

INTRODUCTION

Nation, ‘race’, and racisms in twentieth-century Italy

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Eighty years ago, in 1938, the Italian Fascist state introduced discriminatory laws against a very tiny minority of its citizens who professed a religion different from that which the Concordat of 1929 had enshrined as the state religion. It did this by calling this tiny minority a ‘race’ different from the Italian one (which it defined as ‘Aryan’) and introducing criteria to define who was a ‘Jew’ that paralleled if not surpassed the Nazi legislation on the matter. As in the Nazi case, the making of the Italians of Jewish background into a race depended not only on the criterion of descent, but also on cultural ones such as religion or marriage ‘preference’: in the Fascist legislation a person who had only one Jewish parent ‘counted’ as Jewish if he/she was professing the Jewish religion or was married to a Jew. However, a targeting of the Jewish minority by questioning their character and loyalty to the regime had started earlier, not to mention that the privileged status given to Catholicism in 1929 constituted if not a direct premise of the racist legislation at least a major step back for the position of Jews in Italian society (Sarfatti 2006).

In the five years before the introduction of the anti-semitic legislation, the Fascist state had also increased the degree of discrimination in the colonies: first (in 1933) by introducing somatic criteria (the so-called ‘proof of race’) in the law on the granting of Italian citizenship to ‘mixed-race’ children of unknown fathers, and then by criminalising, after the occupation of Ethiopia, unions between Italian citizens and colonial subjects. By so doing it further extended the racist practices against Africans that were an inevitable part of colonial domination, even under a liberal regime (De Napoli 2009; Barrera 2004). Indeed, Africans had been the victims of *de facto* discrimination since the establishment of the colonies and under Fascism they saw that discrimination fully legalised and expanded, culminating with the 1940 law that impeded the recognition of mixed-race offspring of Italian citizens.

In the case of Italian Jews who had been living in the Peninsula for thousands of years, had participated in the struggle for unification, and had been fully emancipated with the establishment of the Italian state, the laws of 1938 represented a greater rupture vis-à-vis the legislation of the liberal state, not to mention a betrayal of all those who had been supporters of Fascism. Yet, without denying the differences between the histories of colonial racism and anti-semitism, their interconnections and grievous outcomes are evident. In spite of their different origins,

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motivations, and goals, both anti-black racism and anti-semitism resulted in suffering and loss of life. After being deprived of their rights, Italian Jews were then persecuted in their personal lives, as the Nazis could count on the willing collaboration of many Italians (Levis Sullam 2015). About seven thousand Italian Jews died in the extermination camps.¹ In Africa, the Fascist determination to break the resistance of Libyans and Ethiopians, combined with the racist disregard for the lives of the indigenous populations, led the Italian army under the order of Mussolini to set up deadly concentration camps and drop poison gas on civilians, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Both anti-semitic and anti-black policies – in 1938 the regime also took a census of people with African background living in Italy and expelled them (Gabrielli 1999) – aimed to make Italy a ‘racially pure’ nation.

As a way of defining a radical difference between humans, race was not, however, an invention of Fascism. The idea had been circulating for quite some time in Italy and already in the mid-nineteenth century Italian scholars were busy classifying the Italians in racial terms following modalities that were rapidly spreading all over Europe (Patriarca 2012; Quine 2013). This was a self-referential type of racialisation which soon, however, started to be complemented by the hetero-referential racialisation that colonialism made more common (Giuliani and Lombardi Diop 2013). Already during the Risorgimento race provided a ‘supplement of particularity’, to use an expression of Etienne Balibar (1991), to the definition of the nation.² Soon race (and other semantically related words such as *stirpe*, ‘stock’) and nation became interchangeable terms. In 1921 the equivalence between nation and *stirpe* was inscribed in the programme of the National Fascist Party. Fascism accentuated the racial nature of the body politic through programmes which emphasised the somatic normativity of actual Italian bodies.

Moreover, race as a category did not die with the collapse of Fascism. Claudio Pogliano and Francesco Cassata have exhaustively documented its hold in the postwar scientific community, where renowned and powerful figures such as Corrado Gini fought a battle against UNESCO to assert the scientific validity of the idea (Pogliano 2005; Cassata 2011). Nor did racism disappear after the abrogation of the racial laws. Even if Article Three of the 1948 Constitution officially rejected racial discriminations, an implicitly racial idea of Italianness continued to underlay both institutional and non-institutional practices in the Republic, making it very difficult, for example, for mixed-race children born in the colonies to be recognised as Italian citizens, or for former colonial soldiers present on the Italian territory at the end of the war to be able to stay in Italy (Deplano 2017). Even in the 1960s, such a prominent opinion maker as Indro Montanelli was still describing *métissage* as a danger for the Italian nation (Montanelli 1962). Anti-semitism was not dead either, finding new expressions and rhetoric across the political spectrum and in the Catholic Church (Mazzini 2012).

Until recently Italian historical scholarship on race and racism tended to focus primarily on the history of formal ideas and theories of race (such as the ‘scientific’ racism of Lombroso and other positivists) and on the institutionalisation of racism and anti-semitism during Fascism. More recently, a wave of new studies on colonialism and postcolonialism has investigated colonial racism and the racist legislation in the colonies during liberalism and Fascism, and has started to study their legacies in the postcolonial and post-fascist period. Scholars employing an interdisciplinary approach and postcolonial perspectives have also shed light on the extent to which whiteness (in its various shades) has been a defining element of the Italian nation from unification to the Republic (Giuliani and Lombardi Diop 2013).

From these new perspectives, race appears to be less a contingent component of national identity than one of its constitutive elements, even when it is not explicitly invoked and, in fact, is rejected. Following the suggestions that come from this new season of studies but also proposing

some new avenues of investigation, this special issue aims to examine the multiple ways in which the idea of race and racism have contributed to a persistently 'white' and culturally and religiously homogeneous definition of the Italian nation in the twentieth century. The essays of this special issue, including the article which appears in the section 'Contexts and Debates', deal with different types and modalities of racism (anti-semitic, anti-Slavic, and anti-black) from Fascism to the post-fascist Republic, paying particular attention to the latter period, which is generally much less visited by the historiography. Both articles on the Fascist period address the role played by Catholicism in building a racial idea of Italianness. While Nina Valbousquet explores how some trends of Catholic anti-semitism contributed to the racialization of Jews and to the legitimization of racism, Nicolas Virtue highlights how Fascist propaganda made use of Catholic concepts to reinforce the idea of the 'otherness' of Yugoslav partisans. The articles focusing on the post-fascist Republic address two other main issues. The first one is the role of the colour line in the processes of (both formal and informal) inclusion in and exclusion from the democratic national community, highlighted by both Valeria Deplano and Silvana Patriarca. The second one is the exoticisation of 'the Others', retraced from different perspectives and with different disciplinary approaches by Laura Pennacchietti's essay on the reception of Caribbean literature among Italian publishers, and by Gaia Giuliani's article on the 'mondo-movies' of the 1970s. Stressing the role of white masculinity in these films' narratives and paying particular attention to gender as one of the elements Italian national identity is built on, Giuliani also engages with postcolonial theory and cultural studies in order to enhance our understanding of the 'racial and gendered imaginaries' of the nation.

All the authors studying the Republic address the permanence of a racial/racist mindset in post-fascist Italy, but the essay by Silvana Patriarca also calls attention to the way certain political and cultural paradigms widespread in postwar Italian society contributed to obscuring home-grown anti-black racism even when it was observed and denounced. The article by Giacomo Lichtner provides further elements for reflection by focusing on the persistence of anti-Jewish stereotypes. Lichtner weaves together personal memories – especially of the life of his half-Jewish mother born in Rome in July 1944 – and significant moments in the evolution of anti-semitism in post-1945 Italian society until its current troubling re-emergence. He reminds us how today's rampant xenophobia is inseparable not only from the fable of the '*brava gente*' that Italians told about themselves after the Holocaust, but also from the difficulty that even democratic Italians had in understanding and respecting religious and cultural diversity after 1945.

Historicising race and racism and connecting them to the nation-building process over time not only contributes to reframing their role and their meaning, but also to uncovering their presence beyond the period when race was defended by science and codified by the law. This special issue also aims to disentangle racism from the idea that its contemporary presence is the result of recent demographic phenomena. The widespread idea that racist discourses and practices in today's Italy are a reaction to the increasing flow of migrants dates back to the 1980s, when Italy began to be a migrant-receiving country and several episodes of violence against non-white migrants began to be reported in the pages of newspapers. In public debate this way of thinking ended up blaming migrants for the misbehaviour of Italian natives. By contrast, tracing the history of racism to a time when the number of dark-skinned people in the Peninsula was rather small provides a different perspective on the phenomenon, and helps to better understand its complex roots in post-1945 Italian society. Likewise, retracing how a homogeneous idea of Italianness has been strengthened by religious considerations (with the Catholic Church also maintaining a privileged position in the Republic, guaranteed by the inclusion of the Concordat in the 1948 Constitution), helps to better

understand how non-Catholic religious minorities (today Muslims in particular) can still easily be perceived as alien to the ‘real’ national community.

There is of course no need to elaborate on the topicality of these issues, as racism and xenophobia in Italy have been growing in recent years fueled by many factors, among which are continuing high unemployment and the erosion of the welfare state. In a modality practised for a long time in plural societies, the ethnic/racial Other has become the scapegoat for all sorts of social problems. Right-wing political parties use race and the immigration issue as a wedge to exploit the discontent of whites. For quite a while now, political formations that openly express their xenophobia (such as the Northern League, now self-renamed the League) have been in power at the local level, thus shaping a new consensus. For almost ten years they also shaped national policies and are now back in power in a new coalition. Neo-fascist groups such as Casa Pound have also been significantly expanding their appeal and their presence, and in some cases have obtained respectable results at the polls. In the elections of 2018, the League became the largest party on the right after campaigning with the slogan ‘Italians first’. The presence of its leader Matteo Salvini at the head of the Ministry of Interior in the government formed with the populist Five Star Movement is already legitimating even more violence against immigrants and those who are not seen as members of the nation (even if they are citizens) because of the colour of their skin.

Unfortunately the centre-left parties have proved unable to fully develop and defend a different, more inclusive idea of Italianness: suffice it to mention the failure of the centre-left/centre-right coalition governments in power from 2013 to 2018 to reform a citizenship law still based primarily on the *ius sanguinis* principle, and to approve a new law that would make it easier for the so-called second generations to acquire Italian citizenship. Italian society has changed, however, and the legislation will eventually have to reflect these changes—yet ‘legal Italy’ will not become more reflective of ‘real Italy’ unless the Italian public is led to consider critically the idea of Italianness and to reject its racial subtext. Needless to say, the task is challenging but cannot be eluded. On the eightieth anniversary of the infamous racial laws of 1938, the need is stronger than ever to oppose the simplistic and hateful discourses about identity and otherness that a returning and aggressive nationalism is spreading around in Italy and elsewhere.

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Notes

1. See Sarfatti 2006, 201. This number does not include 1,870 Jews in possession of the Italian ‘*piccola cittadinanza*’, who were deported from the Aegean islands to Auschwitz-Birkenau (see Picciotto 2017, 16).
2. On the intersection between nation and race in the Risorgimento see Patriarca 2012 and Quine 2013.

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