



From "yellow alarm" to closed ports. Racism and xenophobia in the days of Covid-19

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“COVID-19 does not care who we are, where we live, what we believe or any other criterion of distinction. We need all our solidarity to face it together. Yet, the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hatred and xenophobia, guilt and witch-hunting. The feeling of hostility against foreigners has grown in the net and in the streets. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have proliferated and there have been anti-Muslim attacks linked to COVID-19. Migrants and refugees have been mocked as the origin of the virus, denying them access to medical care as a result”¹.

On May 8, 2020, the General Secretary of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, felt the need to launch a specific appeal to counter the spread of hostile, discriminatory and violent rhetoric that, even in the extraordinary state of exception linked to the spread of Covid-19, continued to cross the public debate. The messages of an anti-Chinese and more generally anti-Asian, character, which have related the spread of the virus with the belonging to a specific national group or have attributed it to foreign citizens tout-court, are in fact proliferated throughout the globe.

Some academic studies and independent reports have attempted to analyze how the spread of the virus has guided public debate and vocabulary, and whether it has fostered the consolidation/return of stigmas based on national, religious, ethnic and even somatic characteristics².

The use of binary lexical universes already very deeply rooted in the public debate in our country, with the pandemic, if possible, seems to have increased globally. The

¹ The full text of the appeal is available here: <https://unric.org/it/covid-19-appello-globale-del-segretario-generale-antonio-guterres-per-affrontare-e-contrastare-i-discorsi-di-odio-legati-alla-pandemia/>.

² Among the many, we mention the following: M. S. Rafi, *Language of COVID-19: Discourse of Fear and Sinophobia*, University of Management and Technology, Lahore-Pakistan, 18 Maggio 2020; Human Rights Watch, *Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia*, 12 Maggio 2020.



representation of the Covid-19 emergency as a “war” against an “invisible enemy”³, the detailed media description of our deserted cities, the radio and television networks dedicated 24 hours a day for weeks to news and comments on the evolution of contagion, together with the rules on “social distancing” and measures aimed at safeguarding “national health security”, have proposed a new declination of the discourse of fear and offered new arguments in support of nationalism.

The use of war metaphors has shaped public debate at all levels, and where war is declared, an enemy must also be identified.

But, as Federico Faloppa observes, an invisible enemy is an undefined enemy. Nothing is easier, then, than to identify it from time to time as best it suits.

In Italy, especially before the lockdown phase, the search for a scapegoat on which to channel the growing and yet understandable social panic, has once again privileged the foreigner, especially Asian, and in particular Chinese.

But also, at the international level there are some examples.

It is well known the neologism created by Trump, when he baptized the virus “Chinese”. Perhaps the choices made by some foreign newspapers are less well known in Italy. The Jutland Post published a cartoon that replaced the five stars of the Chinese national flag with coronavirus pictograms. The Courier Picard has chosen “Alerte jaune” as the front-page headline of January 26th (it was followed by an apology editorial published on its website). The Wall Street Journal, on February 3, titled one of his pieces as follows: “China is the real sickness of Asia”. Several Italian and foreign newspapers have published articles that have given space to the hypothesis, although repeatedly denied by academic experts until today, of the artificial creation of the virus in a Chinese laboratory. This has favoured the viral circulation of this false news in the net, which has brought with it a trail of anti-Chinese messages and comments. The Daily Mail and The Sun have come to blame the spread of the virus on the Chinese “eaters of bats, snakes and dogs”.

³ Interesting considerations about the recurrence of warlike metaphors in the Covid-19 era are carried out by F. Faloppa. See “Sul «nemico invisibile» e altre metafore di guerra. La cura delle parole”, 25 marzo 2020, here: http://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/parole/cura_parole_2.html.



The President of the Veneto Region must have been inspired by the latter when, on March 1st, during an interview on Antenna 3, a regional TV channel, referring to Chinese citizens, he said the following words: “We have all seen them eating live mice or this kind of thing”. The interview was given to a TV that has a limited circulation, but the liquid world of social media has greatly amplified the echo, contributing to fuel the “hunt for the anointing” that had already been unleashed for days against Asian citizens. The Veneto President’s public apology came when the damage had already been done.

Moreover, only between January 20 and March 8, 2020, Lunaria documented 61 episodes of insults, discrimination, arson attacks and aggression that affected foreign citizens in connection with the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The vast majority are Chinese and Asian citizens, but not only. All insults have the same tenor and mostly refer to the poor hygiene that would “characterize” certain groups or populations⁴.

There was no lack of physical violence either. As happened in Cagliari on February 8th, where a Filipino waiter, resident in Assemini, was insulted and beaten on the bus because he was mistaken for a “Chinese carrier of the Coronavirus”. He was hospitalized and received a 30-day prognosis for facial trauma. In Agrigento, on the other hand, it has come to announce to customers from the microphone of a supermarket the entrance of a “Chinese”.

Of course, there was no shortage of those who tried to cynically feed and ride fear, contributing to the perverse interweaving of collective panic, xenophobia and racism. In Brescia, for example, on February 2, the militants of Forza Nuova posted flyers on the windows of some stores run by Asian citizens, inviting to buy only Italian goods. On March 8, a fire damaged the premises of a Chinese restaurant in Rivoli. It had even been announced a few days earlier by a group of young people fleeing the police called by the managers.

⁴ Among the insults documented in detail in the database of Chronicles of Ordinary Racism: “We kicked you out of Italy, Chinese of m...”. (Milan); “The Chinese “onti”(dirty, in Venetian dialect, ed) were missing to impest us2. (Casier, Treviso); “I hope you get the virus like in the markets in China” (Cesano Boscone, Milanese); “Let’s go that these bring the Sars” (Turin); “Filthy scum, go cough at home” (Florence); “Go away, damn Chinese. You infect all of us” (Venice).



Among those that Valerio Cataldi called the "frighteners" by profession⁵, journalists from some newspapers tried to use any news related to the danger of contagion to continue their campaign against migrants. From the initial launch of an alarm on the spread of the virus in Africa, with the related request to close the ports⁶, it has been claimed that the money for health care was spent in reception⁷, only to announce the outbreak of a health bomb in reception centres (giving, for example, great visibility to the news related to some cases of contagion found in Milan)⁸. In the second half of April, a more traditional type of controversy returned, which contrasted the limits imposed on the movement of people in Italy with the "regularization" of migrants or proposed the idea that the "regularization encourages the invasion".⁹

The headline of the newspaper *Libero* of March 25th, at the limits of human contempt, "The virus scans immigrants" has contributed to spreading yet another "hoax" circulated on social and WhatsApp: the Covid would save foreigners (news, on the other hand, unfortunately denied by the data subsequently released by the National Institute of Health)¹⁰. It is a pity that Prof. Galli, head of Infectious Diseases at Sacco Hospital in Milan, of which a statement is reported in *Libero's* article, merely pointed out that at the time he was interviewed there were few foreigners affected by Covid in his hospital, and that the younger average age of the foreign population could have helped to better protect it from contagion.

⁵ See: V. Cataldi, "Dopo il lockdown ritornano gli spaventatori", *Carta di Roma*, here: <https://www.cartadiroma.org/editoriale/dopo-il-lock-down-ritornano-gli-spaventatori/>

⁶ See: S. Di Meo, "Coronavirus è in africa: chiudete i porti", *La Verità*, 15 Febbraio 2020.

⁷ See: G. Zulin, "I soldi per la sanità spesi in accoglienza", *Libero*, 15 febbraio 2020.

⁸ The newspaper *La verità* has promoted a real campaign. See: A. Scianca, "Centri immigrati sovraffollati: bomba sanitaria", 12 Marzo 2020; F. Borgonovo, "Contagi nei centri, ecco la bomba migranti", 17 Marzo 2020; F. Borgonovo, "Il piano Lamorgese per la bomba migranti distribuirli ovunque", 31 Marzo 2020; Borgonovo F., "Milano, focolaio nel centro accoglienza migranti", 31 marzo 2020.

⁹ See: M. Belpietro, "Caccia agli italiani, sanatoria ai migranti", *La verità*, 15 Aprile 2020; "La sanatoria incentiva l'invasione", *La verità*, 17 maggio 2020.

¹⁰ On May 8, 2020, Giovanni Rezza, Director of Infectious Diseases at the Higher Institute of Health (Iss), said: "There has been much anecdote about Covid in immigrants. In Italy 5.1% of the cases diagnosed concern individuals of foreign nationality". See: "Rezza (Iss): "Molte fake news su stranieri e Covid", *Adnkronos*, 8 maggio 2020, here: https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2020/05/08/rezza-iss-molte-fake-news-stranieri-covid_BauLLgk4tTID4XDNhHEZPJ.html?refresh_ce.



But among the pages destined to remain in the memory for the level of inhumanity and lack of respect even towards the thousands of people killed by the virus, there is certainly the first page of *Liberio* of May 6, whose title reads: “In Italy thirty thousand dead replaced with 600 thousand migrants”, with an article written by its director Senaldi.

The state of health emergency does not seem to have induced the most xenophobic press to produce more correct information.

Rights are unequal, even in times of pandemic

There were, however, not only insults, speeches and incorrect information. The institutional management of the emergency has shown on several occasions that, if Covid-19 does not know discrimination of any kind, who should offer protection, does not seem to behave in the same way.

First of all, it should be noted that undocumented foreign people, affected by the virus, have had difficulty in accessing treatment. The law recognizes, in fact, their right to urgent care, but not the right to enrol in the National Health Service. Without a family doctor (to whom the health safety regulations indicated to turn to in case of suspicious symptoms), many of them turned to doctors only in case of serious symptoms¹¹.

Since the first days after March 9, the date of the lockdown in Italy, the antiracist and humanitarian organizations have highlighted the need to prepare specific protocols for emergency management within the reception system for asylum seekers and refugees and for the Returns Centres¹². In fact, the first indications of the Ministry of the Interior came very late and they have discharged on the managing bodies and operators the responsibility to adopt the necessary measures to try to contain the spread of the virus among the people hosted in the reception system. The purchase of safety devices (masks, gloves, etc.) was put

¹¹ As Rezza observed: “The risk of being notified as a case, for foreigners, tends to be lower compared to Italians - continued Rezza - but if we see instead the risk of hospitalization compared to an Italian we see that in foreigners is 1.4 times higher than in Italians. Also with respect to access to intensive care the figure is higher in foreigners. It means that a foreigner who has a less serious illness has a lower chance of being notified. Instead there is a greater recourse to hospitalization”. See. Adnkronos, mentioned before.

¹² See, for example, the document signed by more than 100 associations that was sent on March 22, 2020 to the Government, available here: https://www.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EMERGENZA-COVID-19_DIRITTI-STRANIERI-22-marzo-finale.pdf.



at their charge and the preparation of dedicated facilities, to be used to house people placed in quarantine, came only after some cases of contagion had occurred.

On the other hand, even the Municipalities have struggled to equip themselves to make the most vulnerable people safe: the problem that immediately arose is that of the thousands of homeless people living in our cities. In fact, even in this case, the information and security of these people, as well as the provision of some essential services (canteen, hostels, distribution of health care) was delegated to voluntary organizations and third sector, only later coordinated with the civil protection¹³.

Despite the substantial blockage of arrivals by sea, the presence of a limited number of people and the concrete impossibility to carry out the repatriation in the countries of origin, it was not considered appropriate to close the Returns Centres and issue a residence permit to all foreigners present in Italy. As stated by the National Guarantor of the rights of persons detained or deprived of personal liberty, still on May 28, "the overall legitimacy of a deprivation of liberty aimed at an objective that cannot be achieved, at least in a short time, remains doubtful"¹⁴. On April 7, 2020, with the Interministerial Decree n. 150, the Government has instead ordered the closure of Italian ports to ships flying foreign flags that have rescued people at sea outside the waters of Sar. By declaring the "unsafe ports", it has thus failed to fulfill its mandatory duties of rescue to those in danger of death¹⁵.

The unequal treatment has also characterized the calls published by some regional administrations to recruit medical and nursing staff and the disbursement of extraordinary contributions prepared to support families in difficulty due to the state of health emergency.

At the height of the health emergency, i.e. when the need to recruit health personnel was most urgent, some discriminatory calls were published in Rome and Catania in order

¹³ See, for example, the document sent by a network of Roman associations to the Major Raggi to urge the preparation of a plan of interventions aimed at making homeless citizens safe: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/wp-content/uploads/roma-persone-senza-dimora-lettera-alle-istituzioni.pdf>.

¹⁴ See: "Il Garante nazionale nei giorni dell'emergenza Covid-19", 29 maggio 2020, here: http://www.garantenazionaleprivatiliberta.it/gnpl/it/dettaglio_contenuto.page?contentId=CNG8955&modelId=10021.

¹⁵ A legal analysis of the specific difficulties caused by Covid-19 to foreign citizens can be found in N. Zorzella, "Diario di un'avvocata del diritto dell'immigrazione al tempo del COVID-19", 22 aprile 2020, disponibile qui: <https://www.asgi.it/notizie/diario-avvocata-diritto-immigrazione-covid-19/>.



to recruit doctors, nurses and anesthetists¹⁶. Among the access requirements provided, more or less explicitly, there was the possession of Italian citizenship. Following the sending of a letter of recommendation, the Garibaldi Institute of Catania has modified the notice. No response was received from the Spallanzani Hospital in Rome¹⁷.

Similar forms of discrimination have been introduced by many Municipalities, on the occasion of the publication of calls for tenders to access the so-called "shopping vouchers" (vouchers useful for the purchase of essential goods including food) for which the Government has allocated 400 million euros. The Municipalities have in fact been able to define independently the criteria for access to the benefit; in some cases, they have excluded all foreign citizens, in others, foreigners without a permit to stay, in others, still, they have requested the possession of a long-term permit to stay or the residence certificate, excluding in the latter case also Italian homeless. A monitoring of Asgi members throughout the national territory has made it possible to identify dozens of discriminatory tenders, to urge the administrations to modify them and to act in some cases with anti-discrimination appeals. In Rome, for example, the Court ordered to extend the benefit also to foreign citizens without a permit to stay.

As the Antidiscrimination Service of Asgi has highlighted "The food emergency interventions, although merely monetary and often of modest entity, are in fact proposed in the new context as always essential, with the consequent need to respect a universalistic criterion, which looks only at the need by grading the support only in relation to income and asset conditions, without those distinctions by citizenship, residence permit or previous duration of residence, which are so heavy on our system of assistance"¹⁸.

Also, the opening of the platform dedicated to the Family Charter¹⁹, another support measure for families in difficulty, has maintained the presence of a discriminatory benefit

¹⁶ For more information, see here: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/bandi-discriminatori-ai-tempi-della-pandemia/>.

¹⁷ In both cases, the reports were sent with a joint letter from Asgi, Lunaria and italianisenzacittadinanza movement.

¹⁸ See: Asgi, Newsletter del Servizio Supporto Giuridico contro le discriminazioni 3/2020, "La vicenda dei Buoni spesa".

¹⁹ Established in 2015, the card provides access to discounts and tariff reductions on goods and services offered by participating businesses, both in stores and online. Originally, it was reserved to Italian and foreign families with at least 3 children living together and under 26 years of age. With the Budget Law 2019, access was limited to Italian and EU



access requirement (possession of Italian or EU citizenship), thus excluding all non-EU foreign families. A letter signed by some associations has unfortunately not yet received feedback.

Art. 103 of the Relaunch Decree, published on May 19, 2020, launched the long-discussed measure of regularization of foreign workers working in agriculture, domestic and family sector. An umpteenth selective measure whose limits are well known: instead of being inspired by the need to guarantee the universal right to health and health security for all, we looked especially at the arms considered indispensable to carry out some economic and welfare activities.

And just a few days after its launch, two cases of ordinary "mistreatment" of foreign workers have been reported highlighting, once again, the conditions of exploitation in which many of them live.

On May 19, a 33-year-old laborer of Indian origin, one of many working in the Agro Pontino area of Terracina (LT), would have dared to ask his employers for masks and personal protective equipment in the workplace, according to Covid-19 emergency protocols. The man, in response, received a letter of dismissal as a result of which he requested the salary due for the work done. Following the request, he was beaten and thrown into a gutter by his employers. The E.R. found head injuries caused by a blunt instrument, various fractures and injuries in different parts of the body.

Two days later, in Rozzano, Milan, a 41-year-old Sri Lankan woman working as a domestic helper for an elderly couple was beaten by her employer. She had dared to ask to be hired with a regular employment contract in order to be able to apply for regularization. A case that highlights how it is deeply unfair and risky for foreign workers who work illegally to entrust, as does the Relaunch Decree, the initiation of the procedure for the emergence of irregular employment relationships to employers only.

families. Following the Covid emergency, it was made accessible to all Italian and EU families with one child, but the exclusion for families of non-EU citizens was maintained.



The exceptionality of the moment in which could led to a collective reflection on the ease with which, in the perverse game of discrimination, xenophobia and racism, the roles of victim and aggressor can be reversed, sparing no one. The insults received by some Italian citizens abroad, the closure of borders during lockdown, the extreme difficulties found by many people to return to Italy, could have at least encouraged a better understanding of the problems related to the status of “foreigner”.

But the political and bureaucratic obtuseness with which in recent weeks there has continued to be a distinction between those who have the right to be rescued at sea and those who do not, those who have the right to be guaranteed a meal and those who do not, those who have the right to come out of invisibility and those who do not, does not show great signs of change.

Even the rapid return of violence on the net, with the sexist and racist insults that hit the young co-operator Silvia Romano, freed after 18 months of imprisonment, seems to disprove those who, with a certain optimism, went so far as to assume the end of the fortune of the so-called racist haters. On the contrary, there is the risk that, in the absence of a more incisive public intervention aimed at reducing economic and social inequalities and alleviating the situation of unease of the most fragile population groups, the medium and long term effects of the COVID-19 emergency may give a new impulse to the most archaic forms of nationalism and new strength to the political entrepreneurs of racism.