of these instances constitute forms of structural and symbolic violence that are codified in the law and produce immediate *social suffering* but also potentially long-term harm with direct repercussions for key aspects of immigrant incorporation (2012: 1384).

Following the reflections of Brenna Bhandar and Davida Bhandar in ‘Cultures of dispossession: Rights, status and identities’ (2016), from a decolonial/post-colonial standpoint, this denial of access to citizenship of second-generation Italians coincides with the territorial dispossession of indigenous people by white settler colonialism that resulted in varied processes of displacement. The denial of belonging and identity is enacted by institutionalised racism through the same sort of colonial dynamics of the racial capitalism of the colonial era. In other words, the juridical apparatus constitutes a legal technique that forces the subalternisation and (re)colonisation of the dispossessed racial other. It feeds the logics of racial capitalism in which inclusion/exclusion are inherent to the idea of *possession* that in this case can be reduced to the possession of citizenship. Accordingly, lawyer Salvatore Fachiles (min. 29) affirms in *18 ius soli* that “granting the release of Italian citizenship is almost like the release of a noble title that is like the recognition of belonging to a privileged caste”. In sum, Petrovich Njegosh puts it in the following way, “race continues to sculpt the life, death and the value of racialized people on a global level” (2016: 217).

Decolonising Italian identity and belonging

Teresa Fiore (2012), in her essay ‘The emigrant post - “colonia” in contemporary immigrant Italy’, highlights an important element of Italian post-coloniality, i.e. that the composition of the Italian immigrant population is, unlike in other European countries, not directly linked to Italy’s colonial legacy. As she reminds us, “while the Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali communities are present, they are by far numerically surpassed by other African groups and even more so by Eastern European communities” (73). Accordingly, this is what Kuwornu effectively points out in the documentary, and, since such “indirect postcoloniality” (Fiore 2012: 72) lacks a proper approach in laws such as the one regarding citizenship, it creates what Sandro Mezzadra (2008) has named as “selective and differential inclusion” (86) and Miguel Mellino (2009) “differentiated juridical status” (8). However, given that these conditions of (differentiated) exclusion/inclusion are, in the light of what was argued above, connected to the history of colonialism, I want now to draw on some crucial aspects of decolonial thinking and its possibilities to move towards an undoing of legal and institutional practices of exclusion.

In ‘Cittadinanze postcoloniali - appunti per una lettura postcoloniale delle migrazioni contemporanee’, Miguel Mellino (2009) proposes a reading of postcoloniality as anti-coloniality that *18 ius soli* effectively grasps by presenting and foregrounding the role of colonialism in the construction of the project of an Italian nation that holds to its Fascist colonial modern ideals. Mellino, drawing on Althusser, accurately affirms the need of the postcolonial

as anticolonial “to be interpellated as a symptom of social, cultural and economic disomogenization of the former colonizing societies’ space” (2009: 3). Thus, we shall start with the precept that Italy never contained a homogeneous social fabric in the first place. Consequently, both from what has been argued in this essay and through the examination of the documentary, it becomes evident that “race, racism, and racialization have fractured the Italian national space ever since the birth of the nation” (Mellino 2012: 87).

In this regard, two concepts are possible lenses through which it is possible to unveil the colonality of the legal violence of the Italian jurisdiction: border-thinking (Mignolo 2011) and de-provincialisation (Mellino 2012). According to Walter Mignolo, the idea of border-thinking is connected to an “awareness of coloniality” that is imprinted in the Third World subject and its dispersion and travel to the First World entails an “immigrant consciousness”, thus being “the necessary condition for thinking decolonially”. Such consciousness opens up the possibility to “delink” from the universal colonial/modern politics of knowledge that created the divide “us/others” in order to rank people according to gender, race, class, and other axes of differentiation. Therefore, border-thinking enables a breaking off from this train of thought. In this way, Mignolo rightly points to the possibilities of border thinking:

Either he or she accepts his or her inferiority or makes an effort to demonstrate that he or she was a human being equal to those who placed him or her as second class. That is, two of the choices are to accept the humiliation of being inferior to those who decided that you are inferior or to assimilate. And to assimilate means that you accepted your inferiority and resigned to playing the game that is not yours, but that has been imposed upon you – or the third option is border thinking and border epistemology (Mignolo 2011).

When Kuwornu selects these young people so as to expose their difficulties and obstacles in their pursuit of doing what they want to do and being who they want to be, they are led to talk from this border awareness. Additionally, I suggest that border-thinking may be utilised in dialogue with Mellino’s requisite of “de-provincializing Italy”. In other words, the necessity of addressing Italy’s:

historical involvement in the rise and spread of a capitalist modernity in which the globalization of both modern European-Christian, humanistic culture and the “color-race line” were complementary strategies of colonial capitalist rule over different territories, subjects, and cultures (2012: 86).

In sum, these are solid strategies to reject a rigid hierarchy of the colour line and to cast light on profound injustices that Italy perpetuates through its lack of adjustment to postcolonial times. As the second-generation young man from Naples, Aravinda, affirms in the film: “I feel Italian even though I do not have citizenship, for the simple reason that I have been here since I was 3 years old. Therefore, if I cannot feel Italian, what should I feel?” His statement is timely and hints at Italy’s failure to recognise and formalise the legal duties of an immigrant country, not only because it has historically been a destination for immigrants and will continue to be, but also because, as Aravinda clearly puts it, one is destined to feel he or she belongs where they have spent the most part of their lives, regardless of the legal recognition of such.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to cast light on some historical events that informed and shaped Italy's national formation, addressing Fascism and the colonial experience while trying to situate it in the larger context of issues of coloniality and postcoloniality. Subsequently, I focused on the Italian law on citizenship assignment and the lives of those young Italians who are automatically excluded from a range of civil rights once they reach the age of 18 by means of racialisation, contrary to their 'truly Italian' counterparts. These arguments and line of reasoning were inspired by the viewing of *18 ius soli - Il diritto di essere Italiani* (2011) directed by Fred Kuwornu that reflects the urgent need to bring the Italian legislation on citizenship assignment up to date. In this sense, I believe that the self-recognition and visibility of these young Italians problematises racial assumptions and cries out against politics of exclusion that are perpetuated at the expense of younger generations.

At the time of writing, there has been some movement in regard to the subject matter studied herein. Since October 2016, throughout 2017, and 2018, self-organised young second-generation Italians prepared flashmobs and anti-racist demonstrations in several capitals around Italy in order to draw attention to their invisibility and to oppose and pressure current bans on migrants and asylum seekers under Matteo Salvini's administration. By these public interventions and through Kuwornu's documentary, what comes to light is that there is an intricate link between official state membership, and belonging. This, of course, originates from the fact that citizens without documents are pushed away and remain limited to the position of second-class citizens and are not perceived as an integral part of the national community. A further division occurs in the case of returnees of emigrated Italians – or if we will – the Italian diaspora, that is not perceived as Italian even though they are in possession of Italian documents. However, in the case of second generations, it is evident that belonging is not merely a legal either/or identitarian matter. It is a rather complex combination of different elements and the legal recognition is a crucial aspect for Italy to adapt to its current social reality and to account for its historical diversity.

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NOTES

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) is a thinker from the United States who introduced the concept of a colour line along which the gross inequities of power, wealth, opportunity and access are distributed according to one's position in a line of people's colour, with whites being the most privileged.

² The Ministry of Education (2018) has conducted research on the students without Italian citizenship of all levels of public schools in Italy. The research has shown that since 2007, the number of students with non-Italian citizenships has gone from 574,133 students (6.4% of the total) in the academic year 2007/2008, to 826,091 students (9.4%) in the year 2016/2017.

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