



## A decade of racist infamy

By Annamaria Rivera

### **The massacre of Florence, the role of the far right**

In Italy as elsewhere, the public attitude and debate on racism and the rights of migrants, refugees, minorities are, as I have been writing for some years, mostly characterized by the lack of the sense of development, processuality and of long duration.

This is what I call *the rhetoric of the first time*. In the face of serious or extreme racism acts, what prevails in the collective consciousness as well as in media, institutional and political actors, and even among some left-wing intellectuals is the tendency to remove the premonitory signs and antecedents and to underestimate or ignore the propaganda, the policies, the legislative measures that have contributed to create a climate conducive to the most brutal racism.

This has also been the case over the last decade, which has been characterized by peaks of racist violence. The massacre of Senegalese citizens which took place in Florence on December 13, 2011, at the hands of the neo-Nazi militant Gianluca Casseri, should have been considered the expression of a tragic leap which, favored by a progression of antecedents, would not remain isolated.

The massacre took place when Casseri, holding a gun went on the indiscriminate hunt for "niggers", killing 54-year-old Diop Mor and 40-year-old Samb Modou, both street vendors. His third target, 34-year-old Moustapha Dieng, survived remaining permanently paraplegic. Before committing suicide, Casseri proceeded to the market of San Lorenzo, in the center of the city, and seriously wounded 44-year-old Cheikh Mbengue and 34-year-old Mor Sougou.

What makes this episode so alarming is the fact that it was carried out with coldness and determination, not in a marginal, degraded environment, characterized by conflicts of proximity, but in the heart of Florence. In addition, there was no personalization of the targets, sought out solely because "niggers".

A similar episode in any democratic country would probably have alarmed institutions to such an extent as to induce them to outlaw extreme right-wing formations (CasaPound, Forza Nuova, Veneto Fronte, Skinheads, Avanguardia Nazionale, just to name a few). Disbanding these groups would have been an implementation of both



the XII provision of the Italian Constitution, which prohibits "the reorganization, in any form, of the dissolved fascist party", as well as the Scelba and Mancino laws<sup>1</sup>.

On the contrary, although CasaPound explicitly refers to itself as fascist, racist and claims to be an heir to the Italian Social Republic, the movement was allowed to run in electoral competition and even scoring a couple of mayors. The same is to be said for Forza Nuova which regardless of its neo-fascist, if not neo-Nazi, ideology and practices, also took part in regional, political and European election.

Among Forza Nuova's usual racist raids, is the well-known "Bangla tour", a systematic punitive expedition carried out, particularly in Rome, against helpless Bangladeshi citizens. Between 2012 and 2013 at least fifty of these raids have been acknowledged by trial, labeling Forza Nuova an "extreme right-wing National Socialist" formation. The raids were mostly carried out by minors, as a sort of rite of passage to militancy.

### **Third millennium fascists and their political groundwork**

Growing during the political and cultural hegemony of what in Italy has been called Berlusconiism, and legitimized during the first Conte government, thanks to the work of the Minister of Interiors, CasaPound, Forza Nuova and similar groups have been able to incite a sort of "popular" xenophobia, using the mendacious concept of "war among the poor". As if between "natives" and migrants there were symmetry of power and as if the extreme right, propaganda and institutional racism did not play a role. Over the last decade there have been scores of such episodes. I will mention a few.

In November 2014, in the working class suburb of Tor Sapienza<sup>2</sup>, in Roma, a crowd of residents, led by a group of people from the fascist extreme right, staged assaults, threw stones, firecrackers and molotov cocktails against a Sprar (Protection Service for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) and a First Reception Centre for minors. Such violent attacks to buildings that hosted asylum seekers or foreign minors have not been isolated cases. Extreme right groups were often, if not always, part in these episodes.

On December 6, 2016, again in Rome, in the working-class neighborhood of San Basilio, a family of Moroccan origin, with three children, tried to enter the popular housing flat which had been assigned to them. The family was "greeted" by barricades a violent protest

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<sup>1</sup> A small signal on the direction of silencing hatred came in February 2020 when the "Rights of the Person and Immigration" section of the Court of Rome rejected Forza Nuova's appeal against Facebook's decision to remove its accounts, arguing that it explicitly refers to fascism and spreads racist ideas. On the other hand, on December 12, 2019, the same Court, ruled against Facebook when Casa Pound appealed for the same reason.

<sup>2</sup> See the contribution dedicated to this case of Veronica Iesué in Part II of this report.



and racist insults from a few dozen residents, unconcerned by the children's sobbing. The family ended up giving up the idea of moving into the flat.<sup>3</sup>

On September 28, 2017, in the Roman "borgata" of Trullo, some people belonging to Forza Nuova and "Roma ai Romani" (which is defined as "the popular wing" of the former) instigated and led a group of residents in order to stop the eviction of an Italian family who illegally occupied a popular housing in order to prevent the entry of the legitimate assignee, an Italian-Eritrean family. The "protest" soon degenerated into a clash between the extreme right and the police: three agents were wounded and three neo-fascists were arrested, among them the Roman leader of Forza Nuova.

On May 6, 2019, again in a working-class neighborhood of Rome, Casal Bruciato,<sup>4</sup> a small crowd of residents, again headed by CasaPound members, tried violently to prevent a Rom mother, who was holding her baby girl, from returning home. The working-class housing was regularly assigned to her family, consisting of no less than fourteen people. Between screams, shoves and unrepeatable insults, the two finally managed to get home, but only because they were escorted and protected by the police in riot gear, while a man from CasaPound threatened to rape the young woman.

If extreme right-wing formations have an easy game in stirring up popular resentment and directing it against the most vulnerable scapegoats, it is also due tangible reasons. To name a few, the absence of urban regeneration projects, consequently the progressive impoverishment of Roman suburbs, the rarefaction of public housing, the miserly and/or irrational management of the allocation of social housing<sup>5</sup>.

Such episodes are not a peculiarity of suburbs in large urban centers such as Rome. Palata, in Lower Molise, just over 1,600 inhabitants and a recent history of progressive depopulation rose against a reception center. On August 30, 2016, some, led or otherwise instigated by Forza Nuova, as well as encouraged by the hostility of the mayor himself and the entire municipal administration, set fire to a building intended to house twenty-four exiles, including seven young women and three children. Immediately afterwards, a "development and security" committee, set up ad hoc, managed to collect 900 signatures on a petition against the center. In spite of this and thanks to the firmness of the Prefecture, the group of asylum seekers could be housed in the same building the following October.

Gorino Ferrarese, a hamlet of Goro home to 641 souls, rose to the honours of the chronicles when its population in October 2016 erected barricades against twelve refugee women (one of which eighth months pregnant). Women and their children were to be hosted in a

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<sup>3</sup> After about a month that family will get another accommodation in the village of Tor Sapienza.

<sup>4</sup> See the contribution of Elisa Pini in Part II of this report.

<sup>5</sup> For a broader analysis Annamaria Rivera, "Il caso di Palata", *Cronache di ordinario razzismo. Quarto Libro bianco sul razzismo in Italia*, Lunaria, Roma 2017, pp.181-183.



hostel in the area. Such a Lega inspired disgraceful protest proved to be a success, as giving in to the blackmail of the barricaders, the prefect of Ferrara would divert women and children elsewhere<sup>6</sup>.

The fact that xenophobia and racism, often legitimized and/or increased not only by the extreme right, but also by the media and institutions, even by center-left governments, can prosper among subordinate classes is neither new nor surprising. This is what happens in moments characterized by economic crisis, social downgrading (real or feared), decay of the welfare state and when political parties from the left tend to disappear from working class neighborhoods<sup>7</sup>.

### **Racist violence, up to martyrdom.**

It was not unpredictable that Gianluca Casseri might one day have an emulator, also due to inadequate reactions to the gravity of the massacre in Florence, especially on the part of national institutions. And this while the anti-racist movement and the Senegalese community, the Florentine one in particular, were clamoring for the closure of the CasaPound local headquarters.

And emulation there was. On March 5, 2018, in the heart of Florence, another racist crime was committed. Roberto Pirrone, 65, killed 53-year-old Idy Diène, also a travelling salesman of Senegalese origin, on the Vespucci bridge. Diène was shot six times and killed with a blow to the head. The victim was chosen as target only because he was a "nigger". The murderer said he killed in order to divert his suicidal impulses towards a scapegoat<sup>8</sup>. It is not the only link with the 2011 massacre: Diène, who had worked in that city for more than twenty years, was a cousin of Samb Modou, one of the victims of that massacre, and had married his widow.

Those that I've mentioned are not the only cases of extreme racist violence, which on the contrary, systematically is a constant during the decade we are dealing with. If I have reported them, it is also to underline how racism has spread to such an extent that it can also align in a city like Florence and strike "well-integrated" individuals. This shows that social integration does not necessarily shield immigrants, refugees or people belonging to minorities from serious discrimination or violence.

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<sup>6</sup> Grazia Naletto, "Le Barricate di Gorino", *ibid.*, pp. 184-189.

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, it is worth pointing out that arguing, as is the case even with some left-wing intellectuals, that it has nothing to do with racism, but only with social malaise, that the fact that "ordinary" people light fires or raise barricades against the reception of foreigners in their town means forgetting that the Nazi pogroms were also favored by conditions of social unease.

<sup>8</sup> On September 2019, although the sentence will be reduced due to the shortened trial, Pirrone was sentenced to thirty years.



After all, Mohamed Habassi, a thirty-three year old of Tunisian origin, was also "well integrated". Following an atrocious sequence of torture and mutilation, Habassi was killed in Basilicagoiano, a village in the province of Parma, on the night between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2016 by two citizens of Parma, Luca Del Vasto and Alessio Alberici, backed by four hired accomplices of Romanian nationality. The two were sentenced to thirty years' imprisonment, with the aggravating circumstances of premeditation, cruelty and futile motives. The victim had been "punished" for not paying the rent for the apartment in which he lived, owned by Del Vasto's partner.

I've focused on this case to point out not only the complicity of newspapers and other national media in not putting enough attention on the issue of racist violence (the episode was covered only by local media),<sup>9</sup> but also the growing, widespread indifference of national media<sup>10</sup> even to the most brutal racist violence. This is both a clue and an indication of the increase in hostile attitudes towards migrants and minorities. In this regard: an analysis of anti-migrant opinions and inclinations, by Vera Messing and Bence SÁgvári, based on data from the European Social Survey and published in 2019, places Italy in first place with 8.7%, followed by Hungary (8.5%), the Czech Republic (6%) and Austria (5%)<sup>11</sup>.

### **Deadly exploitation in ghettos**

There is another category of violence which has contributed to increase the wave of racist crimes is that in which seasonal farm workers of foreign origin are victims. Thus, showing that racism is in no way separable from the structure of class relationships<sup>12</sup>. Not only are these workers over-exploited, underpaid, deprived of the most basic rights, but they are also excluded from social life in the contexts in which they work, as they are confined in what are not by chance called ghettos. The workers are forced to dwell in made up shantytowns, tent cities and other formal or informal settlements, usually in precarious sanitary conditions, and often with no basic services such as electricity or even running water.

Subjected as they are to extreme forms of exploitation - favoured by the *caporalato*, an illicit form of recruitment and management of the labour force in certain areas of the country - these workers, made more than vulnerable also by the residence permit renewal blackmail

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<sup>9</sup> Three subsequent articles dedicated to this case have been published in 2016 by the newspaper *Il Manifesto* and my blog on MicroMega- online. A broader piece entitled "The Martyrdom of Mohamed Habassi" is contained in the already mentioned Fourth White Paper on Racism in Italy in 2017 (pp. 96-99). The first three have merged, with a Post-scriptum, in A. Rivera, *Racism. Acts, words, propaganda*, Daedalus, Bari 2020, pp. 91-103.

<sup>10</sup> With the exception of the newspaper *La Stampa* that dedicated to this case two articles of Franco Giubilei.

<sup>11</sup> Vera Messing, Bence SÁgvári, *Still divided but more open. Mapping European attitudes towards migration before and after the migration crisis*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Budapest, 2019, p. 34: <file:///C:/Users/standard/Downloads/Stilldividedbutmoreopen.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Miles, «Racisme institutionnel et rapports de classe», in Michel Wieviorka (s.l.d.), *Racisme et modernité*, La Découverte, Paris 1993, pp. 159-175.



are easy targets of all kinds of abuse, attacks, physical violence up to murder. Some of them are also held captive in ways that can be described as slavery.

Fires are not uncommon in the ghettos. Becky Moses, a Nigerian woman of 26 was reduced to ashes in the fire of the tent city of San Ferdinando (Reggio Calabria) in 2018. Moses was staying in San Ferdinando after having to leave Riace as her application for political asylum was rejected. Later on the same year, 28-year-old Eris Petty Stone, a worker also of Nigerian nationality, was burned alive in the explosion of a gas cylinder in the sheds of the former industrial complex "La Felandina" in Bernalda, in the province of Matera.

One of the most recent cases is the murder of Soumayla Sacko, a 29-year-old from Mali, who also lived in the tent city of San Ferdinando and who, as a delegate of the grassroots union, was very actively involved in defending the rights of farm workers. On June 2, 2018, in the area of San Calogero, in the Vibonese area, he was shot in the head with a rifle while helping two fellow workers, Drame Madiheri and Fofana Madoufoune, also of Malian origin, to recover old pieces of sheet metal from a furnace which had been closed for a decade and sealed by the Prosecutor's Office. His murderer, the farmer Antonio Pontoriero, could be identified, arrested and tried only thanks to the testimony of the two, who later, in order to escape the death threats, paid for their courage with the forced abandonment of San Ferdinando.

The death Soumayla Sacko coincides with the debut of the first Conte government, which would be soon identified with the anti-immigration and anti-asylum policies and the explicitly racist daily propaganda of its Interior Minister Matteo Salvini. The Lega's leader influence is the reason for the institutional silence on the assassination. There was no form, albeit symbolic, of participation in the mourning. What was left was an awkward and hasty homage to the memory of the victim by the prime minister during his inauguration speech.

A case which reminds us of the long duration of Italian neo-racism - functional also to forms of labour exploitation - and illustrates its progressive social and political trivialization is the murder of the South African Jerry Essan Massalo. Massalo, a de facto political refugee was killed on the evening of 24 August 1989, in the fields of Villa Literno. His murder was also publicly and solemnly condemned by the highest representatives of the institutions, who attended the State funerals. On the following September 20 a strike was called for the first time by immigrant workers. On October 7 a huge national demonstration in Rome would mark the first protest of the Italian anti-racist movement. Moreover, it was this murder that pushed the government in power at the time to pass the first legislative measure "on the condition of the foreigner", later converted into the so-called Martelli law, no. 39/1990. Although unsatisfactory, it eliminated the clause that reserved asylum only for refugees coming from European countries.



Only now, in times of lockdown, when the Covid-19 pandemic prevents immigrant workers from moving to other agricultural areas for equally seasonal jobs<sup>13</sup>, has Italian society realized the importance foreign labour.

### **Roma, Jews, Muslims: historical targets that remain relevant**

During the last decade, all of this has been associated by the resurgence of the two most structural forms of racism: anti-Gypsyism and anti-Semitism. Aforesaid forms both have experienced a marked progression during the first Conte government. If we were to report here the constant violence against the Romani population (Roma, Sinti and Caminanti), the repertoire would be so long that it would require a book. Suffice to say, according to surveys carried out by the Pew Research Center, (which investigates how Romani, Muslim and Jewish minorities are perceived in a number of European countries) year after year Italy is in first place for anti-Roma hostility: with 83%, according to the most recent survey published on October 14, 2019<sup>14</sup>.

Among the cases of aggression and violence directed towards ethnic and or religious minorities, the burning of the Roma settlement near Cascina della Continassa (Turin, 10 December 2011) is certainly worthy of mention. The outstanding quality of the aggression is due both to its typicality - the crucial role of legends and rumors -, and to the ambiguity of non right-wing political actors. After a teenager had reported that she had been raped by two Roma – an account which latter proved to be false - around five hundred people stormed the camp, some destroyed the caravans and shacks with fire, forcing about fifty Roma to flee. The procession was also attended by Paola Bragantini, then president of the district and local chairman of the Democratic Party, who would later be elected MP.<sup>15</sup>

Equally disturbing are the progressive jolts of verbal and factual anti-semitism. The episode that took place in Rome, where twenty stumbling blocks dedicated to the memory of Shoa victim families Di Castro and Di Consiglio , were vandalized. It seems more than plausible that the episode may be the product of the anti-Semitic inclination of the first Conte government. This anti-semitism was not "bleached" by the visit to Jerusalem made by the Lega leader Salvini a couple of days later. The indulgence towards neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups, the obsessive polemical references to George Soros by the Minister of the Interior, the participation of the Minister for the Family, Lorenzo Fontana, to a conference (19 and 20 January 2019) where also anti-semitic thinkers were speaking have legitimized and increased a trend that was already present.

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<sup>13</sup> Adriana Pollice, *Bloccati dal virus nei ghetti, senza cibo e senza lavoro*, "il manifesto", 19 aprile 2020: <https://ilmanifesto.it/bloccati-dal-virus-nei-ghetti-senza-cibo-e-senza-lavoro/>

<sup>14</sup> See Pew Research Center, *European public opinion three decades after the fall of communism*. 6. *Minority groups*, october 14, 2019: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/minority-groups/>

<sup>15</sup> For a broader analysis of this case see the contribution of Paola Andrisani in Part II of this report.



This tendency is confirmed by the survey conducted by the *Eurispes Research Institute*, between December 2019 and January 2020, on a sample of 1,120 cases<sup>16</sup>. The fallacies according to which Jews control economic and financial power and also the media are shared by 23.9% and 22.2% of the sample respectively. According to *Eurispes*, in 2004 2.7% denied the Holocaust, while today the percentage has risen to 15.6%. Finally, it should be considered that a good 61.7% believes that the most recent episodes of anti-Semitism, among which two physical attacks and repeated threats against senator and Shoah survivor Liliana Segre, are nothing more than isolated cases.

In the course of time anti-islamism has also taken on an almost structural character. One could cite numerous cases of aggressions and violence, which have punctuated the decade. Suffice to say that, from the moment of its appearance on the public scene, the Lega (once known as the Northern League) has placed discredit, hostility and aggressiveness towards everything that has to do with the Muslim world at the centre of its identity building and political propaganda.

### **Institutional racism, its *tanatopolitics***

While true that so called institutional racism, peaked during the first Conte government, it needs to be said that its history shows that a role was also played by some centre-left governments. Limiting ourselves recent times, it was during Paolo Gentiloni's tenure (center-left) that Law no. 46, of 13 April 2017, known as Minniti-Orlando ("Urgent provisions for the acceleration of proceedings in matters of international protection, as well as for the fight against illegal immigration"), and Law no. 48, of 18 April 2017, known as Minniti ("Urgent provisions for the security of cities"), were approved. Accompanied by a decidedly security, repressive, discriminatory ideology, these laws have paved the way for the two notorious Salvini decrees, which were later converted into laws: No. 132 of December 1, 2018, and No. 77 of August 8, 2019.

Among other evils, the first Salvini decree eliminated the residence permit for humanitarian reasons, thus resulting that today at least 400 thousand people are deliberately illegalized. Although the two laws represent the culmination of institutional racism, they do not seem to upset the current government at all. Regardless of a different coalition, the Prime Minister has remained in office and apparently demonstrated caution in impeding the repeal of the above mentioned laws. Nor, even in the midst of a Covid-19 pandemic, has he emptied the state camps for migrants to "repatriate", let alone regularize the irregulars.

It must also be recalled that with the aforementioned Gentiloni government, the process of delegitimization of the NGOs was intensified: the Code of Conduct adopted by the Minister of the Interior, Minniti, with its countermeasures and sanctions, impeded and/or criminalized their search and rescue operations at sea - formally passed to the notorious

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<sup>16</sup> See Eurispes, *Risultati del Rapporto Italia 2020*: <https://eurispes.eu/news/eurispes-risultati-del-rapporto-italia-2020/>



Libyan Coast Guard - making landings increasingly difficult or impossible. It is also thanks to this legacy that the first Conte government and especially his multi-minister Salvini, often supported by the M5s government allies, were able to take to the extreme what, to paraphrase Michel Foucault, I have repeatedly called *tanatopolitics*<sup>17</sup>.

In the end, the Conte bis government has not changed pattern. Evidence is the inter-ministerial decree of April 7, 2020 (which by the way has a very dubious juridical legitimacy) that has forbidden the entry to NGO ships in the Italian territorial waters declaring "not safe" all the ports of the Country because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This decision was taken while the "Alan Kurdi", a ship owned by the German NGO Sea Eye, was wandering in the Mediterranean with 149 people on board.<sup>18</sup> In the meantime, another 250 were adrift on four small boats, from one of which a desperate appeal had been launched by Alarm Phone volunteers. Neither Italian nor Maltese authorities sent any rescue. Only thanks to the intervention, on April 13, of the small ship "Aita Mari", of the Basque NGO Salvamento Marítimo Humanitario, that 44 of the people adrift, including the young pregnant woman who had called for help through Alarm Phone, were rescued.

This same organization, which denounced another serious case of ignoring the duty to rescue shipping law by the Maltese and European authorities, notwithstanding informed that another 55 people (63 in fact) - who left Libya on the night between 9 and 10 April 2020 in a very precarious dinghy - were adrift in the Maltese SAR area, "preferred to leave twelve of them die of hardship or drowned, while orchestrating the forced rejection of survivors in Libya, a place of war, torture, rape"<sup>19</sup>

Albeit to a different extent, in short, the last three Italian governments seem to have in common a strategy which is also consistent with the orientation prevailing among the countries of the European Union. These policies, deliberate as they are cynical, reduce thousands of human beings, fleeing to the Mediterranean or trapped in Libyan camps, to a state of not only bare-living, deprived of all rights, but also bare-living, anonymous and irrelevant.

*April 19, 2020*

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *"Bisogna difendere la società"*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2009 (ed. or. 1997).

<sup>18</sup> When the ship had been wandering for ten days, it had had to move off Termini Imerese because of the worsening sea conditions. Furthermore, on 16 April, three people in extreme psychological conditions, including a 24-year-old young man who had attempted suicide, were disembarked by the Italian Coast Guard. Finally, on the evening of 17 April, the rest of the rescued people will be transhipped from "Alan Kurdi" to the ferry "Raffaele Rubattino", made available by the Italian Government, on board of which they will spend the quarantine period, waiting to be "redistributed" between various EU countries.

<sup>19</sup> Alarm Phone, *Come le autorità maltesi ed europee hanno lasciato morire persone in mare e riportato i superstiti nell'inferno della Libia*, 16 aprile 2020: [https://alarmphone.org/it/2020/04/16/dodici-morti-e-un-respingimento-segreto-verso-la-libia/?post\\_type\\_release\\_type=post](https://alarmphone.org/it/2020/04/16/dodici-morti-e-un-respingimento-segreto-verso-la-libia/?post_type_release_type=post)